

or saintly. Holy people might also have a strong devotion to a traditional way of life. In our current usage holiness overlaps with, or may even be subordinate to, ethics.

Yet that is clearly not the full story. When Moses is told by God to remove his sandals before the burning bush because the ground he stands on is holy (Exod. 3:5), no moral values are in play. Similarly, when God declares Shabbat holy (Gen. 2:3), “holy” bears no moral sense. The ethical overtones of the concept of holiness do emerge in the Bible (e.g., Lev. 19:2) and become increasingly salient as Judaism develops. But earlier ideas of holiness as involving dangerous energy or power, separation from the everyday, divine presence, and ritual purity endure. Holiness is a complex concept with a long history.

My new volume explores the many dimension of holiness the Bible, Midrash and Talmud, medieval biblical commentary, and such classic Jewish philosophers as Maimonides, Saadya Gaon, and Bachya ibn Pakuda. There are also chapters on holiness in mystical literature, especially the Zohar, in Hasidism, in modern Jewish thinkers, such as Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig. Additionally, the book explores the idea that the Land of Israel is holy. It also asks whether holiness continues to be meaningful after the Holocaust. The book opens the whole sweep of holiness in Judaism to its readers, and the introduction and afterword assess the implications of holiness in our time.



Behar-Behukkotai 5778

בהר-בחקתי תשע"ח



## The Theology of Meteorology

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Imagine if your weather app displayed not images of sun and clouds, but icons of good and evil, like this: 😊 ☹️. Each city might have a virtue index—with the weather forecast tracking not the jet stream but morality, indicated by a friendly or fierce face. City X has been charitable, so they can expect light rains followed by sunny skies, but City Y has seen an uptick in violent crime, so it is in for a drought or hurricane. Such a system sounds absurd, and yet it is basically what the Torah presents as a theology of weather.

Our second portion, Behukkotai, opens with the prediction that if we follow God’s laws, then God will “grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit” (Lev. 26:4). If we do not obey God and do not observe God’s commandments, then “I will make your skies like iron and your earth like copper, so that your strength shall be spent to no purpose. Your land shall not yield its produce, nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit” (Lev. 26:19–20).

Rabbinic literature has preserved numerous legends that correlate rainfall to virtue, none of them more famous or entertaining than the legends of Honi the circle drawer (Mishnah Ta’anit 3:8; JT Ta’anit 66d; BT Ta’anit 22b-23; *Megillat Ta’anit* Scholion, etc.). During a severe drought, the people ask him to pray for rain, and he does, initially without results. Then, when he persists, God delivers a measly drizzle; he persists further, and a deluge follows. Finally, Honi stands in a circle and demands that God send rains for a blessing. It works, but he is chastised by a rabbinic colleague for his insolence. Never mind, Honi is a favorite of God, and of Jewish children everywhere.

Even within the premises of this climate theology something has always struck me as odd. Rainfall affects entire regions. Why should Israel’s neighbors be

blessed or cursed along with Israel? The prophet Amos addressed this with a prediction that rain could fall on one village, or even one section of it, and not the other, in order to indicate divine pleasure or censure (Amos 4:7). The Rabbis offered a more expansive theory—the conduct of Israel determines the climate of all. The appendix (or scholion) to *Megillat Ta’anit* connects the legend of Honi to the blessing of Abraham: *All families of earth will be blessed through you* (Gen. 12:3). In other words, the actions of the few can affect the many. If Abraham and his descendants act righteously, then the entire world will prosper, but if they are evil, then there will be no limit to our woes. Could this be true?

We are living in a time of rapid climate change; the scientific consensus is that humans are causing much of the change, affecting not only ourselves, but the entire biosphere. Plants and animals, bacteria and viruses, and even the physical contours of the land and sea are all changing because of our conduct. Not every change is bad, of course. Longer growing seasons farther from the equator may allow farmers to grow more food. But most of the changes will be devastating, with rising seas imperiling billions of people living at lower elevations, and many other related horrors. The discrete actions of individuals when combined can cause consequences for all organisms that live on earth.

When I was younger, I was sympathetic to the liberal critique of the second paragraph of the Shema (Deut. 11:13–21). That paragraph integrates the same theology of meteorology into our liturgy—if you behave, then the rains will arrive in their due season, but if not, then watch out—the skies will become your enemy, the earth will become barren and you will perish swiftly from the good land that the Lord has given to you. This struck me as mythological and simplistic—as if global weather systems could be explained by the moral conduct of the people of Israel. I understood why the Reform movement deleted this paragraph, though having left Reform Judaism before my bar mitzvah and entered a series of Conservative camps and Orthodox yeshivot, I continued to say these words from a sense of duty.

As I grow older and more aware of the complex climate systems of our planet, I have come to feel that these sentences of the Shema are more important than anything else found in the prayer. We ought to guard our conduct carefully, acting with virtue and avoiding vice, or else the consequences will be severe. “Virtue” and “vice” today have everything to

do with the climate. People who act with wanton disregard, wasting resources, polluting air, land and sea, are guilty of ruining the world for everyone. I realize that there are religious people who believe that God will always clean up our messes, but this strikes me as the height of ingratitude. People who act responsibly, reducing, recycling, and reusing their resources, are the truly religious, respecting the magnificent gift of life on earth.

The book of Job includes a taunt from God, “Do you know the laws of heaven?” (Job 38:33). The word for “laws” (*hukot*) is the same word as in our parashah’s title, *Behukkotai*. Job wonders if humanity can ever understand God’s laws of nature, but Leviticus demands that we at least act as if we do. This explains the true virtue index of climate change—if we act in partnership with God, then the natural resources of our world will continue to flourish, and we will be blessed upon the good land that is our only home.

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## Speaking of Text

### A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



## A History of Holiness

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*Holiness in Jewish Thought* edited by Alan Mittleman (Oxford University Press, 2018)

The term “holy” (*kodesh* as a noun or *kadosh* as an adjective) appears frequently in the Bible. The more abstract idea of holiness (*kedushah*) appears in rabbinic literature. We use holiness-language in everyday speech in English, as well as words such as “sacred.” But do we know what we mean when we use these terms?

Jewish ideas of the holy have undergone a long evolution. The latest phase—the way we speak now—locates holiness on a moral map. We tend to think of holy people as especially righteous, self-sacrificing, compassionate,