

Torah Table Talk
Holiness and Glory: How We Experience God
 Parshat Yitro
 Exodus 18:1-20:23 / Isaiah 6:1 – 7:6, 9:5-6



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
 in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.
 "He was the perfect child."*

*Do you have thoughts, comments or questions on Table Torah Talk?
 Please share them with me at Haravmark@Optonline.net*

Around the year 732 BCE, Isaiah, shortly after the death of King Uzziah, was called to prophecy after he experienced an amazing vision of God in the Temple in Jerusalem. In this vision Isaiah saw God sitting on a "high and mighty" throne, surrounded by fiery angelic beings called seraphim who were chanting, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" to one another. Overwhelmed by this awesome vision Isaiah, the prophet did not feel he was worthy of being in the presence of God. One of the seraphim came forward and touching his mouth with a burning coal told him, "Now that this has touched you your guilt shall depart and your sin shall be purged away." God then asked Isaiah to deliver a message of chastisement to the people of Judah. With this experience Isaiah began a long career as a prophet. Today's Haftarah contains one of the best known chapters in the prophets. These words play a central place both in the Jewish and Christian liturgy. We chant them several times each day in the morning and after noon service in the Amida and in the Shacharit service. But what do they mean? In one of the key passages we learn that among the characteristics of God are holiness and glory. By exploring the meaning of these words we can begin to understand how we encounter God in our daily lives.

Isaiah 6:1 -3

I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; and the skirts of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs stood in attendance of Him. Each of them had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he would fly. And one would call to the other, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts, His presence fills the earth.

Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 11b

The chapter on creation (Genesis, chapter 1) may not be expounded in the presence of two persons, nor the chapters on the chariot (Ezekiel, chapter 1 Isaiah, chapter 6) in the presence of even one person, unless he is a sage who is capable of understanding on his own. When a man speculates upon four things--what is above [the celestial creatures] and what is beneath them, what preceded creation and what will happen thereafter--it were better for him if he had not come into the world. And anyone who is not delicate about the honor of his Creator--it were better for him if he had not come into the world.

Babylonian Talmud Berachot 43b

He who walks even four cubits with a haughty bearing is as though he had pushed aside the feet of the Presence, of which it is written, "The whole earth is full of His glory" (Isaiah 6:3).

Traditional Siddur, U'vah letzi'yon

And one will call out to another and say, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole world is filled with his glory.' *And they received permission from one another and say, "holy in the most exalted heaven, the abode of His Presence; holy on earth, product of his strength; holy forever and ever is Adonai, Master of Legions. The entire world is filled with the radiance of His glory.* (The section in italics is an Aramaic translation and interpretation of the first line which appears in the prayer book)

Allen Grossman Holiness (Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought)

Holiness in Hebrew, Kadosh, indicates the highest value, or – more precisely – what can be said by men (or angels) when God comes immediately to mind, as in Isaiah 6:3: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts." Holiness is the word by which men describe God and therefore the ultimate doxological predicate because it is the word by which God describes himself. "You shall be holy for I, the Lord, am holy." (Leviticus 19:2) Hence holiness is the abstract term taught men by God to mark God's difference and the nature of everything that comes to be included within his difference.... More generally, the supreme human work (man's service and creativity) is the voluntary performance of the transaction of holiness which reciprocates and completes God's creation of the world by restoring it day by day, fact by scattered fact to His nature...

Philo, On the Allegories of the Sacred Laws

That which is blessed and that which is holy are closely related to one another.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man

He who seeks an answer to the most pressing question, "what is living?" will find an answer in the Bible: man's destiny is to be a partner rather than a master. There is a task, a law, a way: the task is redemption, the law to do justice, to love mercy and the way is the secret of being human and holy. When we are gasping with despair, when the wisdom of science and the splendor of the arts fail to save us from and the sense of futility the Bible offers us the only hope: history is a circuitous way for the steps of the Messiah

Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man

There is much that Philosophy could learn from the Bible. To the philosopher the idea of the good is the most exalted idea. But to the Bible the idea of the good is penultimate; it cannot exist without the holy. The holy is the essence; the good is its expression. Things created in six days He considered good, the seventh day He made holy.

Around the Table

1. Given the reluctance of the Jewish tradition to allow images of the divine, why do you think Isaiah and the other prophets used such anthropomorphic images in describing their encounters with God? Do you think he understood this to be a metaphor or a real experience?
2. The Talmud says that it was forbidden to teach or discuss the divine visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel in public. Why then do we use these passages as part of our liturgy? Are we encouraging people to speculate on the significance of these strange images by chanting them in the Amidah and the daily service?
3. Why does the word Holy mean? Not only are we told that God is holy; we are also told that we must strive to be holy as well (See Leviticus 19). How is it possible for us to be God-like and holy?

4. What is the connection between humility, holiness, and the God's glory? Why does the Midrash suggest that by its very definition it is not possible for a person to be arrogant and acknowledge the glory of God in the world?
 5. The expression *M'lo kol ha'aretz k'vodo*, "The whole world is full of his glory," can also be translated "The fullness of the world is His glory." How are these two translations different from one another? Which one do you prefer? Why?
 6. What is the significance of the three-fold repetition of the word Holy in Isaiah's vision? How is it interpreted in the prayer book? Why do you think the angels repeat the word *Kadosh* three times?
 7. How does Heschel understand the connection between goodness and holiness? Why can't goodness exist without holiness according to Heschel?
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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***