

***Parashah* and Politics: How Torah Changed the World**

Parashat Kedoshim, Leviticus, Chapters 19-20 | May 11, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Jewish Memory and the Other Michael Jackson

Let us speak of Michael Jackson. I refer not to the late pop star, but rather to General Sir Michael Jackson, who in 1999 served as the British commander of the NATO forces in the former Yugoslavia. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks happened to be visiting Pristina, the largest city in Kosovo, and upon conversing with General Jackson was thanked by the general for what the “Jewish community” had done for the children of Pristina: it “had taken charge of the city’s 23 primary schools,” which was a “valuable contribution to the city’s welfare.” Rabbi Sacks, delighted by Jackson’s statement, assumed that Pristina had a vibrant and involved Jewish community, and, when meeting one of Pristina’s Jews, he asked how many Jews actually lived there. The answer, he was told, was eleven. Who, then, were the Jews who had taken care of Pristina’s children? Rabbi Sacks explained:

In the early days of the [Kosovo] conflict, the State of Israel had, along with many international aid agencies, sent a field medical team to work with the Kosovan Albanian refugees. Immediately they noticed something others had missed. The aid agencies were concentrating . . . on the adults. There was no one working with the children. Traumatized by the conflict and far from home, they were running around and feeling lost.

The team phoned back to Israel and asked for young volunteers. Virtually every youth group in Israel, from the most secular to the most religious, sent out teams of youth leaders at two-week intervals. They worked with the children, organizing summer camps, sports competitions, drama and music events, . . .

[T]he Kosovan Albanians were Muslims, and for many of the Israeli youth workers it was their first contact and friendship with children of another faith. Their effort won high praise from UNICEF, the United Nations children’s organization. It was in the wake of this that ‘the Jewish people’—Israel, the American-based ‘Joint’ and other Jewish agencies—were asked to supervise the return to normality of the school system in Pristina.

In other words, when General Jackson thanked Rabbi Sacks for all that the Jewish community had done for Pristina’s children, he meant the world Jewish community, and especially the Israeli Jewish community. This extraordinary story, like countless others, belies the calumny repeated by many against Israel that it does not care

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about the suffering of others beyond its own citizens. In fact, the opposite is true; the story of the Jewish state, and its impact on the world, has highlighted a central aspect of biblical political and moral teaching: that an awareness of Jewish history obligates Jews to protect physically, and to safeguard spiritually, Jewish existence, while at the same time allowing the unique Jewish historical consciousness to sensitize Jews to the sufferings of others. And it is this morally capacious consciousness that is captured in our reading.

Our *parashah's* name, “*Kedoshim*,” is taken from its opening exhortation: “*kedoshim tihyu*,” “be holy.” Biblical Israelites are called to seek holiness, which in the ancient period would have been understood as a call to set themselves apart in the way they lived—and in the way they remembered. Rabbi Sacks himself succinctly summarizes what this means:

Above all, “Be holy” means, “Have the courage to be different.” That is the root meaning of *kadosh* in Hebrew. It means something distinctive and set apart. “Be holy for I the Lord your God am holy” is one of the most counter-intuitive sentences in the whole of religious literature. How can we be like God? He is infinite, we are finite. He is eternal, we are mortal. He is vaster than the universe, we are a mere speck on its surface. Yet, says the Torah, in one respect we can be.

It is not only the taking of Israel out of Egypt that is to be recalled, but also the taking of Egypt out of Israel.

God is in but not of the world. So we are called on to be in but not of the world. We don't worship nature. We don't follow fashion. We don't behave like everyone else just because everyone else does. We don't conform. We dance to a different music. We don't live in the present. We remember our people's past and help build our people's future. Not by accident does the word *kadosh* also have the meaning of marriage, *kiddushin*, because to marry means to be faithful to one another, as God pledges Himself to be faithful to us and we to Him, even in the hard times.

Another way of putting this is to be found in the summation of Judaism given to us by the writer Milton Himmelfarb: “Judaism is against paganism.” And the way in which Judaism's rejection of paganism is sustained is again through Jewish memory, specifically its memory of its time in Egypt. Thus the exhortations of our *parashah* truly begin in those found in last week's:

You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall do my ordinances and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 18:3–5)

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We are all commanded to recall, with horror, the idolatrous ways of Egypt, and the tyranny in which its cultural idolatry manifested itself, and we are obligated to imitate God's love of life. The eternal relevance of this command was summarized by my teacher, Princeton's Robert P. George:

The great Jewish scholar Milton Himmelfarb summarized the matter in a single sentence: "Judaism is against paganism." Note that Himmelfarb spoke in the present tense. Let no one imagine that the temptation to idolatry and paganism is a matter of the distant past, when primitive peoples offered sacrifice to the sun or prayed to stone outcroppings and golden calves.

The essence of paganism is idolatry: the self-aggrandizing worship of false gods in place of the God of love who is Creator of the universe and Lord of Life.

Throughout the reading, the ancient Israelites are called to differentiate themselves by imitating the Lord of Life, by sanctifying the family, by abhorring child sacrifice, by revering father and mother. And in setting themselves apart, the Israelites are also exhorted to care for each other: to love one's fellow, to abhor all injustice and dishonesty:

You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. . . . You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:13–14)

All this, then, highlights the uniqueness of biblical Israel, the way in which it is called to be separate, spiritually and culturally, from the nations of the ancient world. But then, suddenly, in the midst of the reading, we find this:

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:33–34)

Who is the "stranger"? This is understood by rabbinic tradition as referring to the convert, one who does not descend from Jews but who cleaves to the Jewish people, in the manner of Ruth. But as Rabbi Gil Student points out, the scriptural exhortation to remember our own status as strangers in Egypt has a larger moral implication as well, exhorting us to utilize our historical memory to develop a constant awareness of the sufferings of others beyond the Jewish people. Rabbi Student cites the *Sefer ha-Hinukh*, the anonymously written but enormously influential medieval work of Jewish law and thought, which comments on this commandment in the following way:

And we should learn from this precious commandment to have mercy on a man who is in a city that is not the land of his birth and the place of the family of his fathers. And we should not pass him by on the road



when we find him alone and his helpers are far from him, since we find that the Torah warns us to have mercy on anyone who needs help. And with these traits, we will merit to receive mercy from God, may He be blessed, and the blessings of Heaven will rest upon our heads.

And Scripture hints to the reason of the command when it states, “since you were strangers in the Land of Egypt”: It mentions to us that we were previously burnt by this great pain that there is to every man who sees himself among foreign people and in a foreign land. And upon our remembering the great worry of the

heart that there is in the matter, and that it already passed over us and that God, in His kindnesses, took us out of there, our mercies for any person like this will overwhelm [us].
(Trans. Rabbi Francis Nataf)

[A]s we end the week of Yom HaShoah, we must also remember how memory reminds Jews that evil must be fought.

Thus what emerges from *Kedoshim* is the way in which the Jews’ remembrance of their own history is meant to inculcate a sense of Jewish difference and Jewish loyalty, but simultaneously a deep sense of sympathy for the suffering of others, empathy for those beyond themselves.

If there is a moment of political leadership that embodies both Jewish loyalty and empathy for outsiders, it is the first few weeks of Menachem Begin’s first term as premier. In a manifestation of covenantal connection, Begin set in motion the process of bringing Ethiopian Jews home to the Holy Land. But then, Begin also opened Israel to outsiders: to the Vietnamese “boat people,” who were fleeing tyranny and had nowhere to go. In explaining his actions, Begin emphasized how Jewish memory had sensitized his soul:

My first action as prime minister tomorrow will be to instruct that asylum be granted to the Vietnamese refugees. We all recall the ships of Jewish refugees in the 1930s which wandered the seven seas, seeking entry to a specific country or various countries, and were denied access everywhere. Now there is a Jewish state. We have not forgotten. We will act humanely. We will bring those unfortunate refugees here to our country after our ship has saved them from drowning, and we will grant them a haven . . .

This, then, is how memory is meant to inspire Jews: love for their own, and compassion for others.

And as we end the week of Yom HaShoah, we must also remember how memory reminds Jews that evil must be fought. This too Begin made clear in his famous Nobel Peace Prize speech, wherein he described how the Bible first gave the notion of “peace” to the world, and how this love of peace is bound up with the Jewish love of life, its reverence for parents and delight in children. “Peace,” he reflected, “is the beauty of life. It is sunshine. It is the smile of a child, the love of a mother, the joy of a father, the togetherness of a family.”



But Begin then reminded the audience implicitly of the fact that his own family was destroyed, his own father and mother murdered, that the world had done nothing to stop it, and that this had taught him that often evil had to be fought before peace was possible. He said as well:

But in my generation, Ladies and Gentlemen, there was a time indescribable. Six million Jews—men, women and children—a number larger than many a nation in Europe—were dragged to a wanton death and slaughtered methodically in the heart of the civilized continent. . . . Other than a few famous and unforgettable exceptions they were left alone to face the destroyer.

At such a time, unheard of since the first generation, the hour struck to rise and fight—for the dignity of man, for survival, for liberty, for every value of the human image a man has been endowed with by his Creator, . . . Indeed, there are days when to fight for a cause so absolutely just is the highest human command. . . . Only in honoring that command comes the *regeneration* of the concept of peace. . . .

Let it, however, be declared and known, stressed, and noted that fighters for freedom hate war, . . .

Begin's point is that Jewish memory teaches us about Jewish identity, and about the obligation of empathy for those beyond ourselves, but it also teaches us that a refusal to battle evil is itself a form of cruelty; it is itself injustice.

If there was someone who seemed to understand this, it was Sir Michael Jackson, who, to the surprise of many in Europe, vocally supported Israel in its war with Hizballah in 2006. Jackson, we are told by a British paper,

refused to condemn the force of the Israeli offensive, . . .

He told the BBC: "I can understand why the Israelis have set out to at least degrade the capability of their opponents, because they have been suffering civilian casualties in northern Israel from missiles fired from the other side of the border.

"I know Israel has been criticised for the weight of its attack. But I don't think anybody could expect a sovereign nation to take incoming missiles—which were killing and injuring their population—without taking some form of action."

So General Jackson said in 2006. If this was true then—which of course it was—his words have even greater relevance today.

The Jewish vision encompasses love for one's own, profound empathy for the outsider, and a willingness to battle evil. All too many refuse to recognize the moral grandeur with which modern Israel has reflected this vision to



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the world. And the more much of the world refuses to acknowledge the righteousness of this vision, the more different the adherents of Jewish moral teaching will remain: and, as in the past, they will remain different with courage, fortitude, and faith.

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May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

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Additional Resources

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Holiness, "In Search of Jewish Identity," May 2016. [Click here to read.](#)

Robert George on Judaism and Paganism, "Un-American Idols," *Touchstone*, March 2007. [Click here to read.](#)

Menachem Begin on War and Peace, Nobel Price Acceptance Speech, December 10, 1978. [Click here to read.](#)

