



## VAYIKRA

Parshat Shemini  
Holier Than Thou  
April 14, 2018

## HOLIER THAN THOU: HOW TO HANDLE ETHICAL CONFLICTS WITH OTHERS

### ABSTRACT

How do we handle moral/religious differences with others ... be they our parents or children, be they our husbands or our wives, be they our neighbors or friends? What do we do when someone close to us is not living up to our moral/ethical standards? How do we embrace that person without compromising the integrity of our own beliefs?

In truth, these questions apply to any conflict, whether moral or religious, whether involving a friend or stranger, whether involving communal or global issues. They are surely relevant to the present upheavals in the Middle East, and the general confrontation between Islam and the West – a major part of which concerns the coexistence and balance between faith and modernity, religious passion and tolerance, repression and even violence in the name of G-d. The bottom-line is: Where do we draw the line? What should be the limits of our tolerance? Or should we have none?

This sermon examines several different stories across the religious spectrum – and the lesson of this week's Torah reading – to ask (and answer) some hard questions about religious selfishness and to define true religious experience.

For the greatest religious experience is turning the human into the divine, not the other way around. To achieve such a religious experience requires going beyond our narcissistic ego and rejecting its selfish desires. It requires transcending even our "religious ego" and going beyond human definitions of good behavior. It requires recognizing that our object is to go from good to better, from good to G-d.

### 1. Holy Man (Joke)

A patient comes to a doctor complaining of not feeling well.

"Let's begin with a few questions," says the doctor. "Do you drink much?"

"Alcohol?" says the man. "I'm a teetotaler. Never touch a drop."

"How about smoking?" asks the doctor.

"Never," replies the man. "Tobacco is bad, and I have strong principles against it."

"Your diet?"

"Only natural, organic fruits and vegetables."

“Your social life?”

“I’m in bed by 10:30 every night. It’s the best way to avoid sin.”

The doctor pauses, looks at the man hard and asks ...

[Ending 1]

“Do you have pains in your head?”

“Yes,” the man says. “I have terrible pains in my head.”

“OK,” says the doctor. “That’s your trouble. Your halo is on too tight.

[Ending 2]

The doctor pauses, looks at the man hard and asks ... for his wife’s phone number. With the man sitting there the doctor proceeds to call his wife. After he reaches her, he tells her, “Based on what you husband has told me, I must conclude that he is an angel. Would you concur?”

“That’s very possible,” says the wife. “Because after being married to him 28 years I can assure you that a mensch he surely is not!”

I came upon the above joke when I was looking for a definition of “holier-than-thou” which is the subject of today’s sermon. And the best definition I found is:

Holier than thou – people who think that anyone less moral/religious than they is a heretic, while anyone more moral/religious than they is a fanatic.

## 2. Religious/Moral Confrontations

[In preparation for today’s sermon, I went looking for a definition of “holier-than-thou.” And this is what I found: Holier than thou – people who think that anyone less moral/religious than they is a heretic, while anyone more moral/religious than they is a fanatic.]

Funny as that sounds, many of us think that way. And we find it very hard to deal with people who do not sit in our particular pigeon-hole with us.

And this brings us to quite a serious question:

How do we handle moral/religious differences with others ... be they our parents or children, be they our husbands or our wives, be they our neighbors or friends? What do we do when someone close to us is not living up to our moral/ethical standards? How do we embrace that person without compromising the integrity

of our own beliefs?

In truth, these questions apply to any conflict, whether moral or religious, whether involving a friend or stranger, whether involving communal or global issues. They are surely is relevant to the present upheavals in the Middle East, and the general confrontation between Islam and the West – a major part of which concerns the coexistence and balance between faith and modernity, religious passion and tolerance, repression and even violence in the name of G-d.

The bottom-line is: Where do we draw the line? What limits are there to our tolerance? Or should we have none?

Let me attack this problem by telling you several different stories from across the religious spectrum ...

### 3. An Anguished Mother

The first story concerns an anguished mother who approached a colleague of mine completely at loss what to do with her rebellious teenage son. The boy was partaking in activities that she, her husband and their religious community did not approve of, and things were getting out of hand. She and her husband were constantly fighting with the boy in trying to enforce various religious rules. Tensions escalated to the point that their son was impacting negatively on his siblings, and the house was constantly filled with yelling and screaming.

The mother was at her wit's end. She couldn't allow things to continue as they were. Her son would simply not follow any rules. On the other hand, how could she throw her own child into the street?!

My colleague wasn't sure how best to advise the mother. Things seemed completely stuck. How do you begin to repair a relationship that has eroded to a point where parents cannot speak with their son except by shouting?

Then he had an idea. He suggested she take her son out that night to dinner at a good restaurant. "By no means," he cautioned her, "should you address your conflicts, even after dessert. Your son will be expecting for you to pounce. Allow the evening to be only a pleasant one."

The objective, he explained to her, was to introduce a new and surprising dimension to their relationship. With all the tension, it was critical to reverse the downward spiral to their communications, bring in some fresh air and find something good in common.

"What you need to do," he told her, "is to speak to your son for the first time as one does to an emerging adult. Share with him your life and aspirations, what you were like when you were seventeen years old and the struggles you faced. Create a dialogue with him."

At first, the mother was resistant to this approach. She had no idea what to tell her son. She had never had a real conversation with him. Her only relationship with him was of a mother to a child. But he was no longer that.

“Your son still needs your guidance, but tailored to his maturing self,” my colleague advised. “If you don’t open a dialogue now with him, things will get worse to the point that you may never be able to reconcile in the future. You will grow further and further apart.”

The mother finally agreed. The evening went very well. Mother and son had a cordial conversation for the first time. The young man was taken aback and quite surprised to be spoken to as an adult.

At this time, he is still struggling. Parents and child have yet to be at peace with each other, but now there is a relationship. There is some mutual respect and acceptance – a foundation has been established that can be built upon. The parents recognize the need for their son to independently discover his path, even if he stumbles and takes some wrong turns. The son acknowledges the need to respect his parents’ guidelines at home at least.

#### 4. What Happened Here?

You see, what truly happened was this – their relationship finally turned human.

Instead of hiding behind religious issues, control issues and the like, mother and son allowed themselves to be people, vulnerable and natural.

What also emerged was a fascinating insight on the mother’s part. In the course of counseling, she told my colleague, in tears, that she had paid a heavy price to embrace Judaism. Her anti-religious parents disowned her, while the religious community she joined didn’t exactly embrace her. After the initial “honeymoon” with her new religious environment, she realized that even committed religious Jews were not perfect – among them were good and not-so-good, kind and condescending, accepting and intolerant. And even if she wasn’t accepted as an equal by all, it was all worth it, because her children would have it easy – she would provide them with a powerful belief system served on a platter without any of the difficulties she had to face.

When her son began picking apart all that she fought for, it devastated her. She reacted by imposing her beliefs on him. But once she allowed herself to open up, have normal conversations with her son and explain her struggles, she gained new insight. She came to realize that her expectations and disappointments were her feelings, not her son’s. Just as she had the right to make her choices back then, he had the right to make his choices now. As hard as it was for her to accept, her son had to find himself, just as she had to find herself.

Religion can never invalidate a human being and his/her dignified journey in life. As absolute as religious law may be, it cannot become another extension of the human ego and its need for control. Belief in G-d has to

lift a person to a divine level, rather than bring G-d down to our human frailties.

Which brings me to the next story.

## 5. A Prospective Groom's Story

This story concerns a prospective groom who came to see a counselor for pre-marital counseling. He said that, initially, he had been happily engaged. Both he and his fiancée were on a similar journey toward their Jewish heritage. Though they both had grown up in secular homes, they wanted to begin their marriage by building a kosher home and following Torah tradition.

But then “crisis struck.” And he was frantic. His fiancée suddenly was questioning some of the commitments they had agreed upon. “Who knows where she’ll go next,” he worried, “I don’t want to get married and then find out that none of our agreements hold.”

He was ready to give her an ultimatum: “Either you stick to our commitments, or the engagement is over.”

“Tell me,” the counselor asked him, “why do you want your future wife to run a kosher home? Why do you want her to be religious?”

“What do you mean why?” he was incredulous. “The reason is obvious, because that’s what G-d wants of her.”

“So,” the counselor continued, “do you think that she feels that you and G-d are on one side, both of you wanting her to be religious, and she stands on the other side?!”

“Of course, she doesn’t feel that way,” he said. “If she felt that this was what G-d wanted, she would definitely comply.”

“So what does she feel?” the counselor asked him.

He wasn’t sure.

“Let me tell you what she may be feeling,” the counselor offered. “She may feel that the religious stuff is not about G-d but about you. Just as you would want her to wear a blue dress when she may not want to, she feels that you are imposing your will on hers. She may even be testing you (consciously or unconsciously) to see if you love her for who she is or for the fact that she will give you Jewish children.

“The first thing you need to do is show her that you love her. That you respect her journey and her choices. That you are not imposing on her your will, your ego, or your control disguised in religious garb.

“The way you do this is by following the first law of Jewish marriage: ‘Honor your wife more than yourself.’<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Talmud, Yevamot 62b. Rambam, Hilchot Ishut 15:19. See Baba Metzia 69a.

Also remember that G-d Himself says, ‘Erase My sacred name in order to preserve *shalom bayit* (domestic tranquility).’<sup>2</sup>

The young man heard that, but he still asked, “What should I do when she opts not to follow G-d’s law?”

“Discuss it with her, respect her pace, her journey, and it will work itself out,” the counselor advised.

To his credit, the young man followed the counselor’s suggestion. Suffice it to say that today he and his bride are happily married with several beautiful children, and she is more religious than him...

## 6. Marriage Counseling (Joke)

Speaking of marriage counseling...

Sadie and Arnold were always arguing and, so they agreed to see a marriage counselor. When they arrived at the counselor’s office, he said to them, “Before we begin, I’d be grateful if you could both answer a very short test I’ve prepared for you. It will help me plan how best to address your problems. It will take each of you less than a minute to complete.”

He then handed out a pencil and a piece of paper on which were typed the following words: WOMAN ... WITHOUT ... HER ... MAN ... IS ... NOTHING ... And he asked them to punctuate the sentence.

When he got their papers back, he slapped his forehead, “*Oy vey*, I can see that I’ll need many sessions with you both.”

These are the answers he read:

Arnold wrote, “Woman (comma), without her man (comma), is nothing (period).”

Sadie wrote, “Woman (exclamation point)! Without her (comma), man is nothing (exclamation point)!”

## 7. High on Spirituality

And now for the last story. This story concerns a rabbi who, because of his reputation as a “Kabbalist,” attracted quite a following of young people disenchanted with “ordinary” Judaism.

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<sup>2</sup> Rambam, end of Hilchot Chanukah.

As one of them put it to him, “I am not looking for organized religion.”  
Asked the rabbi, “So what are you looking for – disorganized religion?”

Many of them had travelled to Nepal, India, Thailand and other Asian countries on their quest for spirituality. Enamored of Eastern religions, they spoke of going beyond the boundaries of material existence, connecting with the light within and channeling the divine.

They were very special people as a rule. They beamed beatific smiles at their fellow students, never became argumentative and sought to spread “peace, light and love” wherever they went.

The problem was, as their teacher slowly but painfully discovered, they were never around when it came time to wash the dishes in the dormitory or take out the garbage. They hardly ever went out of their way to help a fellow student and were quite slow (and often down-right forgetful) about paying bills and returning borrowed money.

Their spirituality was real, but it was all within. Somehow all that light and peace didn’t translate to inconveniencing themselves for their fellow humans. In short, their spirituality was selfish.

And this brings us to the events described in this week’s Torah reading

## 8. This Week’s Torah Reading

The Torah states:

Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his pan, placed fire on it and then incense. They brought before G-d an alien fire, which He had not instructed them to bring. Fire came forth from G-d and it consumed them, and they died before G-d.<sup>3</sup>

Nadav and Avihu entered the Sanctuary and offered an “alien fire before G-d.” They were then consumed by that fire and died. The question is asked: What exactly transpired here? Did they commit a sin? And if not, why did their action cause their death?

According to the Midrash, Moses’ reaction suggests that he did not think they had sinned.<sup>4</sup> So what happened?

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<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 10: 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Rashi on Leviticus 10:3 as per Sifra Milluim 1:36.



Commentaries<sup>5</sup> explain that Nadav and Avihu entered the Sanctuary in great ecstasy. They were so drawn to feed off the divine energy that they entered in great love and yearning to the point that their souls expired in tremendous ecstasy. However, this is not the ultimate purpose of life. As great as was their divine love, it was “selfish.” They were doing what they wanted to do, not what G-d wanted them to do.

Nachmanides explains that in religious life there is a possibility of a *naval b’reshut baTorah*, (literally, “offender with permission of the Torah.”)<sup>6</sup> This refers to someone who follows the letter of the law but in a way that is offensive to others and to G-d. In other words, someone can “use” Torah to behave obnoxiously. This can be coined “religious selfishness.” We, therefore, have the specific commandment “be holy for I, your G-d, am holy.”<sup>7</sup>

We need to limit and refine even that which is permissible according to the Torah. Strict adherence to its laws is not sufficient; it needs to be saturated with sanctity, with the feeling that these laws are divine, and that we are submitting to G-d’s higher will as we fulfill them, not just filtering them through our own preferences.

The greatest religious experience is when we have the power to go beyond ourselves, beyond even our religious aspirations as they manifest in our own human “structures” and “frameworks.” The greatest religious experience is turning the human into the divine, not the other way around.

## 9. From Good to G-d

To achieve such a religious experience requires going beyond our narcissistic ego and rejecting its selfish desires. It requires transcending *even* our “religious ego” and going beyond human definitions of good behavior. It requires humbly recognizing that serving G-d is not about us but about G-d, that our object is not just to go from good to better, but from good to G-d.

Faith must always refine us as human beings. And the greater the faith the greater the refinement. Faith is about humility. Sometimes we must step back from our own religious selves to ensure that our faith is not becoming another tool of our selfishness.

A story that aptly illustrates this point is told about two Torah scholars<sup>8</sup> – a father and a son – who were absorbed in their studies. Suddenly, a baby (the son’s child who was sleeping in the next room) fell out of its crib and starting wailing loudly. The son was concentrating so hard, he did not hear it. The father heard and went to

<sup>5</sup> Ohr HaChaim Leviticus 16:1.

<sup>6</sup> Nachmanides, opening of Parshat Kedoshim (Leviticus 19:2).

<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 19:2.

<sup>8</sup> The two were Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (the author of the Tanya), and his son who would later be known as the Rebbe Dov Ber.

tend to the baby. When he returned, he said to his son, “If you don’t hear the desperate crying of a child, what value is there in your Torah study? Torah study is meant to refine you, to teach you how to help another person, to hear the cry of one in need!”

## 10. Is This What G-d Wants?

The first question we must always ask ourselves is this: Is my position driven solely by *my* perspective and way of looking at things, or is it what is right and true? Is it what I want or is it what G-d wants?

The only true test to determine the answer is by seeing whether you are ready to “get out of the way” and forego your own convictions for the benefit of another person.

This may be the greatest argument for G-d as opposed to self-rule.

You know the joke. A grandson asks his religious grandfather. “Grandpa, tell me if you had to choose between G-d and the truth, which would choose?” Without missing a beat, Grandpa answers: “G-d, of course.”

If we determine what is right or wrong based on nothing more than our own wisdom and discretion – on our self-made definitions of G-d – then the most we can hope for is some limited form of co-existence with those who have opted for different definitions, and that co-existence will always remain tenuous.

But if we defer to G-d, that instead of asking what I want, we ask what G-d wants, there is the true possibility that we can discover a higher truth, which both transcends and allows for our diversity.

Of course this requires that the search for G-d not be yet another manifestation or extension of our own egos.

## 11. The Sin of Idolatry

Hence, the cardinal sin of idolatry. Idolatry is not as much worship of false G-ds as it is self-worship. Idolatry implies: “I don’t want G-d on G-d’s terms, I want a G-d on my terms. A G-d I can relate to.”

Instead of embracing ourselves as created in the Divine Image, we want to create a G-d in our own image. This distortion in effect blocks every hope of ever finding a higher truth, a higher reality than one of our own making.

Our great challenge is, in the words of the *Ethics of the Fathers*:

Make His will as if it were your own will, so that He may make your will as if it were His will. Nullify your will before His will, so that He may nullify the will of others before your will.<sup>9</sup>

Religion is not a business and not a membership organization. It is not another card-carrying institution. It is not about joining an elite “country club” which separates “us from them.” It is a divine system given to the entire human race to live up to its greatest potential.

But too often religion becomes another human device. As long as religion remains human it is subject to all human distortions. Just as there are other addictions, there can be religious addiction. True religion is a divine institution.

As seriously as we take our commitments, we must take G-d and His cause even more seriously.

So there are religious people and there are G-dly people, and they are not necessarily the same people. Today, we must each ask ourselves: “Which one am I?”

Let us all look into our hearts and answer that question honestly. And then take the necessary steps. Our salvation depends on it. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 2:4.