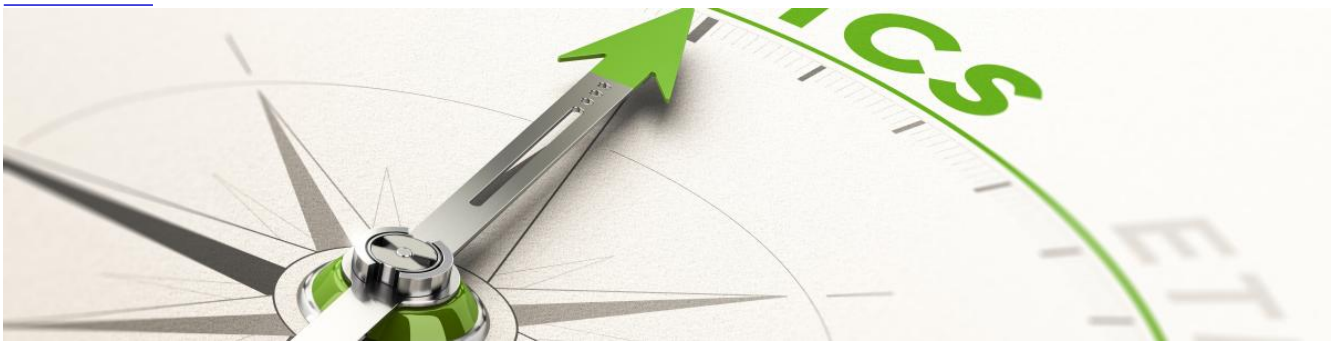
# Prophetic Holiness and Ethics

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It is well known that the classic yeshiva curriculum is dominated by the Talmud, not by the Torah and its rabbinic and philosophical exegetes. When Torah is studied, it is largely limited by a focus on Humash, or Pentateuch, and does not go beyond this to the Ketuvim (Writings) and Neviim, (Prophets). Given the theological and ethical treasures in these books, it is certainly a shame and a loss to the observant world. It is also somewhat odd that these texts are not systematically studied, given that we read from these books in the Haftarot every Shabbat and Festival. Of the many Haftarot that we read, the book that we read most often is Yeshayahu or Isaiah. If Orthodox Judaism ignores Isaiah, Devarim Rabba places Isaiah alongside Moses as the greatest of the prophets (2:4). Isaiah has a central standing among the prophets of Israel and it is noteworthy, given our concerns with kedusha that the most common epithet for God that Isaiah uses is K'dosh Yisrael "The Holy One of Israel" (Is 1:4).

According to Isaiah and most of the other classical prophets, holiness is articulated in terms of social justice and political ethics. In focusing on social morality, the prophets, at times, appear to be opposing the centrality of the cult and issues of ritual purity. Despite this however, Jewish critics like Yehezkel Kaufmannn, Moshe Weinfeld and Shalom Paul, argue that the prophets did not seek the end of sacrifices and traditions or ritual purity any more than they wanted the monarchy to end. Rather, they were critics of these institutions who sought to rid them of corruption and place them in their rightful place in service to God. That Isaiah's vision of the angels proclaiming God's holiness: Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, occurred in the Temple (Is 6:3) and that the prophet Ezekiel was himself a priest, certainly suggests that the prophets did not intend to do away with the priesthood. However, with Isaiah, we do have one of the most forceful critics of excessive concern for the intricacies of ritual purity and holiness alone. That Isaiah refers to God as "the Holy One of Israel" and uses this appellation consistently throughout his text, suggests that ethics is not only required by the Holy One of

Israel, but that the Holy One Himself is morally righteous and that human righteousness is grounded in God. In verse 5:16 Isaiah says: “And God the Holy One is sanctified through righteousness” (Holy Scriptures, JPS translation,1950); or an alternative translation could be “The holy God shall make Himself holy (n’qadesh b’tzedeq ) through righteousness.” So Isaiah’s view, following the Torah’s view, is that the moral law is underpinned and founded in God. Let us hear the words of Isaiah, which as he says, are the word of God.

Hear the word of the Lord…

“What need have I of all your sacrifices?”
Says the Lord.
“I am sated with the burnt offerings of rams,
And suet of fatlings,
And blood of bulls…
Who asked that of you?
Trample my courts no more;
Bringing oblations is futile,
Incense is offensive to me,
New moon and Sabbath
Proclaiming solemnities
Assemblies with iniquity
I cannot abide. …
Though you pray at length,
I will not listen
Your hands are full of blood—
Wash yourselves clean
Put your evil doings
Away from My sight,
Cease to do evil,
Learn to do good
Devote yourselves to justice;
Aid the wronged,
Uphold the rights of the orphan;
Defend the cause of the widow.”
IS 1:10-17

The words of Isaiah here, uttered with so few Hebrew words are a wonder to behold. Isaiah rips through the fabric of sacrificial life, the very nexus of the relationship with God established by the Levitical priests, “Your hands are full of blood.” Here, the expiatory power of the blood of sacrifice is mocked and the line seems to suggest instead that there is an excess of bloodshed. The extent of the verbal charge against the sacrificial cult is comprehensive, from daily sacrifice, to Shabbat, to the festivals, and even unto verbal prayer. “What need have I of all this? Who asked this of you?” The answer could be easy: “What do

you mean?" the people might say. "Certainly, it was You, God, who asked this of us. It was You, God, who established the sacrificial cult, who determined the rules of Shabbat and the festivals as the very vehicle to make us holy. Now you are telling us you have no use for it all!" Without answering these questions, God uses the language of purity, "wash yourselves clean," and directs it in a thoroughly moral and non-ritual direction. Here, Isaiah makes a move that we often see in the prophets, to use ritual purity, as a metaphor for moral purity.

Then, through Isaiah, God presents the people with what simply could be called an ethical manifesto, which, following the short form of the Hebrew, could be put this way.

Cease evil,
Learn good
Seek justice;
Correct oppression,
Defend orphans,
Plead for widows.

Here, in short, is an ethical doctrine which begins in stopping evil in oneself, moves to education in the ways of goodness, and then extends human efforts outward to seek justice. Justice, here, is seen in countering oppression against those that are powerless, the orphan and the widow, thereby representing all who are marginal and have no obvious figures of power to protect them.

Isaiah is not alone in speaking the words of social ethics. His contemporary Amos, who prophesied in the Northern Kingdom, also put forth a doctrine of social justice:

Hear this, you who trample on the needy
And bring the poor of the land to an end,
Saying when will the new moon be over
That we may sell grain?
And the Sabbath that we may offer wheat for sale
That we may make the ephah small and the shekel great,
And deal deceitfully with false balances,
That we may buy the poor for silver,
And the needy for a pair of sandals,

I will make the sun set at noon,
I will darken the earth on a sunny day
I will turn your festivals into mourning
(Amos 8:4-10).

Is this a new instruction, a new Torah replacing the old? Is this a new way to holiness dispensing with all the laws of sacrifice, of Shabbat, of the festivals, and of dietary laws and ritual purity? Certainly, this is the position of Protestant Christianity.

Yet here I would suggest that the prophets are speaking to their contemporary moment in the strongest way possible. They mean to correct abuses in Israelite religious life and the cult,

and were not attempting to abolish its institutions and structures. Certainly, from the position of rabbinic tradition, the Torah and its rituals laws of holiness and purity will never be abrogated. The Torah is given as an eternal covenant, berit olam, between God and Israel, and all of rabbinic Judaism is built on the divinely sanctioned status of the laws and rituals that are given in the Torah.

The great Jewish biblical critic, Yehezkel Kaufmannn, while recognizing real innovation in the texts of Isaiah and the classical prophets, argues that Isaiah works upon already existing moral themes in the Torah. Kaufmannn states that “the prophetic demands for social justice echo, for the most part, the ancient covenant laws” (1960, 365). He reminds us that, in the flood story, God dooms a whole society for moral corruption.” Sodom and Gomorrah were also destroyed for lacking ten righteous men, and the Canaanites lost their land because of their corrupt sexual ways” (1960, 366).

However, if Kaufmannn believes that the prophets did not want to abolish sacrifices and the cult, he is also clear that what we have in the classic Israelite prophets is not just a repetition of the morality of the Torah but an innovation beyond it. Here, Kaufmann argues that the prophets offer a heightened sense of morality. Where the Torah equated destruction of Israel with the heinous sins of idolatry and incest committed by a large group of people, we see that God “threatens national doom and exile for everyday social sins” (1960, 366). Kaufmannn states that it is remarkable how few times Isaiah refers to the sin of idolatry and how sensitive he is to moral slights to the poor and the powerless. Indeed, it is these “small sins” of social justice that bother the prophets and not the “venal sins” of murder, idolatry, incest, and inhuman cruelty that the Pentateuch is concerned with.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel also points us to the heightened moral sensitivity of the prophets. “Indeed, the sort of crimes and even the amount of delinquency that fill the prophets of Israel with dismay do not go beyond that which we regard as normal, as typical ingredients of social dynamics. To us a single act of injustice—cheating in business, exploitation of the poor—is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it s a deathblow to existence: to us an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world” (1962, 4).

As to why the prophet is so sensitive to what appears to be trivial moral concerns, Heschel sees this as a reflection of the acute moral sensitivity and highest moral standards of God. The God of the prophets is concerned with the details of little human lives, his compassion is so great that he is fundamentally concerned with the seemingly insignificant poor. “Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world” (1962, 5).

It is a shame that the curriculum of our Orthodox yeshivot do not include intensive, sophisticated study of the Neviim and have left these texts of the written Torah to the Liberal Jewish Seminaries and the Christians. For the words of the Prophets are no less words of Torah and divrei Elokim than are the words of the Humash and Psalms and the Mishna and Gemara.

In the pre-modern world where Jews were excluded by Christians and Muslims alike from working and participating in their host cultures, there were good reasons why Jews kept to themselves. In those times when Jews were often persecuted and Judaism derided as a dead or false religion, one can also understand that there was Jewish fear and antipathy toward non-Jews. Today, however, where Jews have civil and political rights especially in the

West, the continued self-ghettoization of the Jews and negative remarks one sometimes hears uttered by some Jews and even their rabbis toward non-Jews are morally and spiritually reprehensible. When one hears of a group of Orthodox Rabbis in Israel who issue public prohibitions against renting apartments to Arabs, or “religious” Jews in the old city who spit on Catholic Priests, one wonders why these Jews, who so devoutly study Talmud, manage to miss these words of the great Tosafist, Rabbenu Tam. “One should be envious of the pious and more than these of the penitents, and more than these of those who…from their youth have been diligent in the service of the Lord, blessed be He…And one should be envious of the nations of the world who serve God in awe, fear, and submission.” [5] And our devout co-religionists might also learn from the words of Bahya ibn Pakuda, who said in his introduction to Hovot haLevavot, The Duties of the Heart.

I quote from the dicta of the philosophers and the ethical teachings of the ascetics and their praiseworthy customs. In this connection our Rabbis of blessed memory already remarked ( Sanhedrin 39b): In one verse it is said “after the ordinances of the nations round about you, you have done (Ezek 11:12); while in another, it is said “After the ordinances of those around you , you have not done (Ezek. 5:7). How is this contradiction to be reconciled? As follows: Their good ordinances you have not copied; their evil ones you have followed.” The Rabbis further said (Megillah 16a). “Whoever utters a wise word, even if he belongs to the gentiles, is called a sage.”[6]

The Orthodox community is where many Jews look for “authentic” Judaism. The Orthodox community is where Jews seek and expect to find our Tzaddkim and our Kedoshim, our righteous and holy ones. And one can say, too, that what the religious world needs most today are precisely these kind of exemplars of the righteous and holy life. Yet precisely at his moment of great need, Torah Sages are retreating from the world and advising their students and followers to do the same. This is tantamount to taking Torah and God out of the world at the time when the world most needs Torah and God. So my plea in my book and in this article is that Orthodox Jews live up to the challenge of the great figures of modern Orthodoxy and the command of God in the Torah. Kedoshim Tiheyu: Be holy in mind, in deed, in ritual and behavior, in the synagogue, in court and field. We must be exemplars of the Torah way of life, committed to performance of the ritual mitzvoth as well as the mitzvoth of justice, righteousness, compassion and derekh erets.