A Divine Perspective: Thoughts for Parashat Shemini

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shemini

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am holy…” (Vayikra 11:44).

This week’s parasha delineates the laws about which animals may and may not be eaten. In doing so, it calls on us to make a separation between the impure and the pure. Holiness is identified with separation, making distinctions between what is permissible and what is forbidden.

Just as God is holy/separate, so we are instructed to sanctify ourselves by making distinctions between the holy and the profane, the pure and the impure, the permissible and the forbidden.

What is at stake is not merely a technical process of following the dos and don’ts of the rules. Holiness/separation is essentially a call for a particular worldview.

The havdallah service at the conclusion of Shabbat illustrates the point. For a secular person, the seven days of the week are simply seven twenty-four hour periods of time without any objective difference among them. For a religious Jew, though, Shabbat is not just another day, but is sanctified. The havdallah blessing notes the separation between Shabbat and weekdays, between the holy Sabbath and the regular workdays. A religious person literally feels the sanctity of Shabbat; it is qualitatively a different kind of time from the other days of the week.

Religious people view things very differently from secular people. Not only is time sanctified through Sabbath and festivals; but space and objects are viewed from a perspective of sanctity. A synagogue, for example, is not just another building; it is the dwelling place of God, a sanctified space that puts us in context with the divine. When a religious person experiences a sanctuary it is an altogether different experience from that of a secular person who enters the building.

Mircea Eliade, a thoughtful historian of religion, has noted that religious people view things as manifestations of God. “The existence of the world itself means something, wants to say something….For religious man the cosmos lives and speaks” (*The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 165). The sense of the sacred endows life with meaning, hope, spiritual goals. Lacking the sense of the

sacred, people are deprived of a unique vision and perspective on life.

Modernity has done much to undermine the sacred. Secularization has robbed existence of ultimate meanings, divine whisperings, qualitative distinctions between the sacred and the profane. It is said: it was once the holy Sabbath; then the Sabbath; then Saturday; and now the Weekend. The depreciation of the sacred has not led to a happier, better humanity.

In Judaism, we have a wide range of halakhot that govern all aspects of our lives. Even our mundane activities are sanctified through blessings, through an awareness of fulfilling God's directives. Eliade has noted that "for nonreligious man, all vital experiences—whether sex or eating, work or play—have been desacralized. This means that all these physiological acts are deprived of spiritual significance, hence deprived of their truly human dimension" (ibid., p.168).

When the Torah calls on us to be holy, it is not asking us to remove ourselves from the ongoing flow of life. Rather, it is calling on us to view our lives with a divine perspective. It challenges us to live on a deeper plane, to experience sanctity in all aspects of our world and our lives.

When the holy Sabbath is transformed into the Weekend, life itself is desacralized. When holy buildings and objects are treated as though they are just physical entities like all other physical entities, a vital spiritual dimension is lost.

To separate between the holy and the profane is not a mechanical task. It is a spiritual challenge encompassing the very way we view our lives and the world.