

Mishpatim: Jewish Values

Jewish Values

by Chief Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks

Holiness

To be holy is to be different. Shabbat is part of time yet it is also an intimation of an eternity beyond time. The Temple in Jerusalem existed in space, but it was also the home of G-d who is beyond space, existing everywhere. Likewise, the Jewish people were and are part of humanity, sharing its concerns, contributing to its progress, seeking to be a blessing to society and to the world. Yet they were summoned to holiness, meaning that we are called on to live lives and build a society based not on nature but on something beyond nature. That is what the words G-d placed in the mouth of the prophet Bilaam mean: "It is a people that dwells alone, not counting itself among other nations."

To be holy is to be different - not for the sake of difference, but to live in such a way as to be evidence of something beyond the normal laws of history and sociology. "All the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the L-d," said Moses. "You are My witnesses - declares the L-d - that I am G-d," said Isaiah. Every religion has its holy individuals, its religious elite. Judaism was unique in the covenant it undertook at Mount Sinai to be a nation every one of whose members was charged with the task of holiness. Not privately in the soul but collectively in their history and social structures, the children of Israel were called on to expand the imaginative horizons of mankind by pointing to that which is beyond.

There is nothing sacrosanct about "human nature". *Homo homine lupus est*, goes the Latin proverb: "Man is wolf to man". "Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made" said Kant in an aphorism beloved by the late Sir Isaiah Berlin.

The history of mankind is written in the blood of violence and the tears of oppression. As individuals, all but a few have instincts of fairness and compassion, but en masse, whether as groups, tribes or nation states, humanity is capable of monstrous crimes of inhumanity. Reinhold Niebuhr called one of his books *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, to mark the difference between personal and crowd behaviour. That is why G-d summoned Abraham and his descendants not just to be holy individuals (that is neither difficult nor rare) but to become a holy nation, co-authors with G-d of a sacred society.

Hence the importance in Judaism of social structures - marriage, the family, the Synagogue, community, the school and house of study, acts of *tzedakah* and *chesed* and concern for the underprivileged, each a component of what Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein once memorably called "societal beatitude". Judaism is about constructing a home for the Divine presence not just in the privacy of the soul but also in the public spaces of the life we share.