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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS HOLINESS? How is it related to morality? How is it implicated in that breakdown of morality that we call violence? These three questions motivate this book.

We are used to thinking of holiness as intimately related to morality. A holy person, say, Mother Teresa, is distinguished by her moral excellence—her compassion, her self-sacrifice, her humane beliefs and persistent dedication to human betterment. As moderns, we are comfortable with the idea that holiness maps onto goodness. But what then are we to make of holy places or times? Of holy objects? These do not seem to have anything to do with morality. Indeed, the power of holy places—for example, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem—can motivate people to do immoral things. A "Jewish underground" in the 1980s plotted to blow up the Dome of the Rock so as to spark an apocalyptic war after which the Third Temple would be built and the messianic age would begin.[1] An intense fixation on the holy can lead to ethical derangement. How then can we parse the distinctions between holiness and morality, as well as keep them both conceptually and normatively integrated? This is a philosophical task. In this book, we will use the resources of Jewish philosophy to answer these questions.

Lest these issues seem overly abstract, readers should keep in mind that they are meant to facilitate an analysis of religious violence in Judaism. What do I mean by violence? As in the earlier example, our concern is with violence motivated by religious belief, by convictions held to be so compelling that they give license to actions that override conventional morality. Examples include the murder, by Dr. Baruch Goldstein, of

twenty-nine Muslim worshippers in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, before he was beaten to death, in 1994, and the assassination, by Yigal Amir, of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. Goldstein was inspired by the extremist Rabbi Meir Kahane, who believed that in order for the holy people (the Jews) to achieve redemption in the holy land (Israel), the unholy (Arabs) had to be banished. Kahane's was a wrathful God who required vengeful measures. Amir came to believe, with indirect support from the preaching of militant rabbis, that Rabin was a *rodef* (in Jewish law, a pursuer intent on murder who could be killed to defend the innocent from his depredations). In these cases, imagined religious duty mixes with political beliefs, subordinating ethical constraints for "higher" purposes. This kind of violence has a political context. Religious violence, of course, can be more diffuse. It can pervade daily life, oppressing women, children, or sexual (and other) minorities in the name of some allegedly God-given holy way. Although I am not directly concerned with such phenomena here, they have a common source in misguided construals of the holy and, further upstream, in theological misprisions of God.

Of course, many books have been written, especially since 9/11, about "terror in the name of God" or "terror in the mind of God." This has become a burgeoning field for scholars of religion, political scientists, journalists, and others. Fine books exist on violence in Jewish thought. The present book uses some of this scholarship but departs from it as well. As a work of Jewish philosophy, its contribution is neither historical nor sociological, but normative and constructive. I want to argue for a concept of holiness in Judaism that is true to its biblical roots—that is not simply reducible to moral categories but that is nonetheless allied with morality. I want to argue for a concept of God that has been purged of violence. This book therefore works in the idioms of philosophical theology and

ethics. Its emphasis is more on the critique of religious violence than on its description. To do so, I advance an original theory of holiness, a "natural history of holiness," and explore the connections among holiness, ethics, and violence in light of the theory.

Part of what motivates this inquiry is a confrontation with some highly problematic texts. The Bible sometimes presents God as wrathful. It also enjoins violent conduct toward perceived enemies, such as the Canaanite nations that occupy the land promised to the Israelites. These texts raise fundamental problems about holiness, ethics, and violence. The biblical characters themselves seem to struggle with them. King Saul, for example, balks at the seeming irrationality of God's command to obliterate the livestock along with the people of Amalek (I Samuel, chapter 15). He loses his kingship for following his own judgment, which falls short of the prescribed genocide. Such texts invite philosophical reflection on how the presumed goodness and justice of God can be reconciled with the cruelty of his commands. Why should a holy will fail at times to be a moral one? Far from a parochial project, the philosophical idiom opens up this hermeneutic reflection to readers of all religions or of none. The subject matter is primarily Jewish, but the problem of a gap between contemporary moral beliefs and ancient religious ones is universal.

The gap between moral beliefs and religious ones, however, is not a problem just for moderns. The ancients felt it, too. Bridging the gap involves a struggle to purge immoral elements from the concept of God, disallowing the concept to serve as a warrant for unworthy behavior. Socrates works on a version of this problem in Plato's *Euthyphro*. In that dialogue, Socrates encounters a young man, Euthyphro, who believes himself to be expert in matters of holiness. Holiness or piety, *hosion*, refers to what the gods prescribe for or permit human

beings to do.[2] The gods want human beings, for example, to do justice—that is part of holiness or piety. Indeed, Euthyphro, out of a fanatical devotion to what he understands justice and the divine will to be, is in the midst of bringing an indictment against his own father, whom he holds accountable for the murder of an underling. Socrates, and everyone else, thinks that this is madness. In Socrates's Athens, a lawsuit against a murderer was brought by the family of the victim. Here, Euthyphro is taking the victim's side against his own family. He believes that such extreme devotion to justice is what holiness or piety demands. After all, Zeus—the most just of the gods—imprisoned his own father, Kronos, who had in turn, castrated his own father, Ouranos. Euthyphro holds to a version of *imitatio dei*—do as the gods do. He believes that the holy and the good are defined by reference to what the gods desire or abhor. As Socrates presses Euthyphro, he comes to realize that, given polytheism, the gods disagree as to what is desirable. Merely following traditional religious beliefs about what the gods endorse can provide no criterion for what is truly just or good. A higher criterion, which the gods themselves must take into account, is needed. To the incisive Socratic question whether the gods love the holy because it is (intrinsically) holy or because their act of loving it makes it so, Euthyphro has no answer. He is now perplexed about the relationship between holiness and ethics.

Although not completed in this dialogue, Socrates works up toward a vision of the gods and the good in which the famous question loses its dilemmatic character. The gods (or God) will only the good. The mythological stories of Homer and Hesiod about the gods are unworthy of the gods. Socrates favored, in the words of a leading interpreter, a "philosophical religion founded on a rationalist psychology and theology that devalued the old, publicly observable, external standard of piety that

connected capricious all-too-human gods to humanity through the system of burnt sacrifice. In its place, Socrates advocated an internal standard of virtue and human happiness that emphasized the rational purification of the soul through elenctic argument and a viewpoint that presupposed the existence of benevolent rational deities who loved justice but were relatively indifferent to sacrifice."[3]

The *Euthyphro* shows how matters of holiness, ethics, concepts of God, and the place, if any, of violence in a life devoted to God are bundled together. The tack that Socrates takes, one of rational or contemplative religion, departs from traditional piety but also infuses that heritage with new significance. It rescues inherited religion from being beholden to mere ipse dixit and elevates it to accord with intellectual and moral virtue. It is part of the axial age revolution of deepening the ethical character of received religion. This is all to the good, and yet a sense of the uncanny must remain. A God domesticated to purely human categories would be a diminished divinity. Socrates's contemporary, Sophocles, captures the element of awe, fear, or uncanniness in our dealings with the holy in *Antigone*: "Nothing that is vast enters the life of mortals without a curse."[4] No holiness without danger nor awe without terror.

The modern discourse on the nexus of awe and terror begins in the late seventeenth century with English travelers to the Alps. It continues in the eighteenth century with the work of Edmund Burke. The key term in the discourse is "sublimity," or the "sublime." For Burke, the beautiful may please us, but the sublime, the incomparably majestic, overwhelms and astonishes, filling us with awe: "Astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. . . . Astonishment . . . is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree."[5] Sublimity, astonishment, and horror are linked. In the presence of vast vistas and massive objects, we

are transfixed. Our reason is arrested. A deep, uncanny fear takes hold of us, even as we are transported by an irresistible force. That which transfixes and transports us could as easily crush and destroy us. Burke captures the duality of the sublime, its ability simultaneously to ennoble and disconcert us.

The emphasis on the sublime is a reaction to an overly rational, bourgeois, ordered view of human nature and purpose. It gave a vocabulary to the attempt to resist a "too-rosy picture of the human condition, shorn of tragedy, irreparable loss, meaningless suffering, cruelty and horror."[6] But the sublime also became, for our early modern ancestors, a substitute for the holiness of God. Writers like Burke and his predecessors no longer speak of the uncanny, numinous quality of divine presence or of its lingering traces—the phenomena that "holiness" in one of its senses describes. They displace the holy onto nature, specifically onto what is majestic and awe-inspiring in nature. The aesthetic experience of the grandeur of nature becomes a kind of religious experience, with natural sublimity taking the place of God. There is some justice in this transposition. I shall return to it in chapter 3.

Nature can certainly threaten us. Even the gentle trout stream where I fish can (and does) turn into an angry torrent after many days of rain. The nexus of beauty, sublimity, and terror makes some sense here. But to turn back from this modern ersatz to God, does God also threaten us? If we have veridical experiences of God, do they too come with some quotient of terror? Should the very thought of God include an attitude of fear? Thomas Jefferson wrote that he feared (for his country) when he reflected that God is just. But what if God's justice is a post hoc consideration? What if we should just fear God as such, before moral criteria are introduced against which we may find ourselves wanting? What if the moral criteria themselves—the attempt to pin God to ethically intelli-

gible norms—are an evasion? What if, to put it abstractly, holiness and violence are simply concomitant?

A paradigm case for the Bible is Isaiah, chapter 6. Isaiah has an encounter with God and His angelic retinue in the Temple. God is seated on a high throne, the "skirts of His robe filled the Temple." Six-winged fiery angels (*seraphim*) stood about Him calling to one another "Holy, holy, holy! The Lord of Hosts! His presence fills all the earth!" The Temple filled with smoke and shook. Isaiah cried: "Woe is me; I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my own eyes have beheld the King Lord of Hosts." Isaiah is terrified; he knows that he is unfit to stand in God's presence. A seraph then flies to Isaiah and touches his lips with a burning coal taken from the altar of the Temple. The angel exhorts him: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt shall depart and your sin be purged away." The physical contact of burning coal, taken from the holy altar, to the prophet's unclean lips purges impurity, guilt, and sin—all of this in a quite tangible, not quite metaphorical way. Isaiah, now transformed and emboldened, finds the strength to answer God's call. "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us? . . . And I said, "Here I am; send me."[7]

In this story, astonishment and awe are mingled, as we would now expect, with fear. God appears in a physical, embodied way. He is announced, described, lauded by his retainers as holy (*kadosh*), a term suggesting separateness, purity, and power in the sense of energetic and potentially explosive force. It is as if Isaiah entered into the core of a nuclear reactor. How could he not be overwhelmed by terror? He is unclean (*tamé*), a term bearing both ritual and moral significance. Before he can endure the divine presence, his uncleanness must be purged. He thus undergoes a mysterious ordeal. We next learn that he is able to respond to God, as Abraham responded

long before: *Hineni!* Here I am! His life, like Abraham's, now takes a new direction. Isaiah, commissioned, has a mission to teach, adjure, and castigate his people for their disloyalty to the divine King. Isaiah's terrifying experience of holiness ultimately serves a moral purpose. The prophet's life is now given over to a kind of moral instruction; he is to remind Israel of its covenantal obligations, of the rectitude with which it is supposed to live.

Although it is not the first point made by the story, the eventual conjunction of holiness and morality is important. Even so strong a defender of the mysterious, metarational otherness of the Divine as Rudolf Otto refused to decouple divinity entirely from morality.[8] Although there is nothing *inherently* ethical about God's theophany, its lasting impact on human lives occurs (or ought to occur) in a moral register. Conduct should change. The holy is *conceptually* distinct from the good and the right but *practically* entangled with them. The experience of the holy is uncanny, but the consequences of experienced holiness are not. They are transparent to practical (that is, moral) reason. In part, the moral consequences authenticate the experience of holiness. If experienced holiness led to carnage and savagery, would the experience not thereby forfeit its claim to have been an experience of the holy? As much as I believe that the answer to that question is yes, the answer is not self-evident.

Indeed, God still seems to trade in terror. He reveals himself to Abraham, only to demand that he sacrifice his son. He reveals himself to Moses and Israel in a theophany so dreadful that God warns Moses to keep the people away. Mount Sinai is covered in fire and smoke, trembling as if in an earthquake; mere physical contact with it will incinerate the very people that God had just liberated. Why these terror-inducing displays?

Why the violence or threat of violence? Are these necessary to establish God's sovereignty over a refractory and stubborn people?[9] God could have approached Isaiah as he did Elijah, to whom he was present as a "soft, murmuring sound" (I Kings 19:12). In that revelation, God deliberately chose *against* appearing in a mighty wind that split mountains and shattered rocks, or in the earthquake that followed the wind, or in the firestorm that followed the earthquake. God chose against the vast and terrible as the means for his disclosure in favor of the small but insistent, the "still, small voice," as the King James translation has it. Those sublime phenomena are presented by the text as *from* God, but God was not *in* them. God seems to know the terror that he can bring but restrains himself from using it. God does not want to be associated too intimately with violence or the threat of violence. So too with the private theophany that Moses experiences. He turns to see the astonishing sight of a bush burning yet enduring through the flames. A voice issues forth from it, telling him not to approach further and to remove his shoes—for the ground he stands on is "holy" (Exodus 3:5). When God announces his identity, Moses "hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (Exodus 3:6). The bush, the voice, and whatever Moses saw are dramatic—they are astonishing—but they are modestly scaled. They do not overwhelm. Nonetheless, they still inspire fear. Moses like Isaiah and Elijah soon finds his footing and, after negotiation, accepts his commission.

These cases connect the holy with displays of power that cause fear, to one degree or another. God is not overtly violent, but he could be. Fear, dread, and terror are appropriate human responses to his self-disclosure.[10] The vastness that enters the lives of mortals does not bring a curse, but it does bring danger. Holiness and terror are paired in the Bible's vivid poetry.

That they eventually issue into a moral orientation toward action in the world is crucially important, but it does not detract from the initial eruption of power and ensuing human panic.

These considerations help orient the inquiry into holiness, ethics, and violence that is the aim of this book. They point in two directions, upstream and downstream, so to speak. Upstream lies the divine source of holiness; downstream indicates how an idea or ideal of holiness shapes our conduct, whether for good or ill. As we can see from the Isaiah citation, holiness has to do with God. God and holiness are mutually implicated. When we talk about holiness, our use of words such as "holy," "sacred," "profane," "pure," and "impure" occurs in a framework in which God, as a concept, plays a crucial role. If God were not thought to have a presence in the world, in the burning bush or the ancient Tabernacle and Temple, or if God were not thought to command a unique ("holy") way of life or worship, these words would have little traction. The occasion for their use would not arise. The holiness "language game" is mostly played by theists.[11]

Metaphysically, an inquiry into holiness and violence leads us to ask about the nature of God, about God's character and conduct—to the extent that any of this can be known. That extent, including the prior matter of whether God exists, may be very slight. God is, in a way, an empty vessel into which we pour our notions of ultimacy, finality, and value. Religious traditions, such as Judaism, often claim a privileged knowledge, vouchsafed by a revelation of divine presence and will. At Mount Sinai, so Jews have held, God made himself known to an entire nation. God shared information as to his thought, character, and desire. Epistemically, I cannot help but see such narratives as stories that human beings have told to fill that empty vessel. Our own appraisals of what life means, of what our highest

purposes are or should be, or what, in the case of the Jews, a national life should embody contribute to our concept of God.

Yet, I cannot also help but think that God pushes back. The true God does not allow our false ideas to stand. God qua concept is not just an "empty vessel" but a normative imperative, an idea of the good that brooks no compromise. Perhaps the pressure on reason that the highest ideas of God exert is a sign of the divine as such. The entanglement of holiness with goodness seems to me such a sign. What follows is an essay on its implications. This book is written from the point of view of a contemplative piety, akin to the stance earlier ascribed to Socrates. The stance may be called rational mysticism. This form of piety is decidedly heterodox. It is both critical of inherited doctrinal claims and open to whatever truth they might contain. The "rational" part implies openness to science and a broadly naturalistic perspective. The "mystical" part knows, with Wittgenstein, that when science has answered all of its questions, the problems of life have not been touched at all (*Tractatus* 6:52). Most of all, it seeks an ethical moment. It finds the form of life licensed by the belief in the God of Israel to have its own practical excellence regardless of the constraints that a post-Kantian metaphysics puts on claims about the divine as such.

The question about holiness and violence is a question about how we ought to conceive of God. Abstractly, it is a question about whether the Highest One is synonymous with the Good; whether God should be thought of as a Perfect Being whose nature excludes anger, vengeance, and the capacity to harm. Or is it rather the case that the main character of the Hebrew Scriptures, who is a portrayed as a Person with a tumultuous emotional life, is indeed God. On this view, Goodness, Perfection, Simplicity, and the other characteristics ascribed to God by classical theism are Greek-inspired distortions

of a far more personal deity. Divine anger and the violence to which it leads make sense on this personalist conception.[12] But whether there are any good reasons for holding such a view, other than to preserve the appearances of the biblical text, is an important philosophical-theological question.

Downstream, concepts of holiness influence how human beings live. To believe that there is a way of life prescribed by the holy God is to believe that its concerns, foci, and preoccupations cannot be reduced to a "profane" way of life. Coming from the Highest One, it is higher than other ways of life. Denizens of the world that holiness engenders may look askance at the lives of others; they may come to consider the others a lower form of life, not fully or exemplarily human.[13] That is certainly true of the Canaanite pagans, toward whom the biblical God demands complete extirpation (*ḥerem*). Later, in postbiblical Judaism, there are theologies, typically derived from mystical sources, in which Jews and gentiles are thought to have different kinds of souls. Gentiles are trapped by their embodiment and animality more than Jews (allegedly) are. Jews who believe such things might value gentile lives less than Jewish ones. They might be treated more roughly under certain circumstances, as advocated by a horrific contemporary Jewish legal (*halakhic*) work, *Torat ha-Melekh* (*The King's Torah*). These are painful things to say, not because they are true but because they are true of some strands of Jewish tradition, both ancient and modern. They should rightly be shunned and quarantined; Jews who continue to embrace such views should be challenged morally and theologically. Nonetheless, it is not immediately clear on what basis such a challenge should come.

If the basis for the challenge is contemporary, Enlightenment-derived morality, such as Kantian ethics, then what claim should that have on observant, traditional Jews? Does such a

morality have so unimpeachable a pedigree that moralities internal to ancient—in this case, religious—traditions are by comparison less cogent? If the basis of the challenge is a moral stance internal to Judaism, one that uses some preferred sources to offset the baleful influences of other sources, then what is the basis for the preference? If one prefers an inclusive, generous attitude toward humanity in all of its expressions, isn't one simply constraining the tradition to accord with contemporary secular democratic norms? Where is the criterion that allows one to accept some moral views and reject others?

Questions such as these always arise in Jewish ethics. (Indeed, the term "ethics" implies a rational, universal perspective that can immediately generate tension with traditional Jewish norms, which are thought to be revealed by God at Sinai and inscribed in the Torah. Even to use the term "ethics" signifies a subtle if fatal distancing from tradition on this view.[14]) Yet even in a normative approach that hews closely to halakhic texts and decision-procedures, fundamental matters of selection and weighting—moves that presuppose value commitments—come into play. *Torat ha-Melekh*, which advocates the possibility of killing young gentiles in wartime because they will grow up to be adult anti-Semites, employs a "meta-halakhic" stance based on the presumed higher value of Jewish life, given the supposed higher value of the Jewish soul.[15] Another halakhic work, which was written to repudiate *Torat ha-Melekh*, *Derekh ha-Melekh* (*The King's Way*), appeals to rational, "natural" ethical norms to offset the former's racist ones.[16] In both cases, there is no such thing as a purely procedural halakhah; legal decision making takes place in a context of value-laden choices. Jewish law is never aloof, the pretensions of some of its positivist practitioners aside, from ethical considerations.

The best relation between religious and secular normativity is dialectical; the two sources should challenge, supplement,

check, reconfigure, and enrich one another.[17] That is the stance I take in this book. Nonetheless, there are some inherited religious normative claims that ought not to be appropriated. The idea that the Jews are a holy people in a putatively *biological* way seems to me a clear case of an irredeemable view. I would argue that constructions of holiness that push Jewish morality in chauvinist, racist, and overall violent directions are a disgrace to Judaism, however ancient their textual pedigree. Descriptively, one could call Judaism a religion (to the extent that "religion" is apt for something as multifaceted as historic Judaism) of peace as well as a religion of violence.[18] But normatively, I want to make a constructive case for severing the link between holiness and violence. To do this, we shall have to dig deeply into the roots of holiness, morality, and violence. These three topics are *seriatim* the foci of the book's three chapters.

This book will therefore attend both to our understandings of holiness as well as to the ethical consequences that flow from those understandings. There is a normative argument to be made—that any correct conception of the Highest One excludes violence—but there is also much descriptive work to be done. First, the concepts of holiness at work in biblical religion and subsequent Judaism need to be clarified and analyzed. Our usage of words on the semantic "holiness spectrum" is tentative today. "Holy," "profane," "sacred," and so on have gauzy meanings and sentimental associations. We need to get a firm grip on what these terms meant in their biblical and Jewish contexts as a prologue to constructive theorizing about holiness (and its relation to both morality and violence) in Judaism.

Chapter 1 tries to secure that grip. It reconstructs the meanings of holiness from representative texts of the Jewish tradition. The chapter is primarily descriptive but is organized around two claims, which the texts, in my reading, support. The first

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