

# Being Holy: The State of Israel and Morality

Kedoshim 5782/2022

The central command of this week's Parasha is to seek holiness<sup>1</sup>, effectively a repeat of commands already given in the Book of Shemot which outline the kind of people we should strive to be, "a nation of priests, a holy nation"<sup>2</sup>, but one that needs to be reiterated and contextualised within the surrounding moral commands.

The Ramban explains that our pursuit of holiness is one where we realise that there are permissible things, that in certain contexts, like being out of the parameters of halakha, or in excess, lead us to being immoral and unholy<sup>3</sup>.

The State of Israel a significant evolutionary element of Jewish peoplehood, shares this sacred task of striving for morality and holiness. If we are to believe that the State is the *reshit semichat geulateinu*, the first flowering of our redemption, then we must believe that its mission, like that of the Jewish people, is also to be holy.

It is of course my view that it is holy and moral, and lives up to its sacred mission, to our sacred mission, even if it, like we, makes mistakes. One only has to look at the IDF Code of Conduct to see this pursuit of holiness and morality at play<sup>4</sup>. Or the limited times the State of Israel has engaged in offensive war, and the limits it places on itself in its defence and security, fulfilling the adage of Pirkei Avot that it is better to be slow to anger, than mighty, and it is better to rule one's spirit than take a city<sup>5</sup>.

But what happens if we lose that moral imperative, that ability to be holy. This was a famous question of Rav Soloveitchik who in a talk in 1958, explained about morality and holiness, goodness and wickedness, and understood it as being part of a power imbalance<sup>6</sup>. He ponders that the Jewish people have always been in a state of weakness since our exile, what if we had power, how would we act? His hope was that the Jewish people would be able to overcome this human challenge and maintain its holiness and morality. But also understood that if we were unable to do so, it would change the very understanding of the Jewish story past, present and future.

Judaism is about bringing holiness and morality to the world, and as Rabbi David Hartman explains we are but a vessel to do that<sup>7</sup>. But as Rabbi David Wolpe explains, that task is not easy, and sometimes we falter, but we always need to maintain our noble purpose.

The State of Israel is a shining light of that purpose. Yes, it is not always perfect, but none of us are. We maintain the spirit of Hatikvah, of a hope, that we will do everything in our power to pursue holiness, morality, and bring light into the world.