

## “Art, Sacred Space and Utopia”<sup>1</sup>

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“My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom – freedom from despotism and lies.” Anton Pavlovich Chekhov<sup>2</sup>

### Art and the Sacred

It is difficult to define the terms in the title of my presentation: art, sacred space and utopia. Each has many meanings, which do not necessarily cohere; sorting these out in a clear and distinct manner inevitably would be forced and controversial; placing those in a hierarchy, god forbid, would be catastrophic. In such a case I will instead follow the sage advice of Aristotle and begin not with what is unfamiliar or murky but with what is familiar or, as it turns out in this case, I will begin with - and then examine - what is somewhat familiar to me, namely, sacred space as it is manifest in Judaism.

Not surprisingly, Judaism has its own vision of sacred space, which while unique in certain particularities such as location, personnel, ritual and language, among others, which are of interest to Jews and Judaism alone, nevertheless – in keeping with Judaism’s self-interpretation and its status as a world religion - has broader indeed universal aspirations. So the following elaboration, while it may serve as a contribution to a possible religious, spiritual or

anthropological survey, to a phenomenology of sorts, contains and is driven by a greater aspiration, one far more challenging, but at the same time faithful to the Jewish perspective. This is the claim that the Jewish vision of sacred space is a teaching for the entire world. There are no doubt other teachings. There are no doubt other ways to teach the same teaching. But my point is that in the particularity of the Jewish notion of sacred space, of its conception or rather singular way of manifesting the intersection of the holy and the material or the body, something can be learned by all humankind. Judaism, Levinas has taught, is a “world religion” not because of the number of Jews, which is unfortunately quite small, or even because of the great age of Judaism, which is “as old as the world,” but more compellingly and giving full measure to its singularity it is because its teachings are universal.

But even before entering into this elaboration I want to say a brief word about art and monotheism. It is certain that for the monotheist religions the sacred must be sharply distinguished from idols, idol worship, and the mythological world which supports idolatry.<sup>3</sup> Monotheism and mythology are strictly opposed to one another, or at least this is how the first monotheism, Judaism, conceives the relation of monotheism to mythology. It is within this opposition, however, that art plays its role. The idol, after all, must be sculpted, molded, carved, engraved, painted, and otherwise crafted into the charmed and charming object of worship in whose intoxication a mythic world opens. Taken out of its mythic context, today we would “see” and appreciate the idol not as an idol but as a work of art. But so too the “sacred spaces” and sacred artifacts of monotheism – think, for example, of all the magnificent cathedrals in Europe, the buildings themselves, but also the ornate altars, the brilliant paintings or icons on display, the radiant stained glass windows, etc. that contribute to so many moving experiences within them – all these, in addition to splendid priestly robes, filigreed incense burners, deluxe

prayer books and finely inscribed bibles, are inevitably artworks, creatively designed and decorated places and things of awe and reverence, each in its way a tribute to the one God of monotheism. My point is that art is ambivalent, or rather that it is undetermined, neutral or free in relation to the opposition of monotheism to idolatry and mythology. At the same time it seems necessary to both. Art – or artistry, creative design, *poesis* - is on both sides of this great spiritual struggle.<sup>4</sup>

We must add, finally, regarding art in our secular times, where it is displayed in galleries, museums, parks, shopping malls, homes, on television, in advertisements, heard in concert halls, bars, on radio and iPods, art seems to have altogether detached itself from both sides of the monotheism/mythology struggle. In our day art seems to have come into its own, serving itself, set up as an independent domain with its own history and inner development, aloof from the old spiritual opposition, indeed, aloof from religion altogether. Of course, here one would have to raise a deeper question regarding the meaning of secularization. That is, one would have to ask whether the apparent independence of art is not in fact but another more hidden manifestation of religion. And then, of course, one would have to ask whether today's artworks and art world stand on the side of monotheism, contributing to its higher mission, or rather on the side of mythology, more sophisticated and entrancing sensuous bewitchments, subtler entanglements of the senses and power, especially financial power. In a word, perhaps art has not only never been but presently also is not as independent as its connoisseurs would have us believe.

Sacred Space and Displacement

I cannot pursue these important questions here because I want to determine and illuminate the meaning of sacred space in the Jewish tradition. Sacred space in Judaism manifests itself rather differently - and perhaps essentially differently, though no doubt for historical reasons - than the sacred space one finds in the Christianity which is far more familiar to most Europeans. So even though I am beginning with what is familiar, familiar to me, the truth is that it is actually rather unfamiliar, unfamiliar to most readers. For this reason, in order to avoid confusion from the start, and perhaps to jog the reader from the familiar, I begin with a preliminary and somewhat exaggerated formulation of this difference by affirming that *there is no sacred space in Judaism*. This is the thesis of the present paper. Of course, this formulation is rather too bold because in Judaism there is sacred space or at least there are *very special places* such as synagogues, the ark in the synagogue which holds the Torah scroll, the platform upon which the Torah scroll is placed when it is read, etc. What I really want to say, then, is that what seems like sacred space, or seems like sacred space to a Christian sensibility, is actually in Judaism akin to the operational or imperative absence which is called forth by the notion of “utopia,” a non-place. Sacred space in Judaism is sacred insofar as it is not a sacred place but rather a disruption of place, the kind of disruption of the present that we understand in the visionary notions of utopia which political thinkers often propose, or of the “messianic,” to use the more appropriate religious language.

Let it be said straightaway that I do not mean by “utopia” the pejorative sense given to this term by Marx, i.e., an impossible “other world” which prevents serious political action in the contemporary world, but rather I mean it in the positive sense which all the utopians Marx criticized gave to the term, i.e., an envisioned future not yet present except perhaps as an experimental exception. Actually, by “utopia” I mean something even more specific, a meaning

captured by the term “messianic,” i.e., a transcendence-transcending which has nothing spatial about it but refers to a future “invisible” to and “above” the present, a transcending-transcendence, therefore, which is not the partner, either negatively or dialectically, of the perceptible-visible and the geography of the visible, but are rather rises above these as an ethical obligation exceeds the present. What I have in mind, then, is the manner in which the “ought” is not contained in the “is,” and cannot be derived from the “is,” but rather gives orientation to what is – or *should* give orientation to what is, to speak more precisely.

Sacred space is in Judaism precisely this ethical disruption and excess, and the ethical bonds of responsibility and obligation which hold to what cannot be held by approaching it without appropriating it. Thus sacred space in Judaism – utopian or messianic - is not at all place, finding one’s place, participating in the whole, to be “at home,” but displacement: inadequation and dislocation before the infinite, the invisible, the above - the better. The special places of Judaism then are elections, stringent calls by and to prophecy rather than mythologized location. They are events, ruptures, intensifications of moral imperatives and calls to justice. Such a conception stands in contrast to the sanctified spaces and hallowed grounds of Christianity, for example, which has aligned itself to the iconic, the “icon” of Orthodox Christianity, to what Heidegger understood more broadly as the “world” of the artwork, and hence to the “gift giving” of the being of such being, or to what Walter Benjamin explicated in terms of the singular and reverential experience of the “aura” (*Die Aura*), or, finally, to what the modern aesthetic tradition of European philosophy from Burke to Kant to Coleridge (following Longinus) has called the “sublime.” In contrast, Judaism would be metaphysical without being sublime. Or it would be the sublimity of metaphysics itself, of the better than being. Such would be the “glory” of the infinite, holiness: to love the neighbor, to feed the hungry, to shelter

the exposed, to protect the weak, and beyond these acts of kindness to create a world of justice where such acts are guaranteed by law. These hardheaded non-sentimental projects, projects that require labor, money, food, buildings, airplanes, computers, science and technology, would be expressions of the holiness demanded in the special places – the displacements - of Jewish spirituality at home and in synagogues. But is this conception really true to Judaism or merely a fancy applied externally and arbitrarily?

The test cases would have to be the most holy places in Judaism: are they places, we must ask, or displacements? In the history of Judaism there are two “places” which are most holy, one in the public or communal sphere, the Temple which stood in Jerusalem, and the other in the private familial sphere, to which we will turn later, though both, one the most public and the other the most private, are hidden from public view.

#### The Temple in Jerusalem: Public Holy of Holies

The most holy public space in the history of Judaism is the inner sanctum known as the “holy of holies” (*kadosh kadoshim*) of the first and second Temples which stood in Jerusalem from 960 to 587 BCE and 516 BCE to 70 CE respectively. The Temple, the House of God, is in Hebrew most commonly called *Beis HaMikdosh*, literally “House of Holiness” or “The Holy House.” As everyone knows, it served as the center of Jewish worship, both individual and communal, the daily and holiday ritual sacrifices or offerings of animals, birds and cakes, for nearly one thousand years during the long ancient period of Jewish national sovereignty in Israel. How can it be said of such a place that it is not sacred space? Or rather that it is sacred space as the transcendence-transcending of place?

Actually, and again from a Jewish-religious point of view, the Temple stands at the center or summit of a cosmic geographical hierarchy of the holy. In a universe where all space is in some way holy because God is the creator of all that is, and hence is omnipresent, the outmost sphere of this geography, the least holy space, as it were, is all that lies outside of the land of Israel. First geography of holiness: In the Land or Outside the Land. As everyone knows, to be in the Land of Israel is holier; indeed, the Land of Israel is literally called “the holy land.” And the geography of holiness continues: in the Land of Israel, the city of Jerusalem – *ir hakodesh*, literally “the holy city” - is holier than outside the city of Jerusalem. And in Jerusalem, the land of supporting mount of the Temple is holier than the rest of the city. And on the holy mount, the outer courtyard of the Temple is holier; and then the inner courtyard is holier; and then the Temple building is holier. Until finally, as the culmination, the center or peak, as it were, the highest holiest, the most holy space of all, is found, as I have indicated, in the innermost room known as the “holy of holies.”<sup>5</sup>

Upon the completion of the construction of the Temple no one, not even Jews, not even priests, were allowed into the holy of holies, with the one exception of the High Priest (*Kohan Gadol*) who would enter on one day of the year, *Yom Kippur*, the annual “Day of Atonement,” the culmination of ten days of repentance which begin with *Rosh Hashanah*, the New Year day. As part of a long and elaborate set of rituals, indeed as the high point of those rituals, the High Priest would enter briefly to pronounce the holiest name of God, unpronounceable anytime and anywhere else,<sup>6</sup> and perform the specific rituals of atonement for his own and his family’s sins and, most importantly, for the sins of the Jewish people as a whole. We know, too, that if the High Priest was not sufficiently pure or holy he would die within the holy of holies,<sup>7</sup> which is why his assistants always attached a rope to his waistband so they might drag out his body if

things did not go well inside. Just as the holy Land of Israel spat out the Canaanites because their idolatry made them insufficiently holy for it, so too the holy of holies, at a far higher level, to be sure, could not tolerate a lesser holiness. Certainly the holy of holies in the Temple of Jerusalem gives every appearance of a sacred space. But the reality – or unreality - is otherwise.

We – we Jews, Christians, Muslims and secular Westerners who live in the heritage of ancient Israel - know that the second Commandment prohibits idolatry. In the ancient world, however, it was considered strange, provocative, perhaps even scandalous that in the holy of holies of the Temple in Jerusalem there were no idols, no statues, no icons, no representations whatsoever of a god or of the One God of the Jews. Such emptiness in a sacred place was unheard of throughout the entire ancient world. It was unprecedented, incomprehensible, something of a spiritual affront, a scandal. Despite the opening phrase of the Ten Commandment wherein God identifies Himself as the God who led the Jews out of the land of Egypt, this empty place of utmost holiness raised a fundamental question: what could be the efficacy or even the meaning of a god who does not appear, who is invisible, a God without the possibility of being made present or represented? What sort of height is emptiness, an empty room? We know that when the pagan nations conquered Israel they would honor their deities by placing their idols in the holy of holies, a violation of Jewish practice and belief which for the Jews was the height of desecration. Nevertheless, the Temple was the height of holiness, and the holy of holies the height of that height.

So perhaps we can allow ourselves to be at least initially surprised to learn that for certain authoritative Jewish biblical exegetes the very existence of the Temple in Jerusalem, or of any sacred place for that matter, already represented a degradation of and danger to the specifically Jewish and monotheist notion of holiness. They understood, without reading Plato and Aristotle,



or the Epicureans and Stoics, that the transcendence – the holiness - of the absolute God of the Hebrews could not be contained in a space or in all space. God’s omnipresence, which exceeds any pantheism and transcends all presence, is reflected in one of God’s names: “the place” (*HaMakom*), meaning that all creation is within God while God is within nothing. God would be the paradox of the set of all sets, but the “solution” to this paradox, his surplus, his transcendence in immanence, would be ethical rather than ontological. Not a potential not yet actualized but the good not yet realized. All the ontological and semi-mythological contortions borne by the kabbalist notion of *tsimsum*, God’s alleged “withdrawal” from Himself to make room for His creation, do not make sense of the plenitude, the excess, the surplus of the world’s holiness. Unless that Kabbalah is an ethical one, *imitatio Dei*, as was eventually understood. [Joseph Dan book]

Far from being an unambiguously sacred space, the holy of holies, the Temple and its ritual offerings, are for these exegetes but a concession to Israel’s spiritual failures and weaknesses, its sinfulness, its finitude as we would say today. Of course in one sense this is obvious: the Temple sacrifices were performed to rectify sins. But these exegetes point to a more striking “reason,” namely, the origin of the Temple. They do not mean the reverent and festive dedication ceremonies presided over by King Solomon. Rather they understand that *the human need for sacred space*, for the cult of a Temple, came as a response to the Jews’ greatest spiritual failure: the creation and worship of an idol, the golden calf, shortly after they had received God’s revelation at Mount Sinai. We all remember the striking image, described in the Bible and depicted in many artworks, of Moses coming down the mountain only to smash the two tablets of the Ten Commandments in horror at seeing the Israelites worshipping a golden calf of their own making. This incident was a transformative event in Jewish history: thousands

of idolatrous Jews were slaughtered; the tribe of Levi which had not participated was appointed to be a priestly tribe; and Aaron and his sons were appointed as priests of the sacrifices to replace the now compromised first-born sons (a replacement which Spinoza in the *Theological-Political Treatise* will consider to have been the primary cause of the final downfall of the Jewish Commonwealth).

The entire incident of the golden calf, this mass idolatry of the Jews, even while Moses is conversing with God atop Mount Sinai, is strange, remarkable, disturbing, at the very least questionable. We are compelled to ask – and the rabbis asked - why did the Israelites, who had just witnessed and agreed to the awe inspiring divine revelation at Mount Sinai, why did they immediately create and worship an idol? As always the rabbis have an interesting answer: the motive of the Jews was good. After the revelation quite naturally they immediately wanted to worship God. But what did they know about divine service? They knew only how other nations worshipped. Apparently what God revealed to them at Mount Sinai was too new, too different, the message too exalted, too holy, for the long acquired habits and limited understanding of the newly “chosen” “children is Israel,” who after all had just escaped from more than two hundred years of servitude in Egypt. This is why, according to these exegetes, it was only after the debacle of the golden calf that God decided to permit the Jews to have a “sacred space,” indulging his “children,” as it were, like a loving parent. The Jews would apparently have to learn the proper worship of the eternal God over time, just as they would have to unlearn their slavery over time – in fact the two processes were one and the same: worship and Jewish history (and all of human history ultimately) would be a lesson in becoming free.

Thus the story of the golden calf is followed in the Bible by detailed plans for the construction of the Ark of the Covenant and an elaborate tabernacle (*Mishkan*) made up of posts,

hooks, curtains, alters, bowls, tables, etc. which could be rapidly put up and taken down to be transported by the Hebrews in their dessert wanderings.<sup>8</sup> To grasp the strict continuity joining the portable tabernacle to the Temple in Jerusalem, we must finally ask what was in the holy of holies of the Temple. Though there was no idol it was nevertheless not an empty room. Inside was the Ark of the Covenant of the portable tabernacle, including the rings and poles by which it was carried on the shoulders of the Levites in the dessert. So in the innermost heart of the massive stone and wood Temple of Jerusalem is a portable tabernacle! In the most stable of buildings, the huge imposing edifice of the Temple, supported by cut stones some of which weigh as much as 400 tons, built with the cedars of Lebanon, we find an ark which remains portable, transportable and always ready to go. The highest holiness of the “holy land” then would be an attachment to the most desirable, the height above height, the humility of compassion, and decidedly not an attachment to the soil. And it is historically a fact that it is outside of the Land of Israel that Jews became dangerously attached to soil, where they deceived themselves into believing that they were Germans first, or French first, rather than human beings first. In fact, from the point of view of Jewish spirituality, we can say that wherever Jews become attached to soil – even in Israel - they are outside of Israel. The holiness of the Holy Land is an ethical extraterritoriality.

Be that as it may, the permanent portability of the ark indicates an essential ambivalence which Jewish monotheism teaches about sacred space as such, namely, the primacy of a religious-ethical mission which even though and necessarily located in space, time and symbols, in a desert tabernacle, in a Temple in Jerusalem, and which, furthermore, for this reason is constituted in and constitutes the movement of history itself, *has no place and does not seek a place*. The “true” mission of monotheism is an inalienable alienation, an alienation of the human

which is not, as the romantics and existentialists mistakenly believed, a loss or deficiency but rather a surplus, as assignation and assignment, a vocation: the uniqueness and nobility of the human, “created in the image and likeness” of an Invisible God. To be in the world but not of the world – this is the great prophetic message of monotheism. But it is anything but an escape from the world: it is rather a commitment to always make the world better, to improve it, to repair it, “to make it holy” as God is holy.

Perhaps the comic-tragic image we may have today of the Jew with suitcases packed, ready to flee persecution at a moment’s notice, reveals a deeper truth, something not merely negative, not merely a fearfulness in the face of oppression, a cowering before anti-Semitism, but rather the positivity of an essential alienation in the name of a holiness – ethical election - which cannot be bound to space. And is not anti-Semitism – all anti-humanism, as Levinas has said - always soil and soiled and despoiling, weakness and weariness, concession to gravity, childish flight before responsibilities? The famous cosmopolitanism of the Jew would not be a simple caricature or sociological category, but like the Confucian “gentleman” – the noble soul – it is the bearing of one who is “at home” in all the world because he is never at home, never enrooted, in one time or place only. The Jew bears all history and lives in all lands, and yet remains above history and land, because the Jewishness of the human – what Jews in Yiddish call *Menschlikeit* - is to love the neighbor, whether fellow or stranger, and to struggle for justice, but neither only abstractly or sentimentally.

Our interrogation is far from finished. The Ark of the Covenant is within the holy of holies, yes, but what is within the Ark of the Covenant? Answer: words, just words, the weakness of mere words, but they are also words carved on stone, the words which are mightier than the sword. These are of course the words of the second set of tablets, the Ten

Commandments and by extension all of the commandments, which for the Jews means all of the Oral Torah through which the Written Torah is read and understood. It is therefore all “learning,” all moral teachings, every nuance and detail of responsiveness to the other, the call to the highest ethical vocation, to love the neighbor, the stranger, and to seek justice for all. A sharp reader educated in traditional Judaism might now object out that the commandments regarding agriculture in the Land of Israel, e.g., tithing, first fruit, the three great harvest festivals of gathering (Passover, Shavuot, Sukkoth), etc., comprise the largest single subset of all these commandments, and therefore does this not show – contrary to the present thesis - an inordinate attachment to soil, a Jewish nationalism rooted in the earth like all others? To answer this objection, however, we must ask if these many commandments are laid out because the Jews are rooted in the soil of Israel or rather for precisely the reverse reason: to ensure that the Jews do not become rooted in the soil; so that they do not behave like animals, do not wallow in mud, or rest content in themselves and in their land basking satisfied under the sun like flora. The danger of idolatry, so evident in the incident of the golden calf, arises no less, apparently, in a holy land: to find one’s safe harbor, to forget all the troubles of the world, worshipping the land, always one’s own land, becoming like land, autochthonous as if one were a plant, immobile and unmoved by the suffering of others, those who are only outsiders, barbarian or not. We recall Pascal’s “Thought” (112), cited by Levinas as an epigram of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*: “‘That is my place in the sun.’ That is how the usurpation of the whole world began.” The Jews in the Land of Israel are not to become minerals, vegetables or animals. They are not natives and the land is not originally theirs – it is God’s. They are commanded to become fully human, to be responsible for one another and for all humankind. This is holiness independent of sacred spaces and bound to no place. It is holiness higher than the earth, higher than the solar

system, higher than all galaxies, higher than all of nature, which since Einstein has no up and down in any event. It is the holiness of the good above being.

And thus these exegetes insist on a necessary ambivalence regarding the Temple and the worship ordained there. Furthermore, this ambivalence is intimately bound to another, that of the prophets regarding the existence and status of monarchy in Israel. In one text of the Bible (Deuteronomy 17:14-20) it is commanded by God as a gift, while in another (I Samuel 8) it is granted grudgingly and with warnings as a concession to a sinful desire on the part of the Israelites.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, as we have seen, the portable tabernacle and thus the Temple itself are ordained as a dispensation to weakness: the Jews want to worship and mistakenly they first worshiped an idol copying the nations, just as the Jews wanted a king so they could be like the other nations and were rebuked for this by the Prophet Samuel. Yet on the other hand they are given a Temple as they are given a king, but their Temple like their king are different from other temples and kings, not merely places of self-congratulation and power, but moments of ethical transcendence. The holiness of the Temple, as the biblical prophets (especially Isaiah,<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Micah, Amos and Malachi) insist, may well be necessary, given human nature, but Temple service is itself an abomination without the morality and justice which are the true purpose of the Temple cult and true character of the Jewish election. It is the same with the Jewish king, each of whom must write by his own hand a Torah scroll which he must also always carry on his own person. Thus Jewish spirituality – its rituals, its prayers, its sacrifices, its sacred texts – constitutes a bulwark of ethical imperatives to enable goodness to trump power precisely in those places, persons and ways in which power is most likely to seduce and deceive.

Furthermore, the rabbis teach that one day there will be a third and final Temple. Unlike the first two it will not in any way be a concession to spiritual weakness but rather a Temple of

genuine holiness, serving the Jews, certainly, but also all the nations, just as the kingship of the Jews, begun in some way as a concession to lower assimilationist tendencies, and whose two greatest monarchs, David and Solomon, prepared, built and inaugurated the first Temple, just so the monarchy of the Jews will culminate with the king Messiah. In that time the Jews will be sovereign and safe in the land of Israel; there will be no more war anywhere in the world but rather peace, *shalom*, all nations living in harmony with one another; because all the nations will recognize the divinity – the morality and justice - of the one invisible God. And then, without giving up their different religions and rituals, without giving up their singular identities, all the nations and all religions will acknowledge and obey the path of morality and justice, and hence come to properly worship the true God at the third Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup>

It is certainly no accident, then, that the founding patriarch of the Jewish nation, the Iraqi convert from paganism to monotheism, Abraham, and the celebrated Moabite ancestress of the Messiah, the convert from paganism to monotheism, Ruth, both begin by going into the permanent exile which Jews are still living and celebrating today, giving up the land of their birth to go up to a promised land they have never seen before. They go not to another land to reestablish roots, but to a land of promises, the extraterritorial futurity of morality and justice, and thus the promise, the utopia of peace.<sup>12</sup> It is not a bed of roses, a Holiday Inn, an imaginary fantasy, but a daily struggle, six days of work, work to improve the world, a work guided and regulated by the vision of a perfect utopia which the Jews taste once a week on the holy day of Sabbath.

So the most sacred public space in the history of Judaism, the Temple in Jerusalem, is a testimony to utopia. Not the utopia of another world, but the imperative or utopian force of the call to improve this world. A fundamental dislocation: to make this world better, kinder, more

just, what Hans Bloch called “the principle of hope” and Levinas named “a long patience.” Such is the holiness of the holy of holies, not an escape but a prod, a “more in a less,” as Levinas expressed it. Idolatry, in contrast, is always a matter of place, the romantic and false nostalgia of enrootedness: my place, my country, my religion, and the like. Such, according to the rabbis, was the real and fatal sin of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, not sexual aberration but more fundamentally and supporting such abominations: inhospitality to strangers. Abraham stood for the exact opposite: hospitality to all, kindness to friends, of course, but also to strangers.

Abraham’s “home” was an open tent, a welcome, a temporary shelter, a meal for all who passed: love of the neighbor. Holiness has no location for it occurs everywhere that kindness occurs and justice is rendered. Such is the prophetic lesson of the Temple in Jerusalem, a holy alienation: an empty sanctuary, a portable tabernacle, and inside the ark Israel’s covenant: an obedience to God not as the coveting of bodies, things, places, but as a movement going higher than the height of the sky, in an elevation without reserve: ethical service to the other and to all others. When we are alone or when we gather together as communities in places of holiness, what is truly “religious” – the “link to God” - is not the geometry or architecture of space, however grand or simple, nor is it a comforting sense of belonging, to the earth or to a group, finding one’s alleged place, but far nobler and far greater and far more difficult it is an ethical inspiration, a renewal and rededication of the elevated and elevating movement toward goodness which such places can inspire us to realize. Ends of holiness which cannot be contained in any space and which are neither graspable nor tangible, even if these ends never free us from – and indeed bind us to – the material needs of a suffering humanity. These places and gatherings accomplish their purpose, are holy, when they remind us that to follow the will of God is to take nothing more seriously than the alleviation of suffering. And let us not forget that scientific knowledge and



advanced technology are not obstacles to holiness thus understood but are absolutely required if we are to create the society of plenty which is the necessary condition of a just world.

## Sex and the Sacred

What is the second “space” that is most holy in Judaism? It is the bedroom, the conjugal bed of husband and wife. Actually it is the act of sexual intercourse between husband and wife – though this act is so holy the rabbis will never speak of it directly, instead they always employ verbal circumlocutions, as they do with the holiest names of God. I am not making this up or making a joke. That religion and sexuality are linked is a claim which no longer shocks a modern sensibility in our post-Freudian age. Though in joining holiness and sexuality here, I am not following Freudian cues. Regarding our topic, sacred space, we once again we find a holiness that requires the physical but is not contained in it, as it were, for what is holy is not actually the biological or physiological act of sexual intercourse, but the intimacy, the shared feelings, the trust, indeed, the bond of love between husband and wife, and beyond that the bonds of family, and hence of generations linked by familial love and tradition, that this act – and all the taboos surrounding it - epitomizes. The topic of sex and holiness is too vast for this paper, so what I will focus upon (and even here in a quite abbreviated form), is how in Judaism the holiness of sexuality is closely connected to the holiness of the holy of holies of the Temple in Jerusalem.

There are many ways, both positive and negative, in which Judaism links these two “places” or displacements – these two utopias - of holiness. For instance, to concentrate fully on the holiness of *Yom Kippur* the High Priest and the Jewish people as a whole are forbidden to have sexual intercourse on *Yom Kippur*. *Yom Kippur* is a strict fast day, where the Jews imitate angels, having no food, drink or sex, dedicating themselves wholly to repentance. But this abstinence for one day must not be confused with valuing celibacy or abhorrence of the body or

marital sex. It is a matter of channeling and directing energies. It is always a matter of harnessing material dispersions into spiritual intensities by way of ethical imperatives. On the afternoon of *Yom Kippur* the portion of the Torah (Leviticus 18) which is read aloud in the synagogue today does not speak of angels, heavenly songs or messianic times, but rather presents detailed and graphic lists of abominable and forbidden sexual acts and relationships. Just as the rabbis fear that agricultural labors might prolong the ways of the earth, so they fear that sexuality might provoke lusts and violence rather than love and intimacy.

Indeed, so sacred is marriage, that to perform the *Yom Kippur* Temple service the High Priest *must* be married. The wife of the High Priest, unlike the wife of any other Jew, *must* be a virgin (of course it is desirable that all brides are virgins, but only in the case of the High Priest is it a strict commandment). These are not rules which the ancient Israelites took casually: on the day before *Yom Kippur* the High Priest was married to a second wife lest his first wife die and he become disqualified. Despite the many and constant dangers of an unbridled sexuality - and here we should recall the Canaanite idolatry which was unholy not only because of human sacrifices but also because of sexual abominations (as one sees in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah) - the intimacy of matrimonial sexuality is holiness itself. The High Priest would not be living a full Jewish life, could not represent the Jewish people and could not atone for sins, if he were not married.

Holiness is both separation and intimacy: separated from the profane, the ignoble, the base, and above all from evil and injustice, because it approaches what is noble, high, good and just. This holiness is also the sacred bond joining husband and wife, a bond of respect, including a very real material care for one another, "in health and sickness," as we say, which distinguishes the proximity of marital intimacy from the copulations of animals. It is interesting in this regard

that the Pentateuch speaks of jealousy – *kana* – only twice: with regard to God’s rejection of idolatry, i.e., in the Ten Commandments: “You shall not prostrate yourself to them nor worship them, for I am God, your God – a jealous God” (Exodus 20:5), and when a husband is suspicious or jealous of his wife’s fidelity (Numbers 5:14, 29-30).<sup>13</sup> Idolatry and myth are unfaithfulness to the holiness demanded by God, just as adultery is unfaithfulness to the holiness, the sanctity required by marriage. God is jealous for the sake of the intimacy of holiness, jealous for moral behavior and justice, just as marital partners are jealous regarding the preciousness, the treasure of the intimacy of love and trust in marriage and family life. It is no wonder that the “Song of Songs” can be read both erotically and allegorically... the readings cannot in fact be separated.

But there is an even more striking link joining the holiness of conjugal sex and the holiness of the holy of holies of the Temple. On the cover of the Ark of the Covenant there were two carved figures, each a mix of human face, bird wings and animal body, known as *cherubim*. One female and the other male, they faced one another from each end of the top of the Ark. These figures are not merely decorative: the Bible informs us that it was “from between the two cherubim” (Exodus 25:22) that Moses heard God’s commands. Again we find a space which is not spatial: the face-to-face. But the Torah goes even farther (Yoma 54a-b): when the Jewish people “did the will of God” these two figures embraced one another sexually, locked in sexual union on the very cover of the Ark of the Covenant. When the Jewish people disobeyed God, however, they turned and looked away from one another. So, according to this highly imaginative and keenly instructive narrative, the holiness of obedience to the commands of morality and justice is literally expressed as a face-to-face, and even holier, if one can say this, it is expressed in the intimacy of sexual embrace, *shalom*, a harmony of differences. Allow me to add to this image which surpasses images, a word from Rabbi Akiva, perhaps the preeminent

rabbi of the Oral Torah. In a rabbinical debate about which texts to include in and which to exclude from the biblical canon, Rabbi Akiva famously declared: “All Biblical writings are holy, but the ‘Song of Songs’” – i.e., the most explicitly erotic writing of the Bible – “is the holy of holies” (*Yalkut Shimoni*). At once erotic and allegorical, the two cannot be separated: the body is the launching point of spirit; the spirit gives meaning to the body. Once again holiness bound to body exceeding itself in transcendence – the alienation and extraterritoriality of the good, a going beyond as a making better.

In contrast to Gnostic tendencies in Christianity, for example, with the exaltation of celibacy where marriage is understood, at best, as a concession to the flesh, to be married is the norm for Jews. Further, a Jewish man is also required, as a *mitzvah* – a command, a good deed - to have conjugal relations with his wife. He is commanded also to procreate, to have children. Certain rabbinical scholars would have sexual relations with their wives on the Sabbath especially because in this way the holiness of their sexuality would coincide with the holiness of the holiest of Jewish holy days. What is closer to God, more divine, than both the loving intimacy of husband and wife and the loving act of creating a human being? From holiness comes holiness, such is the “logic” of transcendence.

Marital relations are not holy, however, simply as an instrumental activity. The Jewish man is also required by the will of God to give his wife pleasure. There is much more: sexual relations must occur by mutual consent; one cannot withhold sex as a weapon in a marital fight; a man must provide his wife a beautiful home and beautiful clothing, etc. In a word, the relation between husband and wife, and most especially sexual intimacy between husband and wife, is holy, the holy of holies, though unlike the Temple service on *Yom Kippur*, which is a once a year event and a very public one (though of course also hidden), sex is strictly private and presumably

a regular occurrence. In Judaism it is a general principle that what occurs more frequently is holier than what occurs less frequently. Thus the Sabbath the holiest day, the rededication of spiritual perfection amidst material imperfection; thus a loving marriage, the oasis of shalom in a world of conflict, is the Song of Songs.

Before concluding, and to avoid misunderstanding, I must say that Temple worship, or synagogue services today, and conjugal relations, or marriage itself, are not events within Judaism that can be spiritually isolated from the rest of Jewish communal life. They are highpoints, to be sure. I have focused on the Temple because even more than Israel as a “holy land” it seems on first sight like the greatest instance of “sacred space” in Judaism – hence a counter instance to my thesis. And I have focused on sexuality for the same reason, because it seems so carnal, so pagan, and at first sight therefore quite counter to the idea of holy transcendence. But, as we have seen, each on its own and even more especially in their association with one another, in Judaism both the Temple and marital sexuality teach a utopian vision of spirituality, one publically and the other privately, for which ethical respect for the other is the very height of the holy. No doubt one could discover this same lesson by means of an analysis of the Ten Commandments, where the holiness of the divine is intimately linked to the treatment, the respect, the honor – including sexual purity – one human owes to another. Worship and marriage are bound not only to the entirety of Jewish life, to past and future generations, but through that life they are also bound to all places and all times, to all nations, to all humanity, and to all of creation. Ethical spirituality cannot be limited to one person, one family, one nation, one country, or even one planet or solar system.

I have invoked some specifics of the Jewish religious tradition in order to put into question the notion of sacred space as enrootedness. As most of you already know quite well, I

have been inspired by Levinas's notion of holiness as the imperative to utopian justice. I have tried to show how this approach helps us understand a peculiar ethical spirituality – holiness – as one finds it in Judaism even where one would least likely expect to find it, in its Temple service and in marital sexuality. Holiness as ethical transcendence is the adult alternative to idolatry and mythology and the irresponsibility they engender.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at the conference on “Religion and Culture: Horizons of Everyday Life,” sponsored by the Center for Religious Studies and Research, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania, on May 21, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Robert Brustein, foreword to *Chekhov: The Major Plays*, trans. Ann Dunnigan (New York: New American Library, 1964), xxii.

<sup>3</sup> It is well known that Levinas distinguishes the “sacred” from the “holy” on just this score: the former restricted to idolatry and mythology and the latter to monotheism. In utilizing the term “sacred space” popular in Religious Studies, I will obviously not be adhering to Levinas’s terminology here.

<sup>4</sup> As we have noted of art, Nietzsche notes of artists (in section five of the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*): “they do not stand nearly independently enough in the world.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 102.

<sup>5</sup> One still hears a trace of this spiritual geography in the language of modern secular Israeli Hebrew where the verb for leaving Israel is “to go down” (*le’radat*) while the verb for entering Israel is “to go up” (*le’aylot*). But such geography is not exclusive to Israel.

<sup>6</sup> The pronunciation of this name of God is presently “lost.”

<sup>7</sup> According to *Yoma 10b*, many High Priests died this way during the late Second Temple period.

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<sup>8</sup> Though rabbinical exegesis does not always or necessarily consider the canonical narrative sequence of the biblical text to necessarily represent the historical order of the events depicted, the narrative sequence is nevertheless taken to be a legitimate subject of interpretation, as we see in the present case.

<sup>9</sup> See Levinas's commentary on these texts in "The State of Caesar and the State of David," in Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 177-187.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 1:16-17: "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the most famous messianic text is from Isaiah 2:3-4: "For out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples. They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning-hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 12: 1-3: "God said to Abram, 'Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.'" Ruth 2: 11-12: "Boaz replied and said to her [Ruth], 'I have been fully informed of all that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband; how



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you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and went to a people you had never known before. May God reward your actions, and may your payment be full from God, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge.” I thank Rabbi Moshe Taube, of Young Israel of Buffalo, for pointing out to me this connection between Abraham and Ruth.

<sup>13</sup> See, *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*, trans. Nosson Scherman (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1994), 408, no. 5.