

“Holy to Adonai:” We Are All Priests

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Imagine going to work each day, wearing a headband made of pure gold, engraved with the words, *kodesh l’Adonai*, “Holy to Adonai.” Such was the honor, and the burden, of the High Priest in the Jerusalem Temple of old.

Rabbi Mary Zamore writes, “It is easy to assume that “Holy to [Adonai] signifies the High Priest’s elevated status.”ⁱ That’s an understatement. Only the High Priest bore those words on his forehead. He risked an inflated ego. Indeed, rabbis face a version of the same challenge today, even though none of us wears a gold headband proclaiming that we are “holy to Adonai.” Some people presume that my colleagues and I are intrinsically holy, and that we are owed deference on that account.

That’s dangerous, as Rabbi Zamore has written elsewhere. She describes “the professional or lay leader in a congregation or institution who is successful in their work, yet has substantiated accusations of sexual assault, harassment, or abusive/bullying behavior against them. They are trusted and beloved, generous with their time and/or money; they excel in their field. And because of their success, their community will never hold them accountable for their bad behavior—even though it endangers the community’s atmosphere of safety and respect—leaving a wake of damage in their path. Often working to keep the behavior and its negative impact unknown to the wider world, community leaders act as if the bad behavior is an unavoidable tax for the benefits the community reaps from the productive perpetrator’s presence and work.”ⁱⁱ To understand Rabbi Zamore’s point, we need look no farther than the Catholic Church’s failure to hold sexually predatory priests accountable. Those priests, “Holy to Adonai” like their ancient Israelite predecessors, were deemed too “trusted and beloved,” excellent in many ways and perhaps even indispensable, for people to imagine that they had sinned so grievously, sully themselves and their religious institutions as anything but “holy to Adonai.”

Rabbi Zamore, though, insists that the High Priest of old “was not intrinsically holier than anyone else. Certainly,” she admits, “the priestly class had an auspicious role in the community with the High Priest at the top of this societal and religious structure. Yet, his function was to expedite holy actions, not to personally gain from his position.”ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Zamore cites Rashi, who argues that wearing the headdress was essential to the priest’s role of seeking forgiveness for Israelites’ sins, writing, “Only while it was on his forehead did he atone and effect

pardon.”^{iv} Rabbi Zamore also shares the teaching of “modern commentator Aviva Zornberg,” who posits that the exalted words on the headpiece are aspirational: The phrase is not a declaration that the priest is “Holy to Adonai,” but rather that he must strive to *become* “Holy to Adonai.”^v He is not alone.

Earlier in Exodus, God tells the Children of Israel: “Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep my covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”^{vi}

Rabbi Gunther Plaut, in his famous Torah Commentary, opined that “a kingdom of priests” means: “Ministering to the rest of humanity. This represented a unique idea: all the people and not merely a selected segment would have a special religious task.”^{vii} If the High Priest is “holy to Adonai” in relation to the Children of Israel, Torah seems to be imparting that every member of our Covenant is destined to be “holy to Adonai” in relating to the rest of the world. This notion that we are all God’s “treasured possession” is of course emblematic of our status as a “chosen people.”

Having such an exalted status, being “holy to God,” has much to recommend it. Plaut wrote, “In times of stress it was a source of hope and reassurance; Jewish survival might not have been possible without the conviction that Israel was indeed God’s beloved, destined for high purpose and spiritual glory.”^{viii} However, as Plaut also notes, the notion that we are “chosen” has come under attack in modern times, with many arguing that “in an age that decries inequality of every kind, the doctrine of special election has no further place and should...be disavowed.”^{ix}

If all Jews are, however figuratively, walking around wearing a headpiece, engraved with those words, “Holy to Adonai,” we are at significant risk of hubris. Rabbi Noa Sattath of the Israel Religious Action Center teaches that chosenness can become Jewish Supremacy, a racist perversion. She writes: “Even though white supremacist ideologies around the world target Jews as enemies of the superior race, an analogous ideology has existed in Israel since the 1970s: the Kahanist movement, which advocates Jewish supremacy. Rabbi Meir Kahane ... developed his racist theories, essentially targeting Arabs both within Israel and in the occupied territories. Underlying his theories was the ... the idea that Jews are the chosen, superior people who must therefore separate themselves from others: [In Kahane’s hateful words:] ‘The people of Israel were chosen...since they have the souls of humans, the wonderful special creation in the world. Gentiles, while they are physically equal to Israel, aren’t ‘human’ in the spiritual sense.’”^x

While most of us may not know Jews who think that others are subhuman, we all do know Jewish people who harbor the notion that Jews are somehow superior. That, too, is Jewish supremacy, a notion that only Jews are “Holy to Adonai.”

However, if we look more closely, when the Torah tells us that we may be “God’s treasured people,” it says that we merit this status only if we will observe the Torah and live as God commands. Just as Professor Zornberg argues that “Holy to Adonai” is an instruction to the High Priest, we too are enjoined to strive to be sacred, not to imagine that we are, by accident of birth or choice of conversion, intrinsically superior to other human beings.

Being “Holy to Adonai” is a burden: We who are members of the Covenant must strive to avoid the temptation to imagine ourselves superior. Being Holy to Adonai” is a blessing: We who are children of Abraham and Sarah possess the gift of Torah, a singular pathway to being God’s hands here on Earth. Let us always resist the temptation of superiority. Instead, in every generation, let us do the hard work to become “Holy to Adonai.”

Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Mary Zamore, “What is Holy to God? Each of Us,” *ReformJudaism.org*, February 22, 2021, [What is Holy to God? Each of Us | Reform Judaism](#).

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Zamore, “Harassment-Free Jewish Spaces: Our Leaders Must Answer to a Higher Standard,” in Rabbi Barry H. Block, editor, *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, projected for publication by CCAR Press in 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Zamore, “What is Holy to God? Each of Us.”

^{iv} Rashi to Exodus 28:38.

^v Zamore, “What is Holy to God? Each of Us.”

^{vi} Exodus 19:5-6.

^{vii} Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Revised Edition, New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005, p. 474.

^{viii} Plaut, p. 484.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Rabbi Noa Sattath, “Jewish Supremacy: The Danger of Chosenness,” in Rabbi Barry H. Block, editor, *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, projected for publication by CCAR Press in 2021.