

Article

Holiness and *Imitatio Dei*: A Jewish Perspective on the Sanctity of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract: Research in Jewish studies as well as key passages from Judaism's sacred texts describe teaching and learning as being among the most important, efficacious and sacred of God's commandments. However, while this description is well-documented, the specific dynamics of education's role within a framework of Judaic holiness remains underexplored. This article first lays a thorough foundation of Judaic sanctity, illustrating a theistic axiom at its core surrounded by several peripheral elements, including connection to God, knowledge of God, holiness as invitation, reciprocal holiness, awakening sacred potentiality and, as the purpose and apex of the entire system, *imitatio dei*. Having illustrated *imitatio dei* as a culminating purpose atop the entire system of Judaic holiness, I describe how teaching and learning as prescribed in sacred Jewish texts can be a potent means of achieving this end. Considering that teaching and learning are called *kanegeḏ kulam*, or equal to all the other commandments of Judaism combined, I argue that education conducted in sacred ways prescribed by Jewish scripture can be considered among Judaism's most sacred commandments, as well as a most efficacious means of realizing *imitatio dei* within a Jewish frame.

Keywords: holiness; sacred education; religious education; Jewish studies; Judaism; *imitatio dei*



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1. Introduction

Within the corpus of Judaism's 613 laws, teaching and learning are not described as just another commandment made sacred by virtue of a connection to God as its author, but as *kanegeḏ kulam*, equal in importance, power and sanctity to all the other commandments combined (*Mishnah Peah* 1:1). Many religious Jews consider fulfilling the commandment to teach and learn "the breath of their nostrils, their greatest joy and the finest portion of their lives (Montefiore and Loewe 2012, p. xvii)." As a divinely-prescribed practice that both sanctifies humanity (Neusner 2003, p. xvii) and links them to Heaven (Kadushin 1972, p. 213), "in studying, Jews see themselves as performing [nothing less than] a holy act ordained by God (Holtz 1984, p. 24)." In short, "to Judaism . . . the processes of learning are sacred and study a holy pursuit (Steinberg 1947, p. 67)."

So, while the idea that Judaism considers teaching and learning sacred may be well-established in Judaism's sacred texts as well as scholarship in Jewish Studies, the question of how teaching and learning function within that sanctity remains underexplored. More recent scholarship (Alexander 2001, for instance) discuss the role of God as teacher in a Jewish context. However, such scholarship neither describes Judaic holiness in sufficient detail nor provides an adequate description of education's role as holy within such a rigorously-established framework. These are precisely the contributions I propose to make in this article.

First, I will review key academic literatures that describe the sacred, pulling from both classic and contemporary sources, in order to lay a foundation for a framework of the sacred in which Judaic holiness, or *kedusha*, might be considered in an academically rigorous way. Having laid this foundation, I propose an outline to the various dimensions of Judaic holiness, along with how each of these functions with regards to humanity, with *imitatio dei* as its apex. Within this framework, I illustrate one way in which teaching and

learning could be considered among the most potent means by which humanity might attain holiness from a Jewish perspective. While I attempt to do this in such a way as to pay due respect to Jewish traditions of reverence for education, my position is that of a scholar outside these traditions. Within this positionality, I hope to bring non-Jewish scholarship into the discussion while at the same time honoring the emic perspective of the orthodox Jewish communities whose beliefs form much of the foundation upon which this article rests. In short, I hope to illustrate that, just as teaching and learning are described as the most holy of commandments in Judaism, they could also be portrayed as the most powerful means by which humanity can respond to God's invitation to participate in *imitatio dei*, forge a connection to God as the ultimate source of holiness and thereby achieve what could be considered the ultimate purpose of holiness in Judaism, that is, to become like God. While there are significant and far-reaching implications for teachers, curriculum, and philosophy of education, my purpose in this article is to review the literature necessary to establish this idea. I look forward to enumerating and exploring these implications for education in future research.

While the Latin phrase *imitatio dei* plays a role in other faith traditions, including Christian and (perhaps most notably) Orthodox Christian theologies, Jewish ideas surrounding *imitatio dei* stand apart from such literatures. However, Jewish scholars have adopted the term to refer to their own traditions as a way of combining several Hebrew terms that refer to a similar thread of Judaic theology. Besdin, for instance, equates *imitatio dei* with the Hebrew *hitdamut la'El* (Besdin 1993, p. 24) and adds a supporting passage from the Babylonian Talmud (*Sotah 14a*). Kaplan further establishes a precedent for Jewish authors using the Latin *imitatio dei*, equating it with *היקרי האל* (a modern Hebrew term for the imitation of God, used by Kaplan himself in the translated title of his article; see also (Kasher 2012)), the more formal Hebrew term *hiddamut*, the Tanakhic Hebrew *halikhah bi-derakhav*, walking in God's ways (cf. Deut.10:12; 11:22) or the rabbinically inspired phrase *halikhah ahar midotav*, walking after God's attributes (Kaplan 2005, p. V). The term *imitatio dei* is also used by such seminal Jewish authors as Kaplan, Shapiro, Harvey on the subject, rather than its Hebrew equivalent. The widely-used *Encyclopedia Judaica* notably omits any reference to Kaplan's Hebrew terms, instead including only a single entry for this idea under the title "*imitatio dei*" by Siegel (2007). Even in his article on *imitatio dei* written from a Christian theological standpoint, Meyer wrote, "Apparently, the first person who noticed the presence of the themes of the *imitatio dei* in the Old Testament was the Jewish scholar Martin Buber in 1926 (Meyer 2009, p. 374)." In short, though several traditions make use of the term, there is a significant precedent for Jewish rabbis and scholars to use the phrase *imitatio dei* to describe the imitation of God. It is for this reason that I use the term here.

2. Conceptualizations of the Sacred: A Foundation

I begin by exploring the meaning the sacred from various academic perspectives (including anthropology, philosophy and theology). My primary purpose in doing so is to argue that, among the many conceptualizations of sanctity in these varied disciplines, there exists a common thread: first, that there is a core dimension to the sacred which gives it its vitality, and second, that there is room for an academically-rigorous consideration of God in that role. To begin, I borrow Pargament and Mahoney's "core and ring" approach (Pargament and Mahoney 2005, pp. 179–99) in describing holiness. The "core" of that framework—what Smart called "the mythic or narrative dimension" (Smart 1996, p. 130) or what Dahl described as "something more and different (Dahl 2008, p. 9)"—is as much at home in describing theistic systems as non-theistic ones. This lays the foundation for understanding the nature of Judaic holiness by providing an academically rigorous lens through which to consider theistic axioms in relation to the sacred.

"Something More and Different:" A Core to the Sacred

There are many prominent lenses through which to view the sacred place a construct at its core (Pargament and Mahoney 2005). Some sociologists identify "achieved social

objects" at that core (Rawls et al. 2016, p. 67). Söderblom, representing many theologians, places God there (Söderblom 1913, p. 731). Rather than seeing holiness as an "attribute of human conduct," such theological perspectives view it as an irreducible "attribute of divinity (Oxtoby [1987] 2005, p. 4098)." Similarly, though from the lens of evolutionary biology, Rappaport calls the core at the heart of the sacred an Ultimate Sacred Postulate (e.g., a God or gods, nature, etc. (Rappaport et al. 2001)). Along these same lines, Harrington, a historian of religion, described how the "active and powerful force" that gives potency and efficacy to the sacred "originates with the gods (Harrington 2001, p. 206)."

From the perspective of a psychology of religious practice, Pargament and Mahoney wrote that, "The core of the sacred consists of concepts of God, the divine, and transcendence," or "any object that takes on extraordinary character by virtue of its association with, or representation of, divinity (Pargament and Mahoney 2005, p. 181)." Historian of religion Mircea Eliade further described that which lies at the heart of the sacred as something "which manifests itself to us (Eliade 1959, pp. 7–12)." Together with Nancy's point of view from philosophy that described the sacred as something which "encounters us," (Nancy 2013, p. 157), Eliade's assertion provides ample room for including theistic axioms in academically defensible considerations of the sacred.

Noteworthy anthropological research, most often without making any theistic or non-theistic claims, describes the core of the sacred as a source of efficacious power. This includes Callois' "force with which man¹ must reckon (Callois 1959, p. 22)," van der Leeuw's "power (van der Leeuw 1938)," Mauss' "inexhaustible source of power (Mauss [1902] 1972, p. 10)" and Rappaport's sacred as the emanating force that imbues "the sanctified" with its sanctity (2001). Linguistic anthropologists like Wagner have associated what all these phrases describe with the Polynesian terms "mana . . . the Siouan wakan, Iroquois orenda, Aztec nagual, and Arabic baraka (Wagner 1987, p. 5631)." Much like etymologies of the English terms "sacred" and "holy" suggest, each of these terms connotes an efficacious source from which sanctity derives its power. Otto in particular sees this power at the heart of the sacred as "a power far greater than, and lying far beyond, the human realm (Oxtoby [1987] 2005, p. 4096)," and even goes so far as to coin the term numinous to describe that power (Oxtoby [1987] 2005, p. 4097). This uniquely powerful core is further described by Callois and Mauss as, respectively, both "eminently efficacious (1952, p. 20)" as well as "eminently effective (Mauss [1902] 1972, pp. 23–24)."

While "in the English-speaking world, reference to the holy has [often] implied an appreciation of divine potency as a reality (Oxtoby [1987] 2005, p. 4096)," these various disciplinary perspectives neither endorse nor refute theistic dimensions to the sacred. Importantly, however, by describing "a world that is organized in a hierarchy of differential values and of things that really exist, even when we have no empirical perception of them (Rennie 2017, p. 668)," they make room for their legitimate consideration. In short, several significant interdisciplinary threads describe the sacred in terms of a core construct upon which any peripheral dimensions it may have fundamentally depend.

This lays a vital foundation for approaching holiness from a Jewish perspective. One of the fundamental axioms of a Judaic conceptualization of holiness is the existence of God as the source of sanctity's quality and power. As such, it is significant that these academic perspectives of the sacred each describe a construct at the heart of holiness which, though named differently in nearly every instance, shares many of the characteristics of God in a Jewish system of sacrality. This is not to say that the aforementioned descriptions of the sacred necessarily ally themselves with a theistic perspective, let alone a Jewish one. Nevertheless, seeing as the descriptions of the sacred by these academic disciplines not only make room for but even emphasize the role of an efficacious source at the heart of the sacred, it would seem that including theistic considerations in the present description

¹ Here, as elsewhere throughout this article, I cite scholars who, following the grammatical conventions of their day, use terms like "man" and "mankind" when referring to humanity in general. While I have left all direct citations in their original format, I have taken special care to utilize non-gendered terms such as "humanity" or "humankind" in the original text of this article.

of the sacred is intellectually responsible, academically rigorous and well-supported in prominent threads of literature on the sacred.

3. *Kedusha*: Judaic Holiness

Having laid a foundation for a broader view of the sacred, this section builds on that foundation to describe a Judaic approach to holiness.² In doing so, it relies upon the same “core” framework described earlier. However, in this instance, it adds several peripheral elements to that core (what Pargament and Mahoney call the supplementary “ring” dimensions tied to their “core-ring” approach (Pargament and Mahoney 2005)). I begin with a brief description of the importance of holiness within a Jewish lifestyle and worldview generally. Having established its importance, I provide a brief etymological background to the Hebrew term *kedusha* (קדושה) with an aim to further reinforce two ideas: first, the fundamental existence of a “core” to holiness itself within the Jewish system specifically, and second, in the case of a Judaic worldview informed by Hebrew philology, the identification of God at that “core”. Next, I outline key literature from Jewish philosophy and Judaism’s sacred texts that describe holiness with God at its core. I then build several peripheral dimensions to Judaic holiness on this foundation (again following the “core-ring” approach mentioned earlier). These categories include holiness as a connection to God, holiness as knowing God, holiness as an invitation to act, reciprocal sanctity, holiness as actualized potentiality and (as a culmination of all these) holiness as *imitatio dei*.

I begin with holiness as a connection to God in order to illustrate how each of these appendages to holiness are made so only by virtue of that connection. The two themes thereafter describe how one can make such a connection to Judaism’s core of holiness, namely, by coming to know God and acting upon the invitations God provides thereafter (i.e., the commandments). Such actions actualize the theretofore dormant potentiality of holiness within humanity by means of a process of reciprocal sanctification. Once this potentiality is awakened, the eternal purpose of Judaic holiness reveals itself as *imitatio dei*, that is, to imitate the character, actions, dispositions and attributes of God in order to become more like Him. I describe each of these categories of Judaic holiness in such detail to lay a foundation for understanding how teaching and learning can be considered holy from a Jewish perspective. Following this section, I will describe how teaching and learning are invitations to holiness, that is, invitations to become connected to God in order to awaken the dormant potentiality of holiness within and thereby commence the eternal work of *imitatio dei* in order to become like God.

3.1. *The Importance of Holiness in Judaism*

Holiness, or the Hebrew *kedusha* (קדושה), is a central facet of Jewish law, lifestyle and philosophy. Repeatedly discussed in its sacred texts, (Kahn 1956, p. 575) in hundreds of passages (Müller 1997, p. 19), the subject of holiness “occupies the foreground” of the Hebrew Bible (Mittleman 2015, p. 36) and “takes up over one third of the material” of the Mishnah (Harrington 2001, p. 3). Beyond the written word, holiness encompasses the experiential dimensions of religious living. As such, “holiness,” said Schechter, “is the highest achievement of the Law and its deepest experience as well as the realization of righteousness (Schechter 1909, p. 199).” Judaic holiness seems the central focus of the Jewish philosopher, as well. “To the philosophers,” wrote Heschel, “the idea of the good was the most exalted idea. To Judaism [however] the idea of the good is penultimate. It cannot exist without the holy. The good is the base; the holy is the summit (Heschel 2001, p. 95).” While holiness is a key focal point of Jewish law and living, its importance only comes from its connection to God, who is at the heart of Judaism itself. When understood in its proper relation to God, the importance of holiness within the perspective of Jewish

² Here, as elsewhere throughout the paper, “sacred” and “holy” are used synonymously.

scripture becomes clear, though only derivatively so. When understood in relation to a Jewish conceptualization of God, the place of holiness at Judaism's summit becomes clear.

3.2. God: The Core and Source of Judaic Holiness

Again, within the “core-ring” framework used earlier, from a Jewish perspective, God is the core and source of holiness. “In every case,” wrote Mittleman, “the concept of holiness...is incoherent without the concept of God (Mittleman 2015, p. 39).” In Judaism, holiness is inherent to God's character (Shapiro 1965, p. 48; see also Genesis 20:11; 42:18), nature (Simcha Ha-Kohen of Divinsk 1974, pp. 504–10) and paradigm (Mittleman 2015, p. 36). Even His very existence is inexorably linked to the concept of holiness in rabbinic Judaism (Simcha Ha-Kohen of Divinsk 1974, pp. 504–10). Moreover, holiness is not a symbol that represents God, much less a separate entity that takes His place. It is, instead, comprised of His very essence (Shapiro 1965, p. 52). Within this system, holiness is so closely associated with God, so inseparable from Him, that the two reach a near synonymy with one another. Taken in this light, “to say that God is *kadosh*,” wrote Harvey, “tells us nothing whatsoever about Him (Harvey 1977, p. 10),” for holiness is his most fundamental (Schwartz 2000), supreme characteristic (Shapiro 1965, p. 46)—the highest expression (Shapiro 1975, p. 58) and summation (Cohen 1929, p. 111) of all God's attributes.

Whereas “all other predicates designate created things primarily and God only by extension, ‘holy’ designates God primarily and created things only by extension (Harvey 1977, p. 8).” As such, understanding the nature of holiness within a Jewish system comes by studying God Himself, which further solidifies the unity of God and holiness. When considered without God, wrote Soloveitchik, holiness is not only unintelligible, but leaves the consideration altogether—in other words, when God leaves, holiness leaves (Soloveitchik 2000). Simply put, in a worldview informed by Jewish scripture, “there is no holiness without God (Mittleman 2015, p. 39)” —no holiness outside the sphere of divinity (Leibowitz 1992, p. 24).

It is crucial to note that, from a Jewish perspective, the holiness of God (i.e., His nature, character, attributes, etc.) exists independent of its ritual recognition through prayer (Shapiro 1965, p. 51), experience (Mittleman 2015, p. 61), or any other human intervention. “I am holy,” God is believed to have said, “whether you sanctify Me or whether you do not sanctify Me (see Sifra, Leviticus 19:2).” Unlike some anthropological renderings of the sacred that claim humanity as the locus and source of sanctity's quality and power (for example, see Smith 1980), Judaism sees acts of holiness performed by humanity as simply the “service of a loftier idea of God (Eichrodt 1961, p. 274).” While humanity may honor the source of holiness through its actions, the holiness exists independent of such honorary actions, which only serve to awaken the holiness God (as its source) chooses to awaken in His creations, including (and perhaps especially) women and men. As such, in this system, it is God, not humanity, who is the originating source of holiness as both power and category, imparting to the cosmos (Shapiro 1965, p. 47), yet dependent upon none for its maintenance.

With holiness understood as synonymous with God's character, God's attributes, actions and characteristics all become holy by association. Such holy attributes include, but are not limited to, selflessness (Shapiro 1965, p. 58), unapproachability (see Exodus 3:2–5; 19:18–22; 24:9–17), eternity (Shapiro 1965, p. 61), unity (Friedman et al. 2007, pp. 50–56), morality (Shapiro 1965, p. 71), unchangeability (Friedman et al. 2007, pp. 50–56) and righteousness (Shapiro 1965, p. 71). Each of these attributes is further sanctified because God not only embodies them, but embodies them in perfection (Shapiro 1965, p. 65) in such a way so as to be understood by humanity (Soloveitchik 1966, p. 91). Like His holy attributes, God's actions are also considered sacred in this context. “Even for God,” wrote Mittleman, “holiness does not mean a static, inherent property but [what both Cohen and Maimonides described as] a mode of action (Mittleman 2015, p. 42).” This means that it is not only God's nature that is holy, but God's way of doing things. So sanctified by their connection to Him, God's attributes and actions, when emulated by humanity, have the

power to connect men and women with God and His holiness. With God as the core and source of sanctity itself, such connection is the principal means by which humanity might participate in, experience and embody holiness.

3.3. Holiness as Connection to God

Again, considering God as the core of Judaic holiness, any remaining dimensions of that holiness will derive their sanctity by virtue of a connection to God as its source. In this way, “the holiness of human life is derivative” of the more central and fundamental sanctity which radiates from God (Mittleman 2015, p. 36). One of Judaism’s sacred texts compares the relationship between humanity’s holiness and God’s to “a man drowning in water to whom the shipmaster threw out a cord, saying, ‘Cling to this rope and do not let go of it.’” In other words, this relationship is one of total and complete dependence: just as a victim of drowning might cling to a rope for her life, so humanity depends on God for any connection to holiness whatsoever. Furthermore, like the shipmaster casting a rope to the drowning man in the story, God is seen to cast invitations out to humanity in the form of His commandments. By fulfilling these commandments, humanity grabs the shipmaster’s rope, as it were, and is saved from the drowning separation from holiness that would otherwise await them (see Numbers Rabba 17:6). Seen in this way, Judaic holiness is not wholly elective, anchored only in the arbitrary ground of independent human choice. Holiness in this sense is, instead, “rendered holy by God’s effusion of his holiness (Mittleman 2015, p. 39)” upon “those who have achieved the closest relationship” with God (Shapiro 1965, p. 58). In other words, while holiness emanates from God, its dispensation to humanity depends on humanity’s elective connection with God in response to and made possible only under conditions proposed.

For humanity, then, “holiness consists in continuous adhesion to the Divine (devekut) (Mittleman 2015, p. 40) through disposition, action and ritual realized under divinely predetermined circumstances. Yet, in the Jewish system, humanity is not the only beneficiary of a consecratory connection to God’s holiness. Objects, places, and activities also ‘derive their sacred character’ from a relationship that arises as they serve God (Friedman et al. 2007, pp. 50–56).” For example, the word of God is rendered holy because, as “a sort of extension of Himself,” such words are bestowed with the quality and power of holiness that emanate from God (Harrington 2001, p. 159). Whatever power that may reside in such things is “not because of some seemingly empirical presence or property” independent within their nature, but instead “because of their relation to God. He³ owns them (Mittleman 2015, p. 32).” In this sense, the relationship between God’s holiness and that of humanity is remarkably similar to that shared between God’s holiness and the cosmos in general. Within this Jewish perspective, then, anything that is dedicated to (Jacobs 1997, pp. 18–21), engaged in the service of (Friedman et al. 2007, pp. 50–56), points to (Tillich 1951, p. 216), or is simply in relation to (Kohler 1906, pp. 439–42) God is rendered holy by virtue of that connection and by no other means.

Furthermore, whether with time (like the Jewish Sabbath (Shapiro 1965, p. 72)) or space (like Jerusalem (see Pirkei Avot 6:10)), whatever is possessed by God is rendered holy by the relationship that such ownership implies. In this sense, when God declares something holy (e.g., His people, Israel), “holy functions somewhat like a possessive adjective such as mine (Mittleman 2015, p. 36).” Such divine possession is initiated by God by way of an invitation to which humanity is given the opportunity to respond. Such divine possession, then, “marks the result of an intentional action more than it names a quasi-physical property (Mittleman 2015, p. 30).”

The holiness of sacred space functions in much the same way. “Holy land,” wrote Harrington, “usually a temple or outdoor shrine, was powerful because it was a location of di-

³ “Although here as elsewhere throughout this article there appear several gendered pronouns such as “He, Him, His” to refer to God, this does not represent any allegiance to a gendered conceptualization of God in the anthropomorphic sense. In the citations I use in this article, such terms appear to be the convention among Jewish scholars on this subject. As such, I honor their emic perspective by not altering their prose in reference to their God.”

vine manifestation and was stamped with the seal of divine ownership (Harrington 2001, p. 128).” This instance again illustrates holiness as a connection to God. The centrality of God as the source of both the quality and efficacy of holiness cannot be overemphasized. Purity, for instance, though often considered a defining characteristic of holiness within a Jewish system, is only derivatively sacred, sanctifying only as “a process of loosening one’s ties to the earthy realm and focusing one’s gaze on the celestial (Seeskin 1996, p. 192),” that is, upon God as the source of holiness. Through the medium of space, time, action and disposition, then, humanity can “bring down the divine presence and holiness into the midst of space and time, into the midst of the finite, earthly existence (Soloveitchik 1983, pp. 41–43).” While such connections are forged as a cooperative efforts between God and humanity, from a Jewish perspective, God is the unique originating source of sanctity of which humanity is but a recipient and beneficiary.

Even the “set-apart” aspect of holiness so vital to early Durkheimian descriptions of the sacred is, in a Jewish system, seen as having only peripheral, instrumental importance as a means of connecting to God. Because the state of being set apart from the mundane is seen as so fundamental to God’s character, those who would connect with God and thereby be made holy must likewise set themselves apart from the mundane (Harrington 2001, p. 88). While Judaism maintains that one’s separation from unworthy relationships (see Rashi’s commentary on Leviticus 19:2), foods (see Mikhlita, Kaspá, Mishpatim, 2), worship (see Sifra, Kedoshim) and people (see Rashi’s commentary on Leviticus 20:25–26) are all prerequisites to the attainment of holiness, that separation is, again, only instrumental. The “distance, separation and distinction” (Soloveitchik 2003, pp. 143–44) peripherally characteristic of holiness are meant, instead, to be a means of connecting to God through preferential devotion to God over all others (Harrington 2001, p. 89; Jacobs 1997, pp. 18–21). Seen in this way, Durkheim’s characteristic description of the sacred as “set-apart” is seen in Judaism not as being set-apart from something so much as being set-apart to something, that is, God.

This connection to God, however, is not of equal sanctifying potency in every instance. Some people, places, objects and acts can be more closely associated with God than others. “The Creator,” wrote Shapiro, “has set apart segments of his universe as specially and uniquely hallowed (Shapiro 1965, p. 46).” Within such “degrees of holiness (Jacobs 1997, pp. 18–21; Kohler 1906, pp. 439–42),” God commands humanity to draw nearer than in whatever degree of connection they may currently find themselves (Berkovits 2002, pp. 281–84), whereupon God promises to reciprocate by drawing nearer to them in return (Harrington 2001, p. 90). From this perspective, “the goal of self-sanctification is not union with God, as the mystics suppose, but nearness to God (Seeskin 1996, p. 199).” Such nearness is key to a Judaic understanding of holiness. As such, not only is holiness derived from a connection to God, but as one draws closer to God within the thread of that connection, one’s holiness increases proportionately (Mittleman 2015, p. 30).

3.4. Holiness as Knowing God

In light of holiness as a connection to God, the holiness humanity receives from God becomes “that which reaches out towards God, and which enables us to know him (Shapiro 1965, p. 52).” In other words, another dimension of holiness is manifest in an increased capacity to understand the otherwise ineffable nature, character, mind and actions of God. It does so by “lifting us above our limited conceptions so that we can comprehend the Lord of the universe, insofar as it is humanly possible (Shapiro 1965, p. 52)” to do so. Rabbis and Jewish scholars maintain, however, that knowing God is nearly impossible (Friedman et al. 2007, pp. 50–56) as His holiness is both paradoxical (Soloveitchik 1974, pp. 7–8)—“the great mystery at the center of the Jewish religion (Jacobs 1997, pp. 18–21).” However “remote from all human understanding (Jacobs 1997, pp. 18–21)” that holiness may be, God and His holiness “can yet be very near to us if the necessary conditions are prepared (Jacobs 1997, pp. 18–21).” While these conditions have the power to bring “the

highest of realms (Wein 2016)” into the immediacy of human experience, God’s holiness cannot be controlled, only experienced in cooperation with the divine invitations at its heart (Soloveitchik 2003, pp. 66–67).

Coming to know God through a received channel of holiness requires a willingness to change one’s perception of the world. Holiness, then, is not the creation of something new, but an awakening of one’s awareness to something that, though theretofore unseen, was “already there” waiting only to be brought “into focus (Mittleman 2015, p. 45).” Unveiling holiness from what Maimonides called the “dark veil that prevents us from apprehending immaterial things as they really are (Seeskin 1996, p. 192)” comes about when humanity connects itself to God by responding to His invitations to act. Later I will argue that teaching and learning are among the most efficacious and powerful of these sanctifying actions.

While holiness in this sense is seen to exist independent of humanity’s intervention, its realization in the world is considered contingent upon humanity’s participation with an “awareness of the presence of the unseen,” that is, God (Soloveitchik 2000, p. 171). This awareness is of paramount importance to humanity’s capacity to participate in and attainment of the sacred. “Only a life lived with full awareness for the divine aspect . . .,” wrote Cuilanu, “is worthy (Culianu and Burgdoff 2005, p. 8012).” From a more strictly Judaic perspective, “Unaware of the holy, man is a meaningless shadow,” wrote Harvey. “Aware of it, he is the image of God (Harvey 1977, p. 15)” This awareness of God as the efficacious source of sanctity in the universe, however, is only a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the realization of holiness among humanity. The connection between God and humanity through which His holiness can flow out to them depends in large part upon their fulfilment (Soloveitchik 2000, p. 66) of His commandments. Without this action on humanity’s part, no amount of sanctifying awareness can complete the connection in which God is said to invite humanity to take part. While humanity’s sanctification relies entirely on its connection to God, that connection relies largely upon humanity’s response to God’s invitations to act in ways God prescribes.

3.5. Holiness as Invitation to Act

“All words of holiness,” says the Zohar, “require an invitation (see Zohar 43a, 192.1; Silberman 1996, p. 89).” Such invitations from God to humanity are a call to the action that connects them to God and thereby allows His holiness to do the same. Yet, however important such sanctification may be, how this invitation is received remains “a matter for free but honest choice (Jacobs 1997, pp. 18–21).” From a Jewish perspective, the primary means by which God gives humankind these invitations to holiness-in-action is by way of His commandments. By answering this call “through observing God’s laws,” said Jacobs, “we become holy (Jacobs 1997, pp. 18–21).” Furthermore, with each added invitation-commandment, says the Talmud, God “adds to them holiness (see Mekhlita, Kaspá, Mishpatim 2).” So vital is humanity’s response to these invitations in creating a sanctifying connection with God that keeping His commandments is often seen as synonymous with holiness itself. “There is no difference,” wrote Maimonides, “between His saying ‘Ye shall be holy’ and His having said, ‘Do My commandments!’ (see Maimonides’ commentary on Leviticus 11:44 and 19:2 in Sefer HaMitzvot)” Seeing Judaic holiness as simply “to keep the commandments (Ibn Ezra 2001),” the Talmudic idea that teaching and learning are among the greatest of God’s commandments (to be further explored later on) suggests that educative acts are invitations from God to participate in a superlative degree of His holiness.

One particularly prominent facet of this participatory dimension of holiness is sacrifice. As sacrifice is among the commandment-invitations mentioned earlier, Soloveitchik’s statement that, “sacrifice and holiness are synonymous concepts in Judaism (Soloveitchik 2000, pp. 63–64)” fits within this model. Importantly, while such sacrifice involves “a passionate experience born of bewildering and painful events, of struggle and combat with one’s self and others (Soloveitchik 2000, p. 74),” it does not necessarily

constitute the violence at the heart of Girard's description of the sacred (Girard 1972). The invitation to sacrifice within contemporary Judaism simply implies that, "Holiness is not won easily, at no sacrifice (Soloveitchik 2000, p. 74)." While such sacrifice plays a prominent role among God's connective invitations to holiness, it is not at the heart of the Judaic sacred. Sacrifice, again, is another means whereby humanity may connect to God and be sanctified thereby.

This practical, action-oriented dimension of Judaic holiness is among its most central attributes. "The application of holiness to the life of man (Shapiro 1965, p. 48)" endows a "sacred character" upon him and his works (Shapiro 1965, p. 56). This moves holiness beyond a knowledge of God, or even a familiarity with Him. While it includes these facets, these lead to a participatory process, or task "to be pursued in patience and humility daily (Mittleman 2015, pp. 42–43)." Such participation changes Judaism's vision of personified holiness from the "custodian of holiness as a religious legacy" to being "a practitioner (Mittleman 2015, p. 36) of holiness." Such sacred practice closes "the gap between disposition and deed (Seeskin 1996, p. 201)" thereby "making the contemplative life and the active life become one life (Kaplan 1990, p. 148)." Not realized in an instant, however, these sanctifying acts must be consistent and continuous for "holiness requires human maintenance (Mittleman 2015, p. 42)." Such participatory maintenance is seen by rabbinic tradition as "the responsibility and role of the people in the achievement of holiness (Mittleman 2015, p. 201)." Seen in this way, while God remains the core and source of Judaic holiness, the responsibility to maintain a connection to such sanctity is deliberately placed on the shoulders of humanity by way of invitation, thereby making holiness a matter of reciprocal action between God and humanity.

3.6. Reciprocal Sanctity

From this standpoint, "holiness is reciprocal (Mittleman 2015, p. 43)." In the Midrash, God is recorded as having said, "I sanctify Israel and they sanctify Me (see Genesis Rabbah 15:24)." Yet, "unlike God's holiness, that of Israel is not inherent. It is contingent upon its sanctification through the performance of the commandments (Friedman et al. 2007, pp. 50–56)." As such, "holiness for man is a task, whereas for God it designates being (Cohen 1995, p. 96)." Again, although God's holiness exists independent of humanity's involvement therein, the actualization of holiness among humanity still depends "on man's instantiation of it in the world (Mittleman 2015, p. 42)."

As holiness resides at the top of Rav Pinkhas' "ladder of virtues (B. Avodah Zarah 20b.)," wrote Mittleman, "holiness is exceptional. Unlike the other traits, which may be acquired through focused, disciplined, and constant human intention and action, holiness requires the cooperation of the divine (Mittleman 2015, p. 42)." Judaic holiness, then, is not an invitation to independent action, but a "call to cooperate with God in bringing about the triumph of His will (Shapiro 1965, p. 64)." Such action must originate "not in what a man does, but in the fact that he does it in fulfilling the divine intention (Berkovits 2002, pp. 281–84)." Though it requires "a conscious act of man (Heschel 1951, p. 79)" in order to "be created (Wein 2016)," holiness, again, is not an independent human action, but one taken in tandem with God—"an act of consecration...persisting in relation to God (Heschel 1951, p. 79)." In short, holiness simply "cannot be acquired through human effort alone. An active, agentive divine movement is necessary (Mittleman 2015, p. 41)." In other words, holiness is comprised of a three-step pattern involving the reciprocal action of both God and humanity: first, God invites; second, humanity responds; and finally, the connection with God established, God sanctifies.

As "a partnership between God and man (Wein 2016)," "holiness is two-fold (Luzzatto 1990, p. 13)." "Its beginning is labor and its end reward," wrote Luzzatto. "Its beginning is exertion and its end, a gift. That is, it begins with one's sanctifying himself and ends with his being sanctified (Luzzatto 1990, p. 13)" By "constantly directing their will toward the sanctification of action," wrote Mittleman, "God may let his holiness descend and dwell upon them (Mittleman 2015, p. 40; see also Luzzatto 1990, p. 327). Seen in

this light, Judaic holiness is “not a one-way street” but “a two-way process by which the Holy One comes into the midst of his faithful worshipper...as a partner in holiness (Harrington 2001, p. 88).”

Through a combination of “divine election and human responsibility,” God is believed to choose His people by the symbol of His invitation to them. In return, “as his agents they must reflect his holiness (Harrington 2001, p. 88).” In this relationship, humankind remains entirely dependent upon God for any holiness received, for God can “never be brought under human control (Mittleman 2015, p. 40).” Those who receive such holiness by uniting themselves with God come to “the state of their communion with divine power (Mittleman 2015, p. 40; see also Luzzatto 1990, p. 334.)” Again, any human action made with an effort to attain the sacred independent of God cannot achieve that end. Any power that may arise from such acts comes about only because “the sanctity of man’s deeds invokes God’s aid (“Kedushah,” Encyclopaedia Judaica, pp. 50–56; see also Leviticus Rabba 24:4).” So, while God remains the source of all holiness, the realization of that holiness among humanity depends on a process of cooperative invitations and actions between God and humankind whereby God’s holiness awakens the dormant potentiality for holiness inherent to at least some degree in all humanity.

3.7. Holiness as Actualized Potentiality

Chassidic tradition holds that when the universe was created, God placed “sparks of holiness (Scholem 1941, p. 264) throughout the vastness of creation (Shapiro 1965, p. 46).” These sparks were not fully-realized holiness, as such sanctity can only emanate from God. These sparks were, however, “intimations” or “potentialities of holiness (Jacobs 1997, pp. 18–21).” The invitation from God, then, was that humanity “enable the hallowed phases of reality to achieve their holiness in full (Shapiro 1965, p. 67).” Simply stated, “it is man’s duty to confirm and fulfill that which God has sanctified (Shapiro 1965, p. 67)” in potentiality. For instance, while the Hebrew Bible’s creation narrative describes God as having “sanctified the Sabbath at the very beginning (Genesis 2:3),” it remains for humanity to convert the potentiality of holiness inherent in that day into a “holiness fully realized (Shapiro 1965, p. 67; see also Mekhilta to Ex. 20:8).” Seen in this light, holiness is an “endowed (Mittleman 2015, p. 32)” quality—a combination of “the significance that man, by his thoughts and actions, ascribes” to it (Schweid 1985, pp. 62–63) together with the sacred potentiality God is said to have given it in the moment of its creation.

While this principle pertains to the consecration of places, objects, acts, etc. (Soloveitchik 1983, p. 47), it applies in equal measure to humanity. “Man is not intrinsically holy,” said Leibowitz. “His holiness is not already existing and realized in him. It is rather incumbent upon him to achieve it (Leibowitz 1992, p. 46).” This principle whereby God endows an inherent, though dormant potentiality in all creation then invites humanity to actualize that sanctity is fundamental to Judaic holiness. “The dream of creation,” wrote Soloveitchik, “finds its resolution in the actualization of the principle of holiness (Soloveitchik 1983, pp. 108–9).” Importantly, this process of actualizing a dormant, inherent holiness builds upon the patterns of reciprocal sanctification by invitation outlined earlier.

While “nothing is sacred but man literally makes it so (Lichtenstein 1963, pp. 282–85),” “true, complete, and fulfilled holiness emerges” not as a human action independent of God’s influence, but instead “as the product of the interaction between God Who hallows and man who actualizes the unrealized possibilities of holiness (Shapiro 1965, p. 68).” These unrealized possibilities are where “blessing and sanctity [are] joined together (Shapiro 1965, p. 62)” and have the capacity to sanctify certain acts theretofore sacred only in embryo (see Jeremiah 23:9; Psalms 105:42). Furthermore, the consecratory power of such acts can also engulf those who realize them in “a living spiritual power flowing from God (Friedman et al. 2007, pp. 50–56).” Stated more succinctly, “Those who keep holy the things that are holy,” wrote Heschel, “shall themselves become holy (Abramson 1990, p. 32).” This changes holiness from a “task” to a process of “becoming (Mittleman 2015, p. 42).”

3.8. Holiness as *Imitatio Dei*

"In Judaism," wrote Seeskin, "we are commended not only to do what God says but, in a deeper sense, to walk in God's ways (Deuteronomy 10:12; 28:9). According to one interpretation of this commandment, he continued, "to walk in the ways of God means to perform actions like those God performs (Seeskin 1996, p. 192)." Reading the Levitical verse, "Ye shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy (Leviticus 19:2)," Abba Saul stated, "The King has a retinue. What must it do? Imitate the King! (Sifra, Kedoshim, ad Leviticus 19:2; Yalkut Shimoni, Leviticus 6:4)" Maimonides reinforces this idea, saying that, "A man who has attained the highest degree of sanctification...imitates God (Friedman et al. 2007, pp. 50–56)." Such imitation, however, amounts to more than just mimicking God's actions (Soloveitchik 2003, pp. 66–67). "This commandment," wrote Seeskin, "has been taken to mean that Israel must not only perform certain actions but perform them in order to become like God (Seeskin 1996, p. 191)." For "if a man is an image of God," wrote Harvey, "presumably he has the capability to imitate Him (Harvey 1977, p. 7)." Having been commanded by a being who presumably cannot lie to "be holy even as God is holy (Leviticus 19:2)," Seeskin reasons, "it must be possible for us to become so (Seeskin 1996, p. 196)."

In this sense, holiness envelops not just humanity's actions, but its dispositions, nature and character, as well. "Since holiness is conceived as the very essence of God, Biblical religion...incorporates moral perfection as an essential aspect of holiness, though by no means its total content (Friedman et al. 2007, pp. 50–56)." "God is holy," wrote Cohen, "because the ideal of ethics is inherent in Him (Cohen 1929, pp. 116–29)." As one dimension of God's character, "holiness means morality (Mittleman 2015, p. 42)" and is "basically an ethical value (Shapiro 1965, p. 62)." In this sense, "To 'love your fellow as yourself (Leviticus 19:18)' is as much a demand of holiness, as is the avoidance of eating anything 'with its blood' (see Leviticus 19:26; see also Mittleman 2015, p. 38)." Such goodness, wrote Harrington, "is characteristic of holiness (Harrington 2001, p. 44)." "This ethics," she continued, "is in direct imitation of the Holy One; it is an extension of his holiness into the human realm (Harrington 2001, p. 200)." However significant moral uprightness may be to holiness, though, it is not its overall purpose. It is, instead, only one among many ways in which humanity can connect to God, receive of His holiness, awaken the dormant potential for holiness within them and ultimately become like God themselves.

"The utmost virtue of man," said Maimonides, "is to become like unto Him, may he be exalted, as far as he is able...as the Sages made clear when interpreting the verse, Ye shall be holy (Pines' translation of Maimonides, 1963, 1:54)." For Philo, "holiness or human perfection...is imitation of God's perfection. Humans must understand that 'attaining a likeness to God who made them' is 'the proper end of their existence (Decock 2016, p. 6).'" Yet, however like God one may become by virtue of a connection to His holiness, "this movement towards perfection," wrote Decock, "is [still] the fruit of total dependence on God (Decock 2016, p. 6)." As such, "whatever holiness man attains," wrote Shapiro, it "is at best a dim reflection of divine holiness (Shapiro 1965, p. 58)." In short, the purpose of Judaic holiness is that humankind become so closely tethered to God, the source of holiness, that they not only imitate him, but begin to fundamentally change and even become like Him. And although Jewish scripture suggests that being coequal with God is unattainable, it repeats again and again the call to participate in holiness as an eternal process of becoming like Him.

All these dimensions paint a vivid picture of Judaic holiness. It begins with God at its center, with holiness radiating from God throughout the universe. Humanity's only means of attaining holiness, then, is to connect themselves to God from whom all holiness flows. In order for this connection to be established, however, humanity must first come to know God from whom they would receive the power and quality of holiness. Having come to know God, humanity can begin to answer the invitations to holiness God provides in the form of His commandments. By responding to these invitations through volitional

action, humanity awakens the inherent, though theretofore dormant sanctity within them by means of their newly-established connection with God.

Paramount among all these dimensions of holiness, however, is the central purpose to which they collectively point, namely, that humanity might become like God through an everlasting process of *imitatio dei*. So, while God remains the core, source and heart of Judaic holiness, the crowning purpose of that holiness resides in this process of *imitatio dei*. Seen in this light, it can be inferred that those commandments which most powerfully aid humanity in the pursuit and accomplishment of such *imitatio dei* are to them of the upmost sanctity—the most sacred of commandments and most potent of the connective threads that bind humanity to the source of holiness itself. And as teaching and learning are often considered among the most prominent of God’s commandment-invitations to holiness, it could also be inferred that teaching and learning are not merely among the holiest of all its commandments, but also among the most powerful means by which humanity can accomplish the eternal purpose of holiness itself, namely, to become like God.

4. Teaching and Learning: An Act of *Imitatio Dei*

God is believed to sanctify teaching and learning first and foremost by His presence. “If three have eaten at a table and have spoken their words of Torah,” says the Talmud, “it is as if they had eaten at the table of the All-present (*Pirkei Avot* 3:3).” Because of God’s presence at all pedagogic encounters, the “study of the Torah was considered holy worship (Harrington 2001, p. 143).” For this reason, a prayer is recited at the conclusion of every study session “because the sanctification of God’s Name is the goal of our studies (Shapiro 1965, p. 69).” This is reminiscent of the reciprocal dimension of Judaic holiness whereby humanity treats God as holy and in return receives sanctification from Him. This was among the primary reasons for which Torah (often translated as “teaching”) had been given to the people of Israel: “so that through it [that is, through teaching] the Name of God would be sanctified (*Tanna-debe-Eliyahu*, chp. 18).”

Furthermore, “The transmission of holy word from mentor to disciple,” wrote Harrington, “was a holy process which imitated the holy transmission of God’s word to Moses (Harrington 2001, p. 160).” Such mentors and their disciples had to be pure in order to take part in this sacred process, as it could only be imparted “from one pure vessel to another (Harrington 2001, p. 160).” Though this purity is not the heart of the educative dimension of Judaic holiness, it is a necessary condition preparatory to approaching God through the educative process itself.

Importantly, although the sanctity of the Jewish educative endeavor is spiritual and deeply experiential, it is also “mediated through the mental faculties, not in spite of them (Harrington 2001, p. 160).” In both its intellectual and spiritual facets, “the transmission of holiness” through teaching and learning is “a dynamic process” whose “holiness is a powerful, mystical force which is transmitted and received many times over.” Because God is the source of its sanctity, the act of teaching and learning is a partnership wherein humankind works in tandem with God. As they engage with God and His holiness, those who teach and learn in this way (i.e., in light of the sacred) “participate in the holy” and also become holy themselves (Harrington 2001, p. 160).

Most of all, however, is a single injunction that links all these pedagogies to sanctity itself, namely, that just as God the Teacher taught Moses at Sinai, so every Jewish teacher thereafter is, in an endless pedagogic *imitatio dei*, to teach as God teaches. For instance, consider the Talmudic injunction, “The Holy One said to Moses: Moses, even as I showed you a cheerful face [to encourage you to study Torah], so you are to show a cheerful face to Israel [to encourage them to study Torah] (*B. Ber* 63b).” By imitating God’s teaching in this way, humanity participates in the crowning purpose of holiness, *imitatio dei*, and is sanctified thereby. In a sense, teaching and learning are sacred acts as they assist humanity in their imitation of God and concomitant reception of His holiness.

Teaching and learning are also especially potent forms of *imitatio dei* and its related sanctity because God is said to actually do both every single day. “The rabbis,” said

Alexander, “envisioned God in their own image as a *talmid hakham*—both a student and teacher (Alexander 2001, p. 5).” More specifically, God is said to teach His people “each and every day [as] a divine voice goes forth from Sinai” to proclaim words of Torah (*Pirkei Avot* 6:2). When some among the ancient Sages could not come to a decision in their study, they often called upon God to teach them how to proceed (Rawidowicz 1986, p. 136). “When we teach,” then, said Rabbi Soloveichik, “we imitate God, He who teaches Torah to His people Israel (Besdin 1993).”

Apart from teaching, God also continues to study and learn each day Himself, despite His omniscience. “God not only studied His Torah more than a hundred times before He gave it to Moses for Israel,” wrote Rawidowicz, but “God is in Midrashic Judaism the *eternal student*. He learns *with* Israel, learns always and everywhere . . . Rav, the leading *amora* of the second century, went even so far as to describe exactly the daily agenda of God Almighty: The first three hours of his twelve-hour day of work, God learns Torah (Rawidowicz 1986, pp. 135–36).” Just as with teaching, then, one who learns is also imitating God, and in so doing takes part in His holiness. “What learning meant to traditional Judaism,” continued Rawidowicz, “can probably be best inferred from the fact that the rabbis linked it up with the supreme Jewish idea, the *idea of God* (Rawidowicz 1986, pp. 135–36).” Even “the rabbis of the Talmud,” said Neusner, “believed that they studied Torah as God did in Heaven; their schools were conducted like the academy on high (Neusner 2003, p. 275).”

Among the greatest of commandments, teaching and learning are likewise among the most potent means of participating in *imitatio dei* and connecting to holiness, a primary purpose of *imitatio dei*. In this way, said Alexander, “Study and teaching, in this tradition, are holy acts (Alexander 2001, p. 6).” This is one of the primary and most apparent dimensions of the relationship between Judaic holiness and the act of teaching and learning, namely, that one can become the type of teacher and learner that God is by consistently imitating the teaching and learning to which God dedicates Himself each day.

“When man uses his mind” to teach and learn, said Neusner, “he is acting like God.” Doing so not only connects humanity to God, thereby sanctifying him, but, humankind, “through reasoning in Torah’s laws, may penetrate into God’s intent and plan (Neusner 2003, pp. 274–76).” By teaching and learning, humanity not only imitates God, but in becoming like God can come to see the world through His eyes. “So, studying Torah (in the broad sense) is not merely imitating God,” Neusner continued, “who does the same, but is a way to the apprehension of God and the attainment of the sacred. The modes of argument [inherent in Judaic pedagogy] are holy because they lead from earth to heaven, as prayer or fasting or self-denial cannot (Neusner 2003, pp. 274–76).” Again, teaching and learning are illustrated here as uniquely holy—more capable of sanctifying its adherents than even prayer, fasting, or, as the *Talmud* states, all of Judaism’s remaining 612 commandments combined (*Mishnah Peah* 1:1).

5. Conclusions

In sum, while a Jewish understanding of holiness rests uniquely on God as its epicenter, its purpose lies primarily in bringing humanity to a plane in which it can share in that holiness. After having established a connection with God through a knowledge of His nature and attributes, humanity can respond to God’s commandment-invitations to establish a connection with Him, awaken the dormant, inherent sanctity within themselves, and participate in a reciprocal sanctity exchanged between humanity and heaven. All of these dimensions, however, serve as a preliminary foundation which serves to prepare humanity for an eternal process of imitating God, or *imitatio dei*. Within a system of Jewish religious laws, the commandments serve as actionable invitations whereby humanity can achieve this end. And because teaching and learning are among the most powerful of Judaism’s commandments (equal to all the others together), it can be surmised that teaching and learning are among the most powerful means available in Judaism for the achievement of *imitatio dei*’s divine purpose, that is, that humanity become like God.

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