

NECHAMA LEIBOWITZ: NOTHING HOLY IN THE WORLD

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Nechama Leibowitz, one of the greatest 20th-century teachers whose insights into the Tanach and distinct teaching methodology shaped thousands of students, would often say, “*Ein shum davar kadosh ba’olam*,” there is nothing holy in the world.¹ While her warmth and intellect was certainly accompanied by a dramatic flair, denying the existence of sanctity tests the boundaries of mainstream Jewish belief. What about Israel — is it not a sacred land? What about the Beit Hamikdash — was it not a sanctified space? How can we understand her statement especially in the context of Yom Ha’atzmaut, when we celebrate the development of the State and our return to what we call The Holy Land?

Examining Nechama’s (she insisted that she be called by her first name) writings on the mitzvah to settle Eretz Yisrael and on Moshe’s decision to smash the luchot can perhaps shed light on the concept of kedusha and how it is manifest in the Land of Israel.

Nechama emphasizes that many nations inhabit a homeland. “What is the difference between Israel’s relationship to its homeland and that of other nations to theirs?” she asks.² For the Jews, she explains, it is not just a matter of history; our relationship to our land involves “a moral obligation, the responsibility to observe a particular *way of life* in that land.”³

She bases this on the Ramban’s

citation of our sages who taught that residing in Israel is equal in weight to the performance of all the mitzvot in the Torah.⁴ Nechama illuminates this comment in a beautiful passage:

*... the Torah cannot be observed in its entirety except in a society wholly governed by its precepts ... Admittedly, there are personal religious obligations that can be observed anywhere, even by a Jewish Robinson Crusoe on his desert isle, but the Torah, as a whole, implies a complete social order, a judiciary, national, economic and political life.*⁵

She describes the ideal of life in Israel as holistic, but necessitating human input and development. Our unique relationship to the Land is not a function of the Land per se, but our inhabiting it to fulfill our religious mission. Perhaps this, for Nechama, explains why the Land is indeed sacred.

Nechama believed in the principle established by the *Meshech Chochma*, who writes that nothing in the world is *inherently* kadosh. No holiness simply resides in an object — not the Holy Land, not Jerusalem, etc. — other than that invested in it by Israel’s observance of the Torah in accordance with the will of the Creator.⁶ This is how he explains Moshe’s ability to smash the luchot — their sanctity was not inherent, but a function of the Jews abiding by the laws found therein. Therefore, when the Jews sinned with the Golden Calf, the sanctity of the luchot dissipated and



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they could be broken.

When Nechama said that nothing is kadosh, she meant, nothing is *naturally* holy. Of course kedusha exists in the world and reaches its peak in the Land of Israel. But that holiness was created through human effort. Israel is sacred because we are fulfilling our mandate to live in the land, develop the land and carry out our sacred mission there.

Endnotes

- 1 Chayuta Deutch, *Sippur Chayeha shel Nechama Leibowitz*, pp. 243-246. (My thanks to Rabbi Michael Myers, close student of Nechama Leibowitz, for sharing this book and his general insights with me.)
- 2 Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* pg. 401.
- 3 Leibowitz, *ibid.* (emphasis added).
- 4 Ramban’s strictures to Rambam’s *Sefer Hamitzvot*.
- 5 Leibowitz, *ibid.* pg. 399-400.
- 6 Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot*, pg. 612-614.