

“So Great a Salvation”

Thoughts on the Holiness of God • Preparing to Hear the Shofar

Tim Hegg • TorahResource • 2009

In the opening chapter of Hebrews, the author goes to great lengths to show that Yeshua is the exalted divine Messiah, the very one spoken of by Daniel the prophet, Who is seated on the throne of God, worshipped even by the angels. It was necessary for the author of this great epistle to begin in this way in order to lay the foundation for his primary message, namely, that the eternal salvation of sinners is possible only through Yeshua. Thus, he begins chapter two with these words:

For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? (Heb 2:1–3)

Recently I have been meditating upon that phrase, “so great a salvation.” I don’t think it takes any of us very long to account why our salvation is so great—especially when we consider our unworthiness. But it is primarily when we get a glimpse of God’s holiness that we begin to grasp the magnitude of the salvation wrought for us in Yeshua, our Messiah.

Consider the well known text of the “Song of Moses” in Exodus 15, so familiar to us because of its inclusion in our morning prayers:

Who is like You among the gods, Adonai?
Who is like You, majestic in holiness,
Awesome in praises, working wonders?
(Ex 15:11)

The phrase that caught my attention recently is “majestic in holiness” (נְאֻדָּר בְּקִדְשׁ, *ne'dar bakodesh*). The verb נְאֻדָּר means “to be held in great esteem,” thus the English versions (NASB, ESV, NIV, NET) use the word “majestic” to translate this verb in our text. What struck me, however, is the historical setting that evoked such words by Moses and the people of Israel. God’s power has just been demonstrated against Egypt in the most devastating of ways. For months on end the plagues against Egypt had decimated water, crops, cattle, and made life for the Egyptians miserable. Now, in the final display of God’s greatness, death had come to every household in Egypt. It was not enough that were (most likely) still burying the carcasses of all the livestock that had been killed. Now they were in a sorrowful panic over the deaths of all their firstborn sons. And if that were not enough, the army of Pharaoh had been drowned in the sea as they they pursued the Israelites. Corpses were washing up on the water’s edge.

So is this the way that the God of Israel displays His holiness? Is the utter destruction waged against the Egyptian people the display of God’s majesty? Yes, it is, and that is an awesome thought to consider. The power of God demonstrated in the redemption of Israel from Egypt evokes the rhetorical question of the first line of our stanza: “Who is like You among the gods, Adonai?” But it is the display of His holiness in His utter hatred of His enemies that evokes the adjectival participle “majestic.” From this we learn that one of the ways that God reveals His majestic holiness is by displaying His unmitigated hatred of all that is unholy, resulting in the complete destruction of His enemies.

In fact, nearly every time that we read of God revealing His glory in the narratives of the Tanach, it is described in terms that bring fear and terror to those who are near. Consider the scene at Mt. Sinai:

You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, ‘Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death.... So it came about on the

third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.... Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because Adonai descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. (Ex 19:12, 16, 18)

The self-revelation of God at Mt. Sinai is accompanied by thunder, lightning, smoke, fire, quaking, and a very loud sounding of the trumpet. Death is close at hand for anyone who breaks through the boundaries and touches the mountain.

The smoke and quaking are also found in the vision of Isaiah (Is 6):

In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.... And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. (Is 6:1, 4)

In the midst of this scene, with smoke filling the Temple and the foundations quaking, the Seraphim cry out: "Holy, Holy, Holy is Adonai of Armies. The whole earth is full of His glory" (v. 3). God's holiness is expressed in phenomena that bring terror to mere mortals.

Something we rarely see in the Tanach is the same word repeated three times in sequence. From a semitic standpoint, such a repetition would signal something immeasurable or infinite. Thus, "Holy, Holy, Holy" would emphasize a holiness beyond human comprehension. It is curious that we never hear the Scriptures extolling other aspects of God's character in such a threefold manner. We never hear "faithful, faithful, faithful" or "true, true, true." We never encounter "loving, loving, loving" or "powerful, powerful, powerful." Surely God is infinite in all of His perfections, so all of these would surely be true. But what we do hear the Scriptures say is "Holy, Holy, Holy." This might well suggest that God's holiness forms the core reality of all of His attributes, and helps us understand a text like Ps 103:1, "His Name is holy," where the semitic concept of one's name is that it represents the sum of one's attributes. We may conclude, then, that God's holiness is manifest in all of His attributes, so that His power is a holy power, His truth a holy truth, His faithfulness a holy faithfulness, and so forth.

Yet the revelation of God's holiness is most often couched in terms that bespeak danger and devastation. Indeed, when the Prophet Isaiah sees the majesty of God, he considers himself as dead:

Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, Adonai of armies." (Is 6:5)

Like the people of Israel at Sinai who petitioned Moses that they should no longer hear the thunderous voice of HaShem, so Isaiah, when he witnessed the glory of God in his vision, considers himself as good as dead. The English words "I am ruined" translate the Hebrew verb נִדְמֵיתִי *nidmeiti*, from the root דָּמָה *damah*, which can mean (in the *nifal*) "to be destroyed," "cease to exist." Isaiah's immediate response was that he had no hope of survival.

"Why," we might ask, "does God reveal Himself this way?" Why not show His majestic holiness in terms of life rather than death? Why not the beauty of a summer day, with quiet breezes, fragrance of flowers, and soft, soothing music? Why all of the smoke, thunder, lightning, terrifying blasts of the trumpet, and quaking? How did Moses think that the plague of death in which the Egyptians were engulfed revealed God as "majestic in holiness" rather than "majestic in power?" Why, when Isaiah hears "Holy, Holy, Holy" is he sure that he will die? The answer is that God often reveals His holiness by showing His utter hatred of all that is unholy.

The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes; You hate all who do iniquity. You destroy those who speak falsehood; ADONAI abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit. (Ps 5:5-6)

Sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling has seized the godless. Who among us can live with the consuming fire? Who among us can live with continual burning? (Is 33:14)

‘Also let none of you devise evil in your heart against another, and do not love perjury; for all these are what I hate,’ declares ADONAI. (Zech 8:17)

It may wound our sensitivities to hear the words of Scripture ascribe hatred to the Almighty, but this is because we have failed to appreciate His holiness as we should. If we accept the Bible’s revelation of God, we must accept that God is infinite in His holiness, and thus by His very nature He has an infinite hatred and absolute abhorrence of all that is contrary to Himself. He dwells in perfect holiness and will not nor cannot allow that which is unholy to dwell with Him.

This fact sets forth, in stark reality, mankind’s greatest dilemma. For since all who descend from Adam and Chavah are sinners and therefore unholy, how can there ever be fellowship between God and man? Clearly it is utterly impossible for a sinner to attain to the level of infinite holiness required by God’s own character, yet apart from such attainment, no friendship between God and man may exist.

From the beginning mankind has devised his own imaginative ways to solve this dilemma. Some simply deny the existence of God altogether and therefore dismiss that any such problem exists. Others suggest that God’s attribute of compassion can override His holiness so that He simply overlooks mankind’s sinfulness as an expression of His love. Still others teach that God accepts man’s attempts at goodness, or any amount of sorrow for his transgressions, as sufficient payment for his sin.

But all of these “solutions” fall very short since they fail to reckon with the fact that God’s actions are always in concert with His infinite holiness. Thus, His compassion cannot diminish His justice, for in such a scenario He would cease to be infinitely holy, since He would be less than infinitely just. Moreover, to presume that any of mankind’s attempts at goodness or repentance could pay the infinite debt of his sin in the court of God’s holiness is either to accredit infinite goodness to man (*a non sequitur*) or to diminish God’s infinite justice. For man’s sin, when viewed against the standard of God’s infinite holiness, renders mankind infinitely unholy. We are all “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3) and the debt of our sin is an infinite debt which none can pay.

If we return to Isaiah’s vision (Is 6), we see a foreshadowing of the God-ordained solution to mankind’s great dilemma. After seeing the glory of God and witnessing His holiness, the prophet considers his condition hopeless—he is utterly ruined, for he knows himself to be unholy in the presence of the three-times holy God. Then the plan of God is unfolded:

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.” (Is 6:6–7)

Only the flame of God’s holiness, taken from the altar representing sacrifice, could overcome the infinite gulf between God and man that sin had created. The altar, upon which the innocent sacrifice is consumed as the substitute for the sinner himself, was a foreshadow of the ultimate sacrifice, the Lamb of God Who would bear the sins of His people and pay the infinite debt to bring them to the Father. What Isaiah could not do for himself, God did for him in the sacrifice of His own holy Son.

Thus, the only solution to the dilemma of mankind is that the One Who is Himself infinite in time, space, and being, and thus infinite in holiness, should become man and render Himself an offering for the payment of sin. The mystery of Yeshua’s incarnation, the One Who always existed in the very nature of God yet became man (Phil 2:5ff), is God’s solution to the dilemma of man’s sin and the only possible solution extant in our universe. This is why Yeshua proclaimed: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). It is this very theme that the author of Hebrews develops, showing that Yeshua, our great High Priest, is the only answer to the dilemma of how sinful man can commune with God Who is “Holy, Holy, Holy.” The salvation God has accomplished in His Son is, indeed, a salvation that can only be described as “very great,” for it alone satisfies the infinite holiness of the Father.

Therefore, all who are “in Yeshua” have His infinite holiness accredited to their account, and are given the promise that one day they will stand before the Father, dressed in the righteousness of the Messiah and thus fully accepted by the Father. Further, even now all who are “in Him” have access to the Father, so that we may come boldly before the throne of grace with full assurance that we will be accepted (Heb 4:16; Eph 2:18; 3:12). Moreover, because of our High Priest, the Spirit of God dwells with us and in us, conforming us more and more into the likeness of Yeshua, so that we experience even now a foretaste of the fellowship with God we will fully enjoy in the world to come. “So great a salvation” indeed!



Yeshua’s grave is vacant now, left for the throne above;
His cross asserts God’s right to bless, in His own boundless love.

‘Twas there the blood was shed, ‘twas there the life was poured,
There Mercy gained her diadem, while Justice sheathed her sword.

And thence the child of faith, sees judgment all gone by,
Perceives the sentence fully met, “The soul that sins shall die.”

Learns how that God in love gave Messiah the sins to bear
Of all who own His Lordship now, that they His place might share,

And cries with wondering joy, “As He is so am I,
Pure, holy, loved as Messiah Himself—Who shall my peace destroy?”

Reach my blest Saviour first, take Him from God’s esteem,
Prove Yeshua bears one spot of sin. *Then* tell me I’m unclean!

Nay! for He purged my guilt by His own precious blood,
And such its virtue not a stain e’er meets the eye of God.

(W. N. Tomkins – from *The Believers Hymnal*)