

Lev. 6:7

And this is the ritual of the meal offering: Aaron's sons shall present it before the Lord, in front of the altar. 8 A handful of the choice flour and oil of the meal offering shall be taken from it, with all the frankincense that is on the meal offering, and this token portion shall be turned into smoke on the altar as a pleasing odor to the Lord. 9 What is left of it shall be eaten by Aaron and his sons; it shall be eaten as unleavened cakes, in the sacred precinct; they shall eat it in the enclosure of the Tent of Meeting. 10 It shall not be baked with leaven; I have given it as their portion from My offerings by fire; it is most holy, like the sin offering and the guilt offering. 11 Only the males among Aaron's descendants may eat of it, as their due for all time throughout the ages from the Lord's offerings by fire.

Anything that touches these shall become holy.

כֹּל אֲשֶׁר-יִגַּע בָּהֶם יִקְדָּשׁ

Lev. 6:17

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 18 Speak to Aaron and his sons thus: This is the ritual of the sin offering: the sin offering shall be slaughtered before the Lord, at the spot^c where the burnt offering is slaughtered: it is most holy. 19 The priest who offers it as a sin offering shall eat of it; it shall be eaten in the sacred precinct, in the enclosure of the Tent of Meeting. 20 **Anything that touches its flesh shall become holy**; and if any of its blood is spattered upon a garment, you shall wash the bespattered part in the sacred precinct. 21 An earthen vessel in which it was boiled shall be broken; if it was boiled in a copper vessel, [the vessel] shall be scoured and rinsed with water. 22 Only the males in the priestly line may eat of it: it is most holy. 23 But no sin offering may be eaten from which any blood is brought into the Tent of Meeting for expiation in the sanctuary; any such shall be consumed in fire.

Ex. 29:37 Seven days you shall perform purification for the altar to consecrate it, and the altar shall become most holy; **whatever touches the altar shall become consecrated**.

Ex. 30:29 Thus you shall consecrate them so that they may be most holy; **whatever touches them shall be consecrated**.

Marty Lockshin, "Is Holiness Contagious?" <http://thetorah.com/is-holiness-contagious/>

In classical rabbinic literature, these Torah verses are never interpreted as meaning that someone or something can become holy by touching holy things. In the halakhic understanding, while impurity can be transferred through contact, holiness cannot.

Why not? I believe that rabbinic loyalty to the principle of non-contagious holiness is likely based on theological considerations. Carol M. Myers and Eric M. Myers argue persuasively:

Although defilement is contagious . . . , holiness in contrast is not. Sanctity is much more difficult to acquire and must be generated by direct involvement or behavior. Each individual becomes responsible for adherence to standards that lead towards holiness. This lesson greatly influenced the development of classical Judaism in which adherence to the *halakhah*, standards or law, became the only vehicle for achieving holiness.^[Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, Anchor Bible 25B (New York, 1987) p. 56]

In other words, in halakhic Judaism the idea that holiness might be spread merely through contact was unthinkable, and texts that seemed to suggest otherwise were reinterpreted.

RASHI: Anything that touches these—whether it is a thing of lesser holiness or of none at all—shall become holy in exactly the same way that they are holy. That is, if the offerings are invalidated, anything that touches them acquires the same status: most holy, but invalidated. But if they are fit to be eaten, then anything that touches them must be eaten with the same restrictions as apply to the original offerings—in the enclosure, and by males only.

GERSONIDES: Anything that touches these shall become holy. Because it has absorbed something from them and thus contains some of the same holiness.

RASHBAM: Anything that touches these shall become holy. Rather, anyone who is to touch them must first become holy, that is, ritually pure.

Lockshin, “Is Holiness Contagious?”

In the case of the four Torah verses that appear to describe contagious holiness, Rashbam adopts a remarkable middle position. He does not suggest that an item that touched the altar or the meat of a sin offering becomes holy. Instead, he writes that the word *שקדו* in these four verses does not refer to the *result* of contact with holy items (as all rabbinic exegetes and most moderns assume), but refers to the *preparation* that should be done before touching the altar or the sacrificial food. A person should *שקדו*—purify himself or herself— before touching the holy item.^[10]

Interpreting the verse as referring to a purification process is a break with the rabbinic tradition of interpretation but is not in conflict with *halakhah*. Rashbam’s interpretation was probably motivated by the inconsistency of the standard rabbinic explanation, which reads the identical phrase—*kol ha-nogea’ beX yiqdash* (whatever or whoever touches X shall become holy)—one way in Exodus, and another in Leviticus; his interpretation interprets this phrase identically throughout. He may have also felt that the rabbinic explanations were too far from the simple meaning of the words....

This interpretation has found some traction among modern critical scholars. For example, Baruch Levine has argued, following Rashbam, that these verses mean that people must purify themselves before touching holy things.... Jacob Milgrom, however, roundly rejects this reading.

One of the best left-handed compliments in the history of Jewish Bible commentaries must be Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann’s commentary on Lev 6:11, where he calls Rashbam’s comment on this verse the best of all the explanations that reject Jewish tradition. “*Dies ist noch die vernünftigste aller antitraditionellen Erklärungen,*” in *Das Buch Leviticus übersetzt und erklärt* (Berlin, 1906), p. 238. Hoffmann does not like Rashbam’s habit of ignoring rabbinic exegesis and going his own way, but he considers Rashbam’s approach preferable to that of the critics who see contagious holiness in the verse.

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