

“On the Canonization of John XXIII and John Paul II”

Sermon delivered on Shabbat Parshat Emor 5774

May 3, 2014

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Today’s Torah reading, ParshatEmor, is more formally known by its fuller name, “*ParshatEmor el Ha-Kohanim*” -- taken from its opening verses: *Emor el Ha-Kohanim* -- “Speak to the PRIESTS.”

Our Parshah, uniquely, contains a one-word summary of itself: V’KIDASHTO -- “Sanctify him”... or... “Declare him Holy”... or, perhaps, “TREAT him as Holy.” This commandment speaks to our obligation to show reverence and deference to the Kohen, the Israelite priest... and more fundamentally... to all he represents concerning the priestly mission of the Israelite Nation, the Jewish People at large.

It is intriguing that the Roman Catholic Church chose the week of *ParshatEmor el Ha-Kohanim* for the historic ceremony in which two Popes were elevated to the status and sanctity of SAINTS... in a mass at the Vatican attended by cardinals, a thousand bishops, kings, queens, some 25 heads of state, and close to a million spectators who overflowed the grounds of St. Peter’s Square in Vatican City, pouring into the streets of Rome. In the ritual, Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II (already widely referred to as John Paul the Great) were declared to be Saints... to whom all Christians may direct their prayers, and of whom those faithful may petition for heavenly intercession with God.

The Papal mass quite literally fulfilled the biblical commands of our Parshah -- *EMOR EL HA-KOHANIM*: “Speak to the Priests” ...and *V’KIDASHTO*: “Declare him holy.”

The Papal Mass of Canonization was not only an important day in the life of the Church; it was a fascinating moment in JEWISH history. There have been some 265 Popes, according to the Catholic Church’s reckoning... starting with Saint Peter. Of those 265 priests at the pinnacle of the Catholic Church... the THREE popes with the most positive relationships, the closest and most loving ties to the Jewish People, and the most lovingly reciprocated ties with the Jewish People, were -- arguably -- at the heart of this week’s ceremony... in the persons of -- now -- SAINT John XXIII,, and SAINT John Paul the Great... TOGETHER with their successor to the Throne of Saint Peter, Pope Francis, who presided over their elevation to sainthood.

I was long a fan of John Paul II... whose picture hangs in my rabbinic study. Jews should recall his close youthful friendship with Jews and his resistance to the Nazi regime during his early days in Poland. We remember the unprecedented ties established between the Church during his reign and the State of Israel... We remember his visit to the Jewish State and to the *Kotel*, where he inserted his written prayers in the cracks of the wall -- in keeping with Jewish Tradition.

We also recall that John Paul the Great was the first Pope to visit a synagogue... the Great Synagogue of Rome, where -- in April 1986 -- he made his famous statement of amity for the Jewish People:

“With Judaism.... we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers.”

In a New Years Eve homily later that year, the Pope recalled that historic moment:

“There is one... event that transcends the limits of the year, since it is measured in centuries and millennia in the history of this city and of this Church. I thank Divine Providence that I was able to visit our ‘elder brothers’ in the faith of Abraham in their Roman Synagogue! Blessed be the God of our Fathers! The God of Peace!”

SAINT John XXIII is remembered primarily as the Pontiff who presided over the Second Vatican Council, credited with modernization of the Roman Catholic Church. He was elected Pope at an advanced age and his was expected to be a caretaker reign, with little substantive activity or change. He defied expectations and misconceptions of old age to revolutionize the Church. Some say his canonization was a signal from Pope Francis of his openness to revolutionary measures in his own religious leadership.

Let us recall some of the many steps SAINT John XXIII took in his relationship to the Jewish People. On Good Friday 1960, he halted the mass when a traditional liturgical statement against the “PERFIDIOUS Jews” was included... and ordered that the prayer be repeated without the offensive term... ordering further that the phrase be expunged from the liturgy.

It was under John XXIII that the charge of Jewish deicide was officially rejected by the Church.

It was SAINT John XXIII -- formerly Angelo GUISEPPE Roncalli -- who welcomed a Jewish delegation to the Vatican by reciting the verse from the Torah -- “I am Joseph your brother.”

While still a papal nuncio (Vatican Ambassador), the future Saint met with Isaac Ha-Levy Herzog -- a future Chief Rabbi of Israel -- and intervened to save Jews during the Holocaust period. Whether he did so in BEHALF of the Vatican or DESPITE its policies is still a matter of bitter historic debate. What is well established is that he did indeed defy Vatican orders by returning Jewish war orphans who had been baptized to the Jewish community.

As papal nuncio in Greece and Turkey, the future Pope and Saint aided the Jewish underground in its resistance against Nazi Germany. He was nominated to be recognized as among the RIGHTEOUS OF THE NATIONS -- an honor bestowed by *YadVashem* to those who saved Jews from the Holocaust -- by the Chief Rabbi of Buenos Aires... perhaps not coincidentally, the very city in which Pope Francis had served as Cardinal before his election.

In Buenos Aires, Francis had close ties and co-authored a book with a leading Conservative Rabbi, whom I have met briefly. Rabbi Avraham Skorka visited the Vatican on Succot of this year... and had Yuntiff meals with the Pope and leading cardinals, whom he led in *Birkat ha-Mazon*... another historic first.

The idea of saints to whom the faithful may pray is foreign to Jewish thinking. HOWEVER... the idea that certain remarkable individuals attain heroic and all but unparalleled levels of holiness in their lives... and serve as inspirations and exemplars of devotion to God... motivating us more faithfully to pursue lives of service to the Almighty... THAT is a very Jewish idea indeed. The fact that these two new Saints were priests and popes in the Roman Catholic Church does not preclude sensitive practitioners of Judaism from learning from their spiritual example.

Let us recall that the Biblical Joseph -- who saved the Jewish people from destruction by bringing them TO Egypt... married the daughter of an Egyptian Priest..... and let us recall that Moses, God's chosen, intimate prophet, who saved the Jewish People by leading us OUT of Egypt and INTO God's service... married the daughter of a MIDIANITE priest, whose counsel Moses followed... which counsel is recorded in the Torah itself.

On this *Shabbat ParshatEmor el Ha-Kohanim*... we gratefully turn our attention to remarkable priests. *V'KIDASHTO*... Just as they have been declared to reflect holiness in extraordinary measure... may we have the wisdom to be moved by their examples to embrace that which is sacred. May we have the strength more faithfully to enter into God's service, and may we be granted the ability to recognize the HOLY... even in most unlikely of sources.

May the memories of SAINT John XXIII and SAINT John Paul the Great be a blessing to ALL... just as their LIVES brought very special blessings to the Jewish People and the Jewish State.