# Jerusalem: Between Holiness and Purity

## Based on a *sicha* by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein[[1]](#footnote-1)

### THREE CAMPS

I would like to examine the halakhic status of Jerusalem and see what it can teach us about our relationship with the city. Jerusalem is divided into three concentric domains, which parallel the division of the Jews’ encampment in the desert:

The Israelites shall encamp troop by troop, each man with his division and each under his standard. The Levites, however, shall camp around the Tabernacle of Testimony, that wrath may not strike the Israelite community; the Levites shall stand guard around the Tabernacle of Testimony. (*Bamidbar* 1:52-54)

In addition to the military and aesthetic value of the arrangement of the camp (see *Midrash Shir Ha-shirim* 7:1), this tripartite division has important halakhic ramifications, which we shall soon address. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Beit Ha-bechira* 7:11) spells out the parallel between the desert encampment and Jerusalem:

There were three camps in the desert: the “Camp of Israel” [containing the twelve tribes]; the “Camp of the Levites,” about whom it is stated, “around the Tabernacle they shall encamp” (ibid. 1:50); and the “Camp of the *Shekhina*” (Divine Presence), which extended from the opening of the Courtyard of the Tent of Meeting and onward [towards the Tent itself]. Correspondingly, for all generations [there are three different areas in Jerusalem]: the area from the gate of Jerusalem until the Temple Mount is like the Camp of Israel; from the entrance of the Temple Mount until the entrance of the *Azara* (Temple courtyard), i.e., the Gate of Nikanor, is like the Camp of the Levites; and from the entrance of the *Azara* onward is like the Camp of the *Shekhina*.

What is the relationship between these three areas? Halakhically, one could regard this division as reflecting three gradations of the same phenomenon. The most intense manifestation occurs in the center, in the Camp of the *Shekhina*. This intensity is diluted somewhat as one moves out of the innermost circle, into the Camp of the Levites, and it becomes even less intense in the outermost circle, the Camp of Israel. This theory may account for the different requirements for entry into the various areas (see *Pesachim* 66b ff.). The Israelite camp remains accessible to everyone except a *metzora*, one afflicted with *tzara’at* (a spiritual malady with symptoms akin to leprosy); the Levite camp is off-limits even to those who have become impure as the result of certain bodily discharges; the Camp of the *Shekhina* may not be entered by any ritually unclean individual, even one whose impurity does not come from within, but who has simply come in contact with a corpse. The various levels of stringency, one may contend, correspond to the varying levels of spiritual intensity.

### “*MAKOM KADOSH*” VS. “*MAKOM TAHOR*”

However, one can explain this division differently. Perhaps the three regions do not contain differing amounts of the same spiritual substance, but rather each area has an entirely different quality. Such an approach emerges from the Rambam’s explanation of why *kodashim* *kallim* (lower-level offerings) may be consumed throughout the city of Jerusalem, corresponding to the Camp of Israel, whereas *kodshei kodashim* (higher-level offerings) may be eaten only within the *Azara*, corresponding to the Camp of the *Shekhina*:

[The *kodashim kallim*] may be eaten throughout the city [of Jerusalem], as it says, “The breast of waving and the thigh of lifting you shall eat in a pure place” (*Vayikra* 10:14). Regarding these, the verse does not state [that they must be eaten in] a “*makom kadosh*” (sacred place), which would have referred to the Temple courtyard, but rather in a “*makom tahor*” (pure place), which refers to the entire Camp of Israel [while they journeyed through the wilderness], and to Jerusalem [subsequent to the building of the Temple]. (*Hilkhot Ma’aseh Ha-korbanot* 10:5)

The Rambam derives his distinction between *makom* *kadosh* and *makom* *tahor* from *Parashat Shemini*, where Moshe implicitly distinguishes between *kodashim kallim* and *kodshei kodashim* in his instructions to Aharon and his sons:

A. Moshe spoke to Aharon, and to Elazar and to Itamar, his remaining sons, saying: Take the meal-offering that is left over from God’s fire-offerings and eat it unleavened beside the altar, for it is most holy (*kodesh kodashim*). You shall eat it in a *sacred place*, inasmuch as it is your due. (10:12-13)

B. The breast of waving and the thigh of lifting you shall eat in a *pure place*, you and your sons and your daughters with you, inasmuch as it is your due. (10:14)

The meal-offering (A) is *kodshei* *kodashim*; it must therefore be eaten within the Courtyard, “in a sacred place.” Verse (B), however, deals with *kodashim kallim*, and it requires that the sacrificial meat of the peace-offering be eaten “in a pure place,” but not necessarily a “sacred place.” The Rambam, noting this subtle distinction, deduces that unlike *kodshei kodashim*, *kodashim kallim* may be eaten anywhere in Jerusalem, as they require merely a “pure place,” not a “sacred place.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Thus, the distinction between the Camp of the *Shekhina* (inside the *Azara*) and the Camp of Israel (Jerusalem) extends beyond a quantitative difference. They do not contain varying amounts of the same quality; rather, they are two disparate entities: the *Azara* is a *makom kadosh*, a sacred place, whereas Jerusalem is a *makom tahor*, a pure place. (The Camp of the Levites serves as the bridge connecting the “holiness” of the *Azara* with the “purity” of the rest of the city.)

Where does the difference lie between a *makom* *kadosh* and *makom* *tahor*? How are we to understand the relationship between the Temple and the rest of the city of Jerusalem?

A *makom kadosh* is an area detached from day-to-day life, designated exclusively for matters of absolute holiness (*kedusha*). Activities associated with the ongoing existence of the individual – however acceptable and spiritually significant they may be – have no place in the *Azara*. Even the simplest, most elementary activities are forbidden in the *Azara* – for example, no one may even sit in the *Azara*,[[3]](#footnote-3) and sleeping there is certainly forbidden (*Kiddushin* 78b). In short, the *Azara* is characterized by its being reserved exclusively for *kedusha*.

However, in the Camp of Israel – i.e., Jerusalem – the commitment to the Almighty and His service is not expressed through a detachment from the general exigencies of human existence, nor through a dissociation from the everyday, mundane matters of life. The Camp of Israel, the same region that lies off-limits to the *metzora* because of its inherent spiritual quality, is also an encampment of banners and marching soldiers. Unlike the Camp of the *Shekhina*, this area does not serve as the meeting point between *Keneset Yisra’el*, the Jewish collective, and the Almighty. This region involves all areas of life; it is an area of eating and sleeping, of industry and commerce. These activities, however, are conducted in the shadow of the Temple, with a clear sense of standing “before God,” with the rigorous standards of a *makom tahor*.

### STRUGGLING FOR JERUSALEM

As we celebrate Yom Yerushalayim, we contemplate the significance of the city and our struggle for it, both past and present. Jerusalem is a *makom* *tahor*, a place where the mundane world not only exists but thrive – imbued, however, with the quality of *tahara* (purity). Our attitude towards Jerusalem merges the holy with the mundane.

Our struggle for the city takes place on several planes. First and foremost, we struggle with the nations of the world. Historically, Christian anti-Semitism denied our entire connection to Jerusalem, both the *makom kadosh* and the *makom tahor*. They refused to grant us either the Camp of the *Shekhina* or the Camp of Israel.

The Muslim stance, however, was somewhat more tolerant. Generally speaking, they never objected to our having a “Camp of the *Shekhina*,” allowing us to maintain independent religious institutions throughout the Islamic world. They permitted us to maintain synagogues and *yeshivot*, as long as we were content with a *makom kadosh*, but regarding a *makom tahor*, a national Jewish existence characterized not by small “*shteiblech*” and isolated pockets of religiosity, but by a thriving blend of the holy and the mundane – this was intolerable. They could allocate space for a few little institutions here and there. However, for a large, bustling camp with tribal banners and military prowess, we must continue to fight until this very day. Indeed, in this sense, the city of Jerusalem symbolizes our struggle for the Jewish State as a whole.

### TWO ATTEMPTS TO ELIMINATE THE *MAKOM TAHOR*

*Le-havdil*, we confront far different struggles from within our own people, at both ends of the spectrum. Some among us contend, often out of genuine religious fervor and fear of God, that our camp must be sacred – a *makom kadosh* – and nothing but sacred. They recognize the significance of the Camp of the *Shekhina*, but contend that the reality of a *makom tahor*, the Camp of Israel, must wait for the time of the Mashiach. For them, the Camp of Israel is a place in which one may eat *kodashim kallim* and the second tithe, but not a place for a military camp, tribal banners or general societal development.

However, such a stance, which denies the significance of the Camp of Israel and wishes to replace its *tahara* with an undifferentiated *kedusha*, is opposed to Judaism, to Halakha, to our very humanity. This view is not in consonance with Tanakh, the Sages or the Rishonim. Undoubtedly, *kedusha* stands at the epicenter of our existence, and it serves to orient the Camp of Israel; but this focus on *kedusha* certainly is not tantamount to negating the value or viability of the Camp of Israel.

At the other extreme, we wage an ongoing ideological and political struggle with those who recognize and respect only the secular, without including the “*tahor*” quality of the Camp of Israel. They refuse to relate to the concept of “purity,” and their involvement in the mundane is characterized by the values of the world at large. These communities support the concept of a *makom kadosh*: synagogues, a respectable area near the Western Wall for prayer, and military swearing-in ceremonies by the Wall. So long as the *kedusha* is concentrated into a small corner somewhere, these people are not troubled. However, they are not prepared to allow for a *makom* *tahor*, a place where the values of purity and holiness are expressed on a national level, in all facets of life.

We follow the Rambam and other halakhic authorities; as such, we proudly raise the banner of Jerusalem as a *makom tahor*. Our Jerusalem symbolizes the relationship between the holy and mundane, the interweaving of our service of God into all areas of life. We celebrate Jerusalem not only as a symbol but as a reality, in which this blend is actualized.

### THE MEANING OF PURITY

But what is the precise nature of this quality of *tahara* for which we strive? What exactly does “*tahor*” mean in this context? The term “*tahor*” has several connotations.

1) The Torah refers to “*zahav tahor*” – “pure gold” (e.g., *Shemot* 25:11), that which is unalloyed and unadulterated.

2) When King Yoshiyahu and others clear the Temple from idolatry, they are said to have “purified” the Temple (e.g., II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 34:3). “*Tahor”* in this context involves the absence of that which directly undermines the Kingdom of God.

3) Kosher animals are called “*tahor*” (e.g., *Devarim* 14:11), i.e., that which has received God’s stamp of approval as consonant with His will.

4) King David speaks of “*lev tahor*,” “pure heart” (*Tehillim* 51:12), an internal cleansing and spiritual revival.

We yearn for all these forms of *tahara* and we strive to implement them in our Camp of Israel. We long for a city where the environment remains pure of all forms of spiritual dross, a place where the world of Halakha is actualized in full force, an area where we experience spiritual elevation and catharsis as we stand before the Almighty, even while conducting our daily, mundane affairs.

Essentially, a *makom tahor* can take one of two forms. Certain sin-offerings are burnt outside all three camps: “[The High Priest] shall carry the entire bull to a pure place outside the camp, to the ash heap, and burn it up in a wood fire...” (*Vayikra* 4:12). Rashi explains that there are areas outside the city that are usually reserved for stones contaminated with *tzara’at* (see *Vayikra* 14:40-45) and graveyards. The verse thus stresses that although the sin-offering is to be burnt outside the city, it must be burnt in a *makom tahor*, i.e., away from the cemeteries and contaminated stones, which are a “*makom tameh*,”a ritually impure place. With regard to Jerusalem, we find two kinds of *makom tahor*. First is the aforementioned *makom* *tahor* of *Parashat Shemini*, which lies inside the Camp of Israel or Jerusalem; this is the place where sacrificial meat and the second tithe are eaten. Second, there is a *makom tahor* that is situated outside Jerusalem, not far off from graves and piles of impure stones.

These two types of “*makom* *tahor*” reflect two different types of *tahara* in general, a distinction critical for our understanding and appreciation of Jerusalem as a *makom tahor*. A non-Jew, for example, cannot be rendered *tameh*; even if he touches a corpse, Halakha does not consider him to be in a state of *tuma* (impurity). The Gemara (*Nazir* 61b) explains: “Whoever has *tahara*, has *tuma*; whoever does not have *tahara*, does not have *tuma*.” The non-Jew, although he also must abide by standards of morality and Godliness, has no association whatsoever with the institution of *tuma* and *tahara*. Only the Nation of Israel is affected by these concepts. For us, *tahara* involves a process of spiritual elevation that results from the confrontation with *tuma* and overcoming its influence. The world of *tahara* extends beyond the mere absence of *tuma*; it comprises an exalted existence, where *tuma* has been confronted and defeated. The non-Jew, on the other hand, simply bears no relation to these concepts.

Similarly, a *makom* *tahor* outside the camp, where the sin-offering is burnt, receives its status of *tahara* by virtue of its lack of association. These places are off the beaten track; they are in empty lots which could be used for trash. This is the purity of the one who has no impurity to confront; it is pure simply in that it is not rendered impure. The metaphysical world of *tuma* and *tahara* bears no relevance to such a place.

The *tahara* of the Camp of Israel, by contrast, relates to the bustling activity of day-to-day affairs, to the interface of the sacred with the exigencies of life. This *tahara* results from the infusion of spiritual significance into all life’s endeavors, the adherence to our system of values and rising above the influence of the forces of *tuma*. This is the *tahara* of a culture that is exposed to all areas of life but manages to be purified and elevated from within those variegated realms. This *makom* *tahor* lies not to the side of some plagued stones, but alongside factories, offices, stores and government buildings. In such an existence, this quality of *tahara* can be actualized and become rooted in serving God.

The *tahara* of Jerusalem is not the isolation of the *makom* *kadosh*, nor is it the isolation of being outside the camp. This is the tahara of the Camp of Israel, with its teeming life. Our *makom tahor* follows the example of the *makom tahor* of the wilderness, a huge region geographically but centered around, and focused upon, the *makom kadosh*, the Tabernacle, the heart of the entire camp. This is the *tahara* of Jerusalem, and this is the *makom tahor* in which we believe and for which we continue to struggle.

### RENEWED COMMITMENT

Our historical responsibility to ensure the purity of the city continues perpetually. It is true that it was sufficient for Jerusalem to be sanctified only once and to be defined as a *makom tahor* once. The Rambam rules (*Hilkhot Teruma* 1:7) that the status of the Temple Mount and Jerusalem was not abrogated by our exile from the land, and it continues unabated to this day. Nevertheless, we must remain eternally vigilant to preserve the status of Jerusalem as a *makom tahor*. During the inauguration ceremony of the Tabernacle, Moshe sprinkles anointing oil on the Outer Altar, thereby sanctifying it for the holy service (*Vayikra* 8:11). The Ramban there comments that this is reenacted when the High Priest sprinkles the blood of the offerings on the Inner Altar each Yom Kippur: “He shall sprinkle the blood on it with his finger seven times; thus he shall purify it and sanctify it from the impurities of the Israelites” (ibid. 16:19).

If the altar inside the Tabernacle requires a renewed sanctification and purification each year, how much more so does our city of Jerusalem, the *makom kadosh* and the *makom tahor*, require an annual rededication!

There once were major sanctification and purification ceremonies; the places were specified and designated as *makom kadosh* and *makom* *tahor*. Still, each year, each month, each day we confront the challenge of perpetuating, renewing and enhancing the status of Jerusalem as both *makom kadosh* and *makom tahor* – in the face of political-religious opposition from without and ideological disagreements from within. May we find the wherewithal to designate both a *makom kadosh* and a *makom tahor*, to establish a purity that stands alongside holiness and draws its strength from that holiness; and may this purity impact upon the entire Camp of Israel.

1. This *sicha* was delivered on *Yom Yerushalayim* 5753 (1993). It was translated and adapted by Rav David Silverberg based on a transcript by Aviad Biller. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rashi, in his commentary on these verses, understands likewise. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A Davidic king is an exception to this rule (*Yoma* 25a). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)