

Hillul HaShem

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In talking about the priests, the Torah keeps on repeating the word Hillul. Some translate this a desecration, humiliation, demeaning or vilifying. It is the opposite of sanctifying, making holy, glorifying.

It is used first of a daughter of a priest who acts immorally. She betrays her position and her father and is punished accordingly because even members of a priest's family are expected to behave appropriately. Then the term is used of priests who betray their calling through misbehavior and those priests who been banned from public service but who nevertheless insist on serving publicly. And finally, the Torah uses the term generally to mean demeaning God or bringing Him and His followers into disrepute. The source for this is in Torah portion we read Leviticus 22.31 & 32

"You should keep My commandments (says God) and not desecrate My holy name because I expect the people of Israel to sanctify My Name."

This expression "Hillul HaShem." Has become in Judaism a very important principle. One should always be careful of what one does and how it might be seen by others. And if it damages the Divine reputation.

In ancient Israel, this was a very important concept. Society was predicated on Law and Order and Law and Order was based on the authority of the ruler and the ruler on earth depended on the authority of the Divine Ruler. Hence the concept of the "Divine Right of Kings." Nowadays we no longer treat kings or Presidents that way. We are happy to criticize, insult and demean our leaders without a second thought. Similarly, many of us use the word "god" as if it was a swear word. We are careless with our actions and words.

Hillul HaShem has now come to mean doing something that brings God or one's religion into disrepute. As in "See, another Jew who breaks the law. All Jews are like that. You can't trust them." Or internally, when non-religious Jews see an apparently Orthodox Jew behaving disreputably they will say "See, Orthodox Jews are all hypocrites," and use this to justify not following the Torah.

Maimonides quotes the Talmud when he says this is such a serious matter in Judaism that even Yom Kipur cannot atone for someone who causes God or Torah to be demeaned and disrespected. When we are good human beings we elevate God. When we misbehave, we diminish God's influence in the world.