

ASKING THE CLERGY

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What does your faith hold sacred?

BY JIM MERRITT
Special to Newsday

The definition of what is sacred may be changing in an era of shifting generational, economic, political and social norms. This week's commenters discuss spaces, objects, beliefs and other things still held sacred in their faiths.

THE REV. DWIGHT LEE WOLTER
Pastor, Congregational Church of Patchogue

The United Church of Christ, with which my church is affiliated, has no single statement on sacredness. We have no sacred objects, including our beloved buildings and other property. We honor and keep our two sacraments of baptism and communion in which God's sacredness is revealed. Our relationships with one another, creation, service, art and music in which God's purpose and presence is honored can be sacred. Acts of justice, compassion, love and reconciliation are often seen as sacred participation in God's presence. A pledge of allegiance to a country may not be sacred, but a pledge of allegiance to God may be. Sacred, for congregational churches, seems best not defined or widened to include everything likable. Sacred means to be

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Dwight Lee Wolter



Isma H. Chaudhry



Ira Ebbin

set apart from all else. Sacredness is something you enter. Spaces, places, moments, including empty spaces, empty places and even moments of profound emptiness and loss may be sacred. We make room to behold and experience sacredness even if we do not understand it. A good way, it seems, to assimilate sacredness is to arrive empty of dictates and expectations. Sacred is in the eye of the beholder.

ISMA H. CHAUDHRY
Board member, Islamic Center of Long Island, Westbury

The sacred belief system of Islam guides worship, shapes character and influences relationships within society, for a life rooted in devotion to God, moral integrity and service to humanity. The Quran is the sacred text,

revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). It provides guidance on faith, worship, morality, law and daily conduct. Prophet Muhammad's Sunnah and Hadith are sacred, as they record his sayings and actions, helping Muslims apply the teachings of the Quran in their daily lives. The Five Pillars of Islam are rooted in Quranic teachings and are the sacred foundation. These include the declaration of faith, five daily prayers, fasting, almsgiving and the pilgrimage to Mecca. Islamic belief is also shaped by core articles of faith, including belief in God, the angels, revealed scriptures, all the Prophets, the Day of Judgment, life after death and Divine Decree. Ultimately, sacred teachings in Islam nurture a moral framework that prioritizes human dignity, justice, compassion and responsibility. They guide Muslims in

their interactions with others and help them understand life's purpose as service to God and care for humanity.

RABBI IRA EBBIN
Congregation Ohav Shalom, Merrick

One of the greatest challenges of our age is the loss of reverence. We live in a world where little seems off limits, where everything is casual and where the distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary is often blurred. Judaism teaches the opposite: that some things are sacred. The Hebrew word for sacred is kadosh, meaning separate, elevated and set apart. At the center of Jewish faith is G-d, whom our prayers describe as holy: "You are holy and Your Name is holy." Because of this, the Ten Commandments prohibit taking God's name in vain. Holiness demands reverence. Judaism extends this idea beyond G-d alone. A synagogue and the Land of Israel are sacred spaces. Shabbat is sacred time. A Torah scroll and prayer book are sacred objects. All are treated differently from their ordinary counterparts because they elevate life. Even human relationships reflect this value. The commandment to honor one's parents — and, by extension, teachers — teaches respect for those who gave us life and helped shape who we are. Judaism teaches that a meaningful life requires recognizing that not everything is the same. When we preserve a sense of the sacred, we create space for holiness to enter our world.

In heaven's glow, a son gathers the animals

Dear Rabbi Gellman: I am a Jewish immigrant who came to America from Holland in 1948. My parents were in the Resistance during the Nazi occupation. During the war years my parents had a dog, Tyno, who quietly alerted them time and again when the Germans came close. When we came to America, they were unable to bring Tyno with them.

My parents took in all manner of injured animals and strays, got them to the veterinarian and then found them good homes. I have loved and shared my life with many dogs. One that was extra special passed away about 20 or so years ago. I grieved for a very, very long time until I had an incredibly vibrant, brilliantly colored dream about him.

From the time of that dream all my memories of him have been with love

rather than sadness. To add to this dream experience, our son loved animals very much, to the point that he would not kill a spider. He was very aptly named Noah. He loved all of wildlife and nature. He was probably the most brilliant person I've ever known.

He took his life at 34. My mental image is of him, sitting cross-legged on the ground in that same vibrant,

sunny clearing, with a book in his lap. As he reads from the book he is surrounded by all the animals (not just pets) who have died. So, "yes, Virginia, there IS heaven for animals."

— Noah's mom (forever grieving the loss of my son)

MG: Thank you for opening your heart to me and to God's creatures. I open my heart to you. My grandfather,

Leo Gellman, was a zookeeper at the Milwaukee Zoo. He was killed by a drunk driver in 1958 as he was crossing the street to mail a letter to the zoo director to hire his friend who would have been the first Black zookeeper.

Grandpa would take me to the zoo almost every weekends. He would sometimes let me walk out onto monkey island with my pockets stuffed with mandelbread my grandma Sara had baked. The monkeys would swarm me and pick the cookies out of my pockets.

In honor of Grandpa, our home was always filled with animals. Many of my pets were puppies in training for the Guide Dog Foundation in Smithtown.

One of our puppies, named Lucky, graduated from Guide Dog school where I met his new blind partner. His family name was al-Fassi. I asked him if he was related to Rabbi Isaac al Fassi, the 12th century scholar who had writ-

ten the first code of Jewish law. He said that Rabbi al Fassi was his ancestor. I told him that his ancestor had helped me to see Judaism more clearly and now I was proud to be able to return the favor after 900 years by enabling his descendent to see Queens Boulevard more clearly. A dog who can do that must be allowed into Heaven.

One of the hints that animals are let into Heaven, despite the fact that they do not have human souls, is that Heaven in Hebrew is called the place where our souls are sheltered under God's wings. I must believe that God's are not the only wings in Heaven.

SEND QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS to The God Squad at godsquadquestion@aol.com or Rabbi Marc Gellman, Temple Beth Torah, 35 Bagatelle Rd., Melville, NY 11747.



GODSQUAD
Rabbi Marc Gellman