



WEEKLY PARASHA

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Is Holiness Only Skin Deep?

Through the book of Vayikra, the Torah has been concerned with kedusha, sanctity, and how to protect it. The Torah now turns its attention from the sanctity of the Temple to the sanctity of those who are constantly in the Temple – the Kohanim. The Children of Israel were commanded in Parashat Kedoshim “you shall become holy,” (Vayikra 19:2) indicating that for them holiness was an aspiration, something to strive towards, and not innate. In contrast, the Kohanim are both commanded to become holy – “Holy shall they be their God, and they shall not defile the name of the God ... and they shall be holy” (21:6) – and are, at the same time, already considered to be holy: “A woman who is a prostitute or defiled, or a woman who is divorced from her husband they shall not take, because he is holy to his God.” (verse 7). Thus, for them the command to “become holy,” is less one of aspiring to a status that is not yet achieved, as much as it is a command to preserve and protect their holy status.

Now, this idea of intrinsic sanctity is hard for many people, especially since we live in an egalitarian, non-caste society, a society in which status is a function of accomplishment, not a right from birth. “What makes the Kohanim holier than any other Jew? Why are they better just because who their father was?” we may reasonably ask. The Torah does, to some degree, address this. He is holy, we are told, not as something innate from birth, but because of the role which he has been assigned: “... for he offers up the bread of God.” Nevertheless, he is entitled to this role as a birthright, and this role is not open to non-Kohanim. This is a very challenging concept for many today.

In addition, it seems that the Torah is not only asking us to see Kohanim as holy because of the role that they play, but also because they have been chosen to embody holiness on this earth. Just as the Temple is holy because God’s presence dwells in it, so the Kohanim are holy because they are regularly in the Temple and thus God’s holiness extends to them as well: “Holy shall he be to you, for holy am I, the Lord who makes you holy.” Thus we find in Parashat Ki Tisa (Shemot, 30:22-30) that the anointing oil was made to both

sanctify the Temple and its vessels, and to sanctify the Kohanim who serve in the Temple. The Kohanim, then, are a type of *klei kodesh*, holy vessel, which is holy not just because of the role he plays, but as an object, as it were, that has been chosen to be an embodiment of God’s holiness, as a symbol of holiness.

What makes the concept of *kedusha* as applied to Kohanim even more challenging is the way in which the *kedusha* expresses itself. In what ways does a Kohen’s holiness require him to act differently from an average Jew? First, we are told, he may not become *tamei*, impure, to a dead body, unless it is of a person of his immediate family. Second, he must be conscious of his outward appearance, and cannot disfigure himself in mourning. And, finally, he may not marry certain women who are seen as less than proper – a prostitute or a divorced woman. This is a strange and troubling list. The first demand is understandable – *tumah* is conceptually the antithesis of *kedusha*, and, were he to become *tamei* he would have to remove himself from the Temple and from his role of offering the sacrifices.

The last two items on the list, in contrast, do not interfere with his ability to function in his role, but they do – presumably – impact how he is perceived. A Kohen who has disfigured himself, even in mourning, is not looked at with honor and respect. A Kohen who has married a (former) prostitute would naturally be looked at by many people with disdain. He would not be able to command their respect for him, and thus would compromise his role as a symbol of holiness to the people. This is also why, presumably, he is proscribed from marrying a divorced woman. In a society which highly valued virgins, and which probably regularly saw divorced women as “defiled,” regardless of who was to blame for the divorce, being married to a divorced woman would lower a person’s status in the eyes of many. Thus, a Kohen which must be a symbol of holiness, and must call upon people’s respect, cannot allow himself to be seen by others with disdain.

This focus on appearances extends to the next section of the parasha – the concern with blemishes. We are told that a Kohen who has an external blemish “may not draw near to offer up the bread of his God.” (Vayikra 21:17). Why does a blemish matter? He hasn’t done anything wrong! He is not to blame! But, of course, people are people, and they will naturally look with more respect on a Kohen who is tall, good looking, and handsome, than they will on a Kohen who is physically disfigured. People do focus on trivial externalities. Let us not forget that the Temple itself is the epitome of a focus on the external – with its gold and silver, its purple and crimson – the Temple was to look beautiful and majestic so that people would see it, and God who was represented by it, with honor and respect.

The practical implications of holiness, then, are understandable, but they remain quite challenging. Now we ask not only what entitles a Kohen to this holiness, but also why this holiness is translated in such external, superficial ways. Why are the commands not more moral and religious, as they are in Parashat Kedoshim? Why does his holiness not demand of him to live a life that is morally beyond repute, and that is fully focused on serving God? We are told that “a person sees with his eyes,” but we are also told, “but God sees to the heart.” (Shmuel I, 17:7). So why not try to correct people’s focus on externals rather than tacitly accepting it, and accommodating it?

Perhaps these two questions answer one another. The Kohen’s *kedusha* status, while present from birth, is not the *kedusha* of Parashat Kedoshim. The *kedusha* of that parasha remains the true *kedusha*. It is a *kedusha* of morality and of religiosity. It is a *kedusha* of aspiration, one that the Kohanim are not excluded from. They, like every Jew, must constantly be working to grow morally and religious, to be closer to God not physically, but spiritually and morally. The Kohen, like every Jew, must strive his entire life to “become holy.”

The *kedusha* of Parshat Emor, in contrast, is the *kedusha* that Kohanim have from birth, but it is a very different *kedusha*. It is one that they have by virtue of the role that has been given to them, and because they have been chosen to serve as a symbol to the people. This lesser *kedusha* is one that is not about who they are, but about what they are. Who they are inside, what type of person they are, is the concern of Parashat Kedoshim. What they are on the outside – a symbol to the people – is the concern of Parashat Emor.

This *kedusha* of being not like a person and a subject, but of being like an object, like a *klei kodesh*, like the very Mikdash itself, is one which does express itself in terms of externals. The *kedusha* of Kedoshim is the *kedusha* of a person; the *kedusha* of Emor is the *kedusha* of an object.

The problem still remains, however. People will gravitate towards the external. People will see the external *kedusha* as the primary, as the one that really matters, and will ignore the more significant, but less visible, internal *kedusha*. And, in fact, we know that so many people do, sadly, associate religiosity with externals – externals of dress and appearance, externals of performance that serve to mark one or one’s community as different, as somehow “more holy.” To focus on the less visible *kedusha*, the character of the person, their values, their morality, their true religious striving – to serve God fully and in ways that truly matter – is truly a profound challenge. It is so rare that we are able to focus on the more important *kedusha* of Kedoshim, and to not be distracted by the *kedusha* of Emor. Who among us will not immediately assume that the rabbi with the long beard and the black hat and the long *bekesha* is not more holy than the clean-shaven rabbi who sometimes wears jeans?

The challenge for us is to both acknowledge the importance that people give to externals and appearances, and the need to accommodate it, and at the same time to be aware that true worth, and true *kedusha*, lies not without but within. If there are times that we must make certain concessions to the way the world works, we must do all that we can to ensure that we do not marginalize those with merely external blemishes, that we do not give undue significance to the external- object-based *kedusha* of Parashat Emor. We must ensure that we keep our focus on the internal- person-based *kedusha* of Parashat Kedoshim. “For a man sees with the eyes, but God sees to the heart.”

Shabbat Shalom!

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