

Parashat Emor

May 6, 2023

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

This famous quote from Henry David Thoreau describes his desire to separate himself from the hustle and bustle of society, to take time apart to sit with nature and his own mind, and to see what he could learn from this time alone.

In my early twenties, I too craved separation. I spent several years traveling, both on roadtrips throughout the contiguous United States and while living in Europe and Central America. On one of those trips, a friend gave me a laminated index card with that quote from Thoreau on it, handwritten, and that little card became a prized possession. I took it everywhere with me, using it as a bookmark, slipping it into the lining of my

suitcase, hanging it on the cinderblock wall in the house where I lived in the jungle in Costa Rica.

I saw that little index card every day, and it reminded me that I needed to live intentionally, or, as Thoreau put it, to live deliberately. I didn't shut myself off from society to the extent that Thoreau did, I didn't literally disappear for two years, but I was aware that the choices I was making were different from those of a lot of my contemporaries, who had graduated college and either went directly to grad school, or got high-paying jobs in DC, or got married and started families.

And me? I was living out of a suitcase. I made the choice to keep myself a bit separate, not because I wanted to be alone, persay, but because I felt drawn to exploration and adventure. I had this persistent sense of discontent with the world I saw, and I was also haunted by my growing awareness of my own human mortality and my increasing comprehension of the inherent imperfection of human society, government, education, religion, and every other undertaking under the sun. I thought that by keeping myself separate from what was

expected of me, I could perhaps learn truths about life that I might have missed out on otherwise.

This is all to say that I think that 22-year-old me would have gotten along swimmingly with Henry David Thoreau.

Although, he probably wouldn't have wanted to talk to me, because I wasn't a tree...

It's also no surprise that the career path that I ultimately felt called to-- to become clergy, to spend my life accompanying others through intense and inexplicable moments and transitions-- is one that is, in certain ways, an isolating job.

Don't get me wrong-- as a rabbi I am surrounded by all of you all the time, and it's great. There's always community, simchas and sadness and celebration and a never-ending pulse of holidays, sermons, pastoral visits, and kiddush luncheons. I'm almost never actually alone, and I love the meaningful relationships with all of you.

But there is a unique experience, something beyond words, about being the person to stand on the bimah and teach; there is something indescribable, something beyond words, about visiting congregants in the hospital; being the person who sits at someone's bedside and recites Viddui with them as they are dying; there is something different about being a person who rushes towards pain, and towards death, and towards sickness. It's such an honor-- but it also means that in a way, I and other clergy are always a little bit separate.

This guarantees that the separation that I sought as a young adult is going to accompany me throughout my career. It's a unique way to serve, and I'm so lucky to get to do it. But this separation means I'm constantly searching, constantly examining, constantly searching to find balance between holy connection and holy separation.

And our most recent Torah portions are all about that balance. Let me explain.

Last week's Torah portion was Acharei Mot-Kedoshim. Because of the triennial cycle, we only read from Acharei Mot this year.

But it is parashat Kedoshim that begins with the famous verse, in Leviticus 19,

דַּבֵּר אֶל-כָּל-עַדְת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה  
אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Speak to the entire people of Israel and say to them, You shall be Kadosh, for I, your God, am Kadosh.

Pretty straightforward.

We usually translate Kadosh as “holy”, making this verse, “you shall be holy, for I, your God, am holy.”

This is a beautiful sentiment, and one that I try to embody in my daily life as a rabbi.

But there is a second meaning for Kadosh in Hebrew, a meaning that parashat Kedoshim and this week's parashah, Parashat Emor, continue to expound upon: Kadosh also means unique, and separate, and different, and set apart from others.

In Leviticus 20, our Torah reiterates the command that B'nai Yisroel be "Kadosh", but says it in a more specific way:

וְהָיִיתֶם לִי קְדוֹשִׁים כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה וְאַבְדַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִן־הָעַמִּים לִהְיוֹת לִי:

"And you will be Kadosh to me, because I am Kadosh, and I have set you apart from other peoples, to be for me."

It seems clear from this verse that the enjoinder for us Jews to be Kadosh goes beyond spirituality, beyond goodness— that there is a unique desire from God for us to dig deeper, to take the time and the effort to go the extra mile and look beyond what is in front of us, to be— separate.

It might be surprising for you to hear me say all of this, because so much of my theology and so much of what I say from this bimah, so much of what drives me to be a rabbi and to serve the Jewish people, is the belief that every little bit of good we do in the world counts. That kindness is, at the end of the day, the moral of the story, and that regardless of religious belief or lack thereof, that's what life is all about.

But so much of these parshiot defies that belief. They tell us that kindness is the start of the story, but not the end.

So much of the parashiot we are reading right now have to do with rules and regulations that honestly have nothing to do with kindness, or even with theology. While kindness is an important part of holiness, these parashiot teach us that it isn't the whole picture.

And the rules in the parsha we just read make it impossible for us to pretend that the only thing God is asking of us Jews is to be kind.

And that's because a lot of these rules, frankly, have to do with separation, not with connection.

A lot of these rules are rules of separation. Rules of distancing. Rules that, to be frank, sometimes fly in the face of our human and emotional needs and urges.

Parashat Emor begins with an elaboration of ways in which the Kohanim, who were tasked with being religious leaders within B'nai Yisroel, must live within extra layers of restrictions when it comes to whom they are allowed to love and marry, when and where they are allowed to pray, and even how they are allowed to express grief.

To those of us sitting here today, there is a level of these rules that might seem almost inhumane-- because, for example, of course we would not burn our children at the stake for making sexual decisions we disagree with-- that's in Parashat Emor. And of course we would not cut someone off from the community, sentencing them to Karet, for leading us in religious ritual while having a broken arm or leg or a rash. That's in Parashat Emor. As a rabbi, I would never tell a

Kohen that they could not hold the hand of their dying spouse, a type of contact Emor expressly forbids. As a human being, my loyalty to compassion will win out, and it is in situations like those described in this week's parashah that I am grateful that as a community, we no longer hold Kohanim to the same stringencies in our post-Temple Judaism.

And yet.

קְדָשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

You will be holy and separate, for I, your God, am holy and separate.

We are commanded to be holy. We are commanded to be unique. We are commanded, yes, to be separate from others, in a way, because God is also holy, and unique, and separate.

We are called— all of us, not just rabbis— to be kadosh, in all of these ways.

Henry David Thoreau's time of separation lit a fire inside of him. He emerged committed more deeply than ever to his friends and to living his values. After two years of isolation in the woods, he realized that though he could not fix the problems of society that had so repelled him, he had to take an active role in trying to improve the world. No longer content to just write, he became an active abolitionist, a participant in the Underground Railroad.

His time of separation changed him. His time of separation taught him the lesson that Rabbi Tarfon teaches us: that while it is not upon us to finish the work, neither may we desist from it.

This is to say that isolation for the sake of isolation is not what being Kadosh is all about. But when separation nurtures a deeper sense of purpose, and a deeper sense of mutual responsibility to God, to each other, and to the world around us, then it becomes a truly holy thing.

This rings very true for me in my experience as a person and a rabbi.

I know that there are things that I will never understand, simply because I am human. These are things like the meaning of life, what happens when we die, and other truths about the universe. I call these things “spiritual gray areas”, because dwelling on them can be uncomfortable or challenging, given that we humans just don’t have proof or answers. These are things that I believe are God’s bailiwick and not humanity’s. I don’t believe that any person will ever be able to explain the deepest why’s and how’s of the universe.

However, so much of being clergy is about occupying those gray areas and leaning into them, and accompanying people through them. And as it turns out, it is precisely these spiritual gray areas, and the life cycle events that bring us all face to face with them, that offer us an opportunity to be Kadosh.

Many of those gray areas, those areas that have that deeper spiritual potential, have to do with love, and marriage, and birth, and death, and sexuality.

Maybe that is why Parashat Kedoshim and Parashat Emor are full of so many rules about these intimate and emotional aspects of human life.

Maybe, even though it might feel natural to make major life decisions based only on thought and emotion, God is calling on us to reflect on the bigger picture first, before we take the plunge.

Maybe part of what these parashas are trying to tell us is that if we go on autopilot throughout life, if we make personal and family and life-cycle decisions based only on gut feeling or only on popular culture, even though we may be being moral, and honest, and true to ourselves, we might not be being *kedoshim*.

We might not be making *bad* choices, but we also might not be making *holy* choices.

Holiness, our Torah teaches, isn't just about being good or kind. It's also about being beholden to something beyond ourselves, and making the choice to step back before we step forward.

And that's not an easy thing to hear. It would be lovely if all that mattered was goodness, but that isn't what our tradition teaches us. The prophet Micah famously says that God asks us to do justly and love mercy, yes— but that's not all. Micah also says we also must walk humbly before God. Humbly. And having true humility means letting go, and accepting that we're not actually, ultimately in control, and that there are things bigger than our own lives that we are beholden to.

We don't actually, ultimately, get to make all of the rules.

And the Torah teaches that accepting this fact— embracing this fact— surrendering to this fact— and leaning into the gray

area of holy separation is one of the first steps towards being Kadosh.

Shabbat shalom.