

Sermon | Parshat Kedoshim

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On Thursday, Israelis and Jews around the world celebrated Yom HaAtzmaut—Israel's Independence Day, a day marking the moment in modern history when the State of Israel was born and sovereignty over our homeland returned to us for the first time in nearly 2,000 years. It was a moment that indicated to the world that we were no longer subject to others, but independent on our own. In an article published this week, Dena Weiss, a member of the faculty at Hadar in New York City, explored this concept of independence from the perspective of the *Sefat Emet*, the Hasidic master Rabbi Aryeh Leib Alter. She writes, "According to the Sefat Emet, it is interdependence, rather than independence, that reflects God's vision for us in the world. We should be recognizing ourselves as embedded in a social web rather than trying to deny that we exist in relationship to other people."¹ There is nothing shameful or wrong about independence and self-sufficiency, but the Sefat Emet reminds us that in reality, we are rarely entirely independent. We *are* interconnected, reliant upon one another, and this necessitates that we exist in relationship with the people around us. This means that we know them, seek to understand them, and aim to build a society in which we all can thrive. When we celebrate Israel's independence, we celebrate this lofty goal of building a thriving society. And here in American, we must aspire to do the same.

Parshat Kedoshim begins with God saying to Moses, "Speak to the whole Israelite community (כָּל עַדְתְּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, your God Adonai, am

¹ [Dena Weiss, "From Independence to Interdependence," Yom HaZikaron-Yom Ha'Atzmaut 5782.](#)

holy.”² Generally speaking, God provides instructions to Moses and tells him to share these teachings with the Israelites. But here the verse adds seemingly superfluous words, *kol adat B’nai Yisrael*, the entire community of Israel. The teachings that follow are not only for Moses, not only for Aaron, not only for the tribal leadership, not only for adults—these words are for everyone to hear. Citing a *midrash*, Rashi says that this *parsha* is distinct because it is recited before the entire community, and what makes it so distinct is *מִפְּנֵי שֶׁרַב גּוֹפֵי תוֹרָה תְּלוּיִין בָּהּ*, that most of the Torah’s essential teachings rely upon what is contained herein. We have to hear this *parsha* because everything else relies upon it. This is the *parsha* which means “holy ones,” and that is arguably the motivation behind everything else in the Torah: to help us construct a life that is infused with holiness for ourselves and for those around us.

Among the sacred instructions of this *parsha*, we read, “You shall not follow the practices of the nation that I am driving out before you...I Adonai am your God who has set you apart (הִבְדֵּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם) from other peoples.”³ We read a similar verse last week about not following the ways of the Egyptians and the Canaanites. In my letter to the congregation then, I wrote that these verses teach the Israelites to have pride in their unique identity. We do things differently because our Torah commands us to do so. Likewise, these verses from Parshat Kedoshim teach us that we must distinguish ourselves from others because God distinguished us from them, הִבְדֵּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם.

The root is the same as the one for Havdalah, the ritual we observe on Saturday night when three stars appear in the sky and Shabbat departs. During this ritual, we affirm that God’s

² Leviticus 19:1-2.

³ Leviticus 20:23-24.

holiness is manifest in the world because God distinguishes between things. God distinguishes between sacred and secular, between light and darkness, between the Jewish people and others, and between Shabbat and the rest of the week. These distinctions are not ways of prioritizing one over the other, or suggesting that one is superior or favorable. We need light in order to draw grain from the earth and feed the world, and we also need darkness to give us respite from the day's hard work and restore our energy each night. We need Shabbat to be in sacred community with family and friends, and we need the rest of the week to do the work of making this world and its people thrive. We need to be proud of our distinct identity as Jews, while making room for those who ascribe to different traditions and religions. Holiness is manifest if we know when and how to make distinctions according to our tradition.

What is holy for me as a Jewish person is making distinctions in my life and separating between various options that are all technically available to me, even if I choose not to make use of them all of the time or at all. What is holy to someone of another faith tradition has the potential to be very different. If and when a free society seeks to limit anyone's ability to make decisions based on their own religious practices, then their freedoms and religious liberties are being restricted. In the words of the Rabbinical Assembly, the body which represents Conservative Rabbis, "Denying individuals access to the complete spectrum of reproductive healthcare, including contraception, abortion-inducing devices, and abortions, among others, on religious grounds, deprives those who need medical care of their Constitutional right to religious freedom."⁴ It may very well be that your faith tradition teaches that abortion is never permissible, or only narrowly permitted. But for Judaism, which unquestioningly privileges the

⁴ [Rabbinical Assembly, Resolution on Right to Legal and Accessible Abortion in the United States, March 15, 2021.](#)

wellbeing of the mother over that of a fetus, and which broadly defines that privilege and which arguably gives the autonomy to make that decision to the individual herself, thereby permitting and even requiring abortion in certain cases, any attempt to restrict, limit, deter, or hinder their ability to access an abortion is an affront to our Constitutional religious freedoms and to the reproductive freedoms of all women in this country.

It is undoubtedly a hallmark of American democracy that we pride ourselves on personal autonomy and individual freedoms. In such a system, each one of us has *religious* freedom. I choose to make distinctions between what I eat, and what I do not eat. I distinguish between what I do on Saturday, and what I do the rest of the week. It is through those distinctions that I bring holiness into my life and into the world. The only way for me to do that is for society to protect my religious liberties. Any attempt to do otherwise, and I am no longer free. I am no longer sovereign over myself.

We are given the autonomy to make decisions for ourselves, and Judaism asks us to make decisions through the prism of the values and laws of our tradition. How those laws and values are applied in any particular situation is not one that any society can fairly account for in even the most exhaustive legislation. There might be an identical situation where for one individual of one religion it is obligatory to terminate a pregnancy, whereas for a person of another religion they are dutybound to maintain it. Making that decision, to understand the distinction, is a matter of holiness for that individual according to their religious identity. Therefore, any law privileging one over the other on a religious basis is an affront to religious freedom in the United States, and in the case of this week's leaked decision of the Supreme Court, it is an affront to Judaism and the religious freedoms of all Jewish women in this country.

We know that as Americans we have personal freedoms, and yet we are inescapably connected to everyone around us. When Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and others live in the same country and are subject to the same laws, that system and those laws, if they proclaim to safeguard our *individual* rights to determine what is holy and what is unholy, what is sacred and what is secular, then they must not restrict anyone's ability to exercise those freedoms or force us to receive permission from another before exercising those rights. It is our interconnectedness and our interdependence which requires us to permit the other to make their own distinctions and mark for themselves what is holy when it does not otherwise harm me or restrict my rights in the process.

Parshat Kedoshim is a reminder to us as Jews that to live a Jewish life is to live a life where we make intentional and thoughtful decisions and distinctions. To be a Jew is to question, to explore, to listen, and to act in such a way that we bring holiness into our lives and the lives of those around us. No court, no legislature, should ever, especially in this great nation of freedom, try to take that religious liberty away from anyone.