

Rabbi Rochelle Tulik  
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5784  
What is Holy?

Kedoshim t'hiyu ki kadosh ani Adonai Eloheichem.  
You will be holy because I, your God, Adonai, am holy.

What does it mean to be holy? Can I be holy? Can I be holy without God?  
Without Torah? Without community? Is a day holy? This day? These High  
Holy Days? What makes today so holy? Can I make this day holy? Can I make  
myself holy? What even is holiness?

At the beginning of time, some say God's presence filled the universe. When  
God decided to bring this world into being, to make room for creation, God  
first drew in a breath, and contracted. From that contraction darkness was  
created. And when God said, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3), the light that came  
into being filled the darkness, and ten holy vessels came forth, each filled with  
primordial light.

In this way God sent forth those ten vessels, like a fleet of ships, each carrying  
its cargo of light. Had they all arrived intact, the world would have been  
perfect. But the vessels were too fragile to contain such a powerful, divine  
light. They broke open, split asunder, and all the holy sparks were scattered  
like sand, like seeds, like stars. Those sparks fell everywhere, into everything.

That is why we were created — to gather the sparks, no matter where they are hidden. God created the world so that we could raise up the holy sparks. And when enough holy sparks have been gathered, the broken vessels will be restored, and tikkun olam, the repair of the world, awaited so long, will finally be complete. We were created to seek out and raise up the lost sparks, to release them from wherever they are imprisoned and elevate them to holiness.

But what is holiness? Where does holiness come from? Is it inherent in a thing? Or is it infused into that thing? Can something, someone be both holy on its own and also made holy through intention or action? Can something, someone be holy without intention, just by being? Is only God holy? Is nothing holy?

Spoiler alert - it's D. All of the above.

The kabbalistic view of the world, creation, and our mission here, teaches that there is a divine spark within each of us. Everyone is holy, just by virtue of being. Because we are all made b'tzelem elohim, in the image of God. The sparks that burst out of God's ten vessels came into each of us - into everything on earth and all of creation. The spark within us is our potential, our purpose. We are holy when we reach that potential, feel the love and connection to others, and work to make change in the world. Holiness comes from seeing the divine spark within everyone and within ourselves, and doing something about it. Holiness comes from action. Action that makes the world a better place.

Torah tells us kedoshim t'hiyu ki kadosh ani adonai eloheichem.

You will be holy because I, your God, Adonai, am holy.

Common understanding is that to be holy, we must follow the commandments. Today, as Reform Jews, we follow commandments as we see fit. Torah is a guidebook, not an instruction manual. And we use it as such. Reform Judaism teaches us the importance of action over inaction and thoughtful engagement over blind subservience. Reform Judaism stresses tikkun olam - making the world a better place, repairing God's broken vessels. We don't get bogged down with laws dictating clothes, food, or hair.

But when Torah tells us we will be holy because God is holy, it also gives us specific commandments to explain what that means. The first three commandments we get - the answer to what will make us holy (among other things) are honoring our parents, observing Shabbat, and not worshiping idols or other gods. Reform Judaism gives me the power, the ability, the opportunity to decide what those commandments mean to me.

So as a Reform Jew, when Torah commands me to honor my father and mother, I strive to learn about and from my past and work toward a better future. When Torah commands me to keep Shabbat, I strive to find time to center myself and give myself the gift of quiet, as often as possible. When Torah commands me not to worship other Gods, I strive to stay humble and focus on uplifting others and not just myself. I seek out the divine sparks I know exist all around me.

In our tradition, the concept of holiness is not about rigid adherence to religious laws but rather about a commitment to ethical living, personal growth, and making a positive impact on the world all within a framework of individual autonomy and interpretation and centered on our core values of justice, compassion, and inclusivity. Your path to holiness is unique, guided by your own beliefs and interpretations of our texts and traditions. Holiness comes from engagement. Engagement with Jewish texts and with Jewish people - and with all people.

So how can you be holy? Through action, intention, and appreciation. Alan Morinis, founder of the Mussar Institute compares holiness to the value of *hakarat hatov* - literally recognizing the good. And in a totally circular, very Jewish, way of explaining a thing, he teaches that to be holy is to recognize the holiness in everything. Good is all around us - it is within us, and within every element of creation. Holiness is all around us - within each of us and every element of creation. Our job on this earth is to find that spark - spark of holiness, kernel of goodness - in ourselves and others and bring it to light. To be holy is to recognize good in all that is around us. To be holy is to recognize we are already holy; to find the spark, see the good that already exists in ourselves and in others.

Tonight is Rosh Hashanah, one of the holiest days of our year. It is also Shabbat. The holiest day of each week. This must then be the most most holy day imaginable. But is it just the nature of the day? Does Rosh Hashana falling on Shabbat double the holiness of the day just because?

A Chasidic tale is told of Rabbi Elimelech and Rabbi Zushia who wondered whether the holiness they felt on Shabbat was due objectively to the Sabbath day itself or due to their own subjective attitude. Is it the day which introduces holiness? Or is it our own intentions? They decided to test the matter. "Let us make the Sabbath on a week day and we will see whether we will find the same sense of holiness on the weekday as we have found on the Sabbaths." So, on Tuesday they prepared for the Sabbath which would be on Wednesday. They spread the Sabbath tablecloth, put on Sabbath clothes and fur caps, lit the candles, recited the Kiddush and after the meal recited the grace, sang *zemirot*, and spoke words of Torah. On Shabbat they prayed as they always did -- the *Shacharit*, *Musaf*, *Minchah*, and *Maariv* prayers. After Havdalah they looked at each other with trepidation for they had indeed experienced *kedushah*, the sense of holiness on the weekday and they were frightened. It appeared that it was not the Sabbath day that held the secret of *kedushah*. Tuesday or Wednesday was equally receptive to holiness.

They set off to consult with the Sage of Mezeritch and told her their experiment. The Sage of Mezeritch responded "Do not fear. The preparation of the heart, your *kavanah*, has the true power to draw the light of the Sabbath holiness down to earth." Shabbat is more than chronology, it's a matter of sensibility.

When God created the seventh day and called it holy the Bible says God created the Sabbath to be made: "*la'asot*". There is a Yiddish expression called "*machen Shabbes*" which literally means to make the Sabbath. God created "*yesh me'ayin*" -- something out of nothing, but we create "*yesh me'yesh*"

something out of something. The Sabbath, its holiness, our own holiness, is something to be made.

Shabbat is not simply a matter of astronomy in the heavens; the Sabbath is a philosophy, a way of thinking, behaving and belonging. The holiness of Shabbat, the holiness of this erev Rosh Hashana comes from what we make of it. And the holiness that is within each of us, in the spark of the divine buried deep within, comes from what we make of it.

I am telling you, you are holy. Just as this day is holy. You are as holy as you make yourself. But you are also holy when you don't feel it. Because there is holiness within you and sometimes it can only be seen by others. Sometimes it has to be broken free through another's love and connection. You are holy. I am holy. When we seek out the divine spark, in ourselves and each other, we bring holiness into the open. Holiness comes from doing, repairing - ourselves and the world around us. It comes from seeking and finding that spark of meaning, love, connection in ourselves and those around us. Holiness is inherent and intentional. It is always a yes, and.

Over the next ten days (and beyond) I encourage you to see the holiness in everything around you. In yourself, your children, friends, loved ones and strangers. Seek out the holiness in the darkest corners, in the people with whom you struggle, and those with whom you thrive. Recognize the good, the holy sparks scattered all around you. And remember, you are holy, whether you see it yourself, whether you feel it or not. You are holy and you are part of a holy community.

**Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tovah**