

Nuriel Gutman – D'var Torah – *Kedoshim*

Shabbat Shalom. Thank you for being here with me at this point in my Jewish journey. My Parsha is Achrei Mot/Kedoshim. Kedoshim, which means holiness, starts with the words: "You shall be Holy, for I the Lord am Holy." Kedoshim includes many different laws about holiness and I'm going to share some thoughts with you about some specific mitzvot, how I relate to this commandment, to be holy, and what it has meant to me throughout my life.

When I was younger I grew my hair into peyot and wore tzitzit (peyot are ritual sideburns and tzitzit are ritual fringes). In chapter 19 of Kedoshim, verse 27 states "You shall not round off the side growth of your beard or destroy the side growth of your beard." Following these ritual commandments made me proud. I didn't understand exactly what they meant or where the rules came from, but I did know that I was Jewish and wanted to show the world. Though, most of the time doing this was easy, there were times when showing my Jewish identity was hard, especially when I needed to answer questions about my peyot and tzitzit on almost a daily basis. I remember a time around 1st grade when I was standing on the portable risers in the music room, practicing for our concert. I was in the back row with my tzitzit on. A teacher walked up to me. "Nuri, you need to put away that white stuff." I shifted on my feet, "Why?" I asked quietly. "They are distracting other students," she responded. I didn't answer but I quietly tucked my tzitzit into my pants, trying not to be distracting. In general, I try to set myself apart from others and be a bright light. That day was one of the times when my bright light was dimmed. Still, as I reflect on following those commandments it makes me happy to know that I was expressing myself as a Jew very early on in my life.

An ethical commandment from parshat Kedoshim that I have always tried to follow is "Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him." I interpret this commandment as standing up for people but not being mean or hurtful while doing it. Most times when I have had to stand up for myself, it has been about my gender identity. For those, who don't know, I identify as gender non-conforming. In general, I try to educate people instead of making people feel bad.

For example, when I was in 2nd grade, I got onto the bus and walked to the back in my favorite jacket. It was soft and purple with white leopard spots around the fake fur. "Hey, why are you wearing that girl jacket?" I heard a disgusted voice say. I turned and saw a middle schooler sitting on one of the textured green seats. "Girl jacket?" I responded. "What do you mean, there aren't boy and girl clothes." "Yes, there are," they answered, "You can't wear that." I shook my head, ready to recite the words I had said so many times. "There aren't boy colors or girl colors or boy clothes and girl clothes. I can wear what I want." They didn't respond and I turned and sat

down in a seat. Even though I might not have changed their minds, I felt good about sticking up for myself. I understand that I won't be able to teach everyone and that not everyone is open to learning but I will always do my best to stand up for what I think is right.

In my life now, the most meaningful ritual commandment I follow is observing Shabbat. This ritual commandment helps me feel more holy, and doing this commandment with people whom I love and care about is very meaningful. Every Friday night, my family and I have Shabbat dinner with our downstairs neighbors. We sit at the table, raising our voices in prayer, as we light the candles and peek through the cracks in our fingers at the flickering light. We get up from our seats, hugging each other and whispering Shabbat Shalom. We sit down and look at all of the food piled before us. We smile and crack jokes, each smile lit up by the dim flames. From doing blessings together and lighting candles to sharing funny moments, Shabbat is one of the best parts of my week.

Shabbat is something I can count on every week, a time with no worries, where I am always welcome. My feelings about Shabbat are so complex and personal that I am not able to fully put them into words. I think everyone experiences holiness in their own way, something that others can't always understand but can still be one of the most precious things in life. My Parsha - Kedoshim or holiness - really got me thinking about what it means for a person to be holy and to *feel* holy. When I think about holiness, I think about being pure and clear. It is also about following the commandments, feeling comfortable in my own skin, and being my best self. I also understand the concept of holiness as something that will change for me over time.

My favorite commentary I read interpreted kedoshim (be holy) as *perushim*, to be separate. One way I think of this is by being unique. When I was in 5th grade, we had a dress for success day at my school. We were supposed to wear nice clothes, something that made us feel special and successful. I knew that I wanted to wear a dress but was scared to do it. When I was very little I wore dresses all the time, and it had felt easy. Now, as a fifth-grader, things felt different -- but I had never backed down from being myself. When "Dress for Success" day finally arrived, I put on my dress and drove to school with a friend. I walked shyly into my classroom and sat down at my desk. Walking into the door from the hallway was one of the hardest things I have ever done. While I don't really remember most of the day, I do remember arriving home and feeling so excited. I told my mom, "I have never felt more like myself." Kedoshim. I felt free and pure and holy, like myself.

As I have reflected on my parsha and the role that holiness and uniqueness plays in my life, I have thought about the importance of being holy within a community. According to a commentary I read, the commandments were given "not

to a few pious priests” but to the entire community. Whether it is about celebrating shabbat together, feeling seen for who I am, or standing up for those in need, a strong community makes all of this possible. A few months ago, I launched a fundraiser for an organization called Pitch in for Baseball and Softball to help kids and communities that can’t afford baseball and softball equipment. I am proud to say that I have raised over 1,500 dollars and have donated a lot of equipment to kids who will put it to good use.

Over the years, many people have supported me on my journey and helped me feel a sense of holiness – in my community, in my family, and in my broader life. I want to thank them: My amazing tutor Debbie Gelber and our very own Rabbi Toba, thank you for helping me prepare for my B’nei Mitzvah. I also want to thank my previous teachers, both in Hebrew school and in my former school, the Haley, for helping shape me as a person and helping me grow.

To my friends: Evelyn, you have always kept me laughing with your funny faces and contagious giggle, Ilana, thank you for helping me stay sane during the pandemic by baking elaborate cakes with me and always sharing awesome jokes, and Ila, you have been my best friend since day one and have been there through it all.

I want to thank Barney, Bada and Nama, Meme and Popchie, Nana, Saba and Savta for loving and supporting me as you watch me grow up.

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Jordan and Lior, thanks for making me laugh and cheering me on in all aspects of my life.

Heschel, thank you for always keeping me in good spirits, playing video games with me, and loving me, even though you are a tad annoying sometimes.

Liz, thank you for encouraging me to continue learning and growing every day.

Lastly, I want to thank my mom. Mom, you have loved and supported me my whole life. You have taught me to be myself no matter what. I can’t express my gratitude enough. You’re awesome, mom. I love you.

Thank you all for coming and Shabbat Shalom.