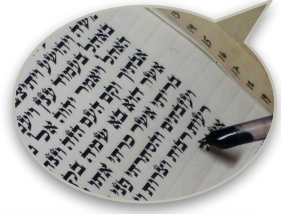




The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Vayikra

Parshat Kedoshim

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Do Something Holy

By Daniel Shamah

In this week's *parasha*, God instructs *Moshe* to inform *Bnei Yisrael* to "be holy." (*Vayikra* 19:2) Why do we have to "be holy"? *Ki kadosh ani*, because God is holy. This instruction raises a question: what is *kadosh*, holiness? The *pasuk* itself lends itself to two possible answers.

On the one hand, we're instructed to "be holy," implying that holiness is something you have to do (the verb in Hebrew, *tihiyu* is in the future tense). This finds some support in many of our *mitzvot*; for example, the blessing for *kiddush* (a word itself derived from the Hebrew word for holiness) on *Shabbat* states that God sanctifies the *Shabbat* (incidentally, we're separately commanded to sanctify the *Shabbat*, setting up an interesting contradiction that scholars have wrestled with for centuries). The *Ramban* seems to endorse this view, noting that this passage comes amidst discussions of laws against sexual immorality

and forbidden foods, and thus says the commandment to "be holy" is really a commandment for self-restraint; by not indulging our base desires we enhance our holiness and we bring ourselves closer to God. In this conception, certain **actions** are "holy," and others aren't, and the commandment is to do as much of the former and as little of the latter as we can.

On the one hand, we're instructed to "be holy," implying that holiness is something you have to do (the verb in Hebrew, *tihiyu* is in the future tense). On the other hand, the *pasuk* suggests that holiness isn't something you do, it's something that just is; we have to be holy because God is holy.

On the other hand, the *pasuk* suggests that holiness isn't something you **do**, it's something that just **is**; we have to be holy because God is holy. This concept of holiness also finds support in our tradition; after it's built, the *kodesh hakodashim*, for example, is just inherently holy. The *Sforno* seems to adopt this view, noting that *Moshe* is commanded to convey this commandment to the entire congregation (*kol adat Yisrael*) and

identifying the parallel *pasuk* in *Shemot* that "you shall become for Me a nation of priests a holy nation" (*Shemot* 19:6). He also implies that the prohibitions against sexual immorality were designed to separate us from other nations. Holiness, in other words, is a **category** (much like the categories of purity and impurity when it comes to kosher food), a quality of the Jewish people that makes us unique among nations, and is not tethered to a specific act any individual person undertakes at any given time.

These alternative explanations seem irreconcilable. If holiness is an immutable quality, the commandment to "be holy" is no more achievable than a commandment to be left-handed. Alternatively, if holiness is expressed in how we behave and the impact our actions have on the world around us, then

by setting the bar as God's own holiness, the commandment seems to set us up for failure; how can we possibly expect to live up to the perfection of God's holiness in our everyday actions?

I would suggest that both the *Ramban* and *Sforno* each have it half-right and that holiness is more like a measure of our relationship with God. As many commentators note, the *psukim* immediately following *kedoshim tihiyu* offer something of a “mini” Ten Commandments: fear your parents and guard *Shabbat* (19:3); don't worship idols or make false idols (19:4); don't lie, steal, or bear false witness (19:11, 13); don't take God's name in vain or curse God's name (19:12). That's a clue, because these are not just *mitzvot*, they are the baseline of our relationship with God (indeed, “commandment” is the wrong word; as Robert Alter points out in his excellent translation, *dibrot* just means “words”).

Rabbi Yeshayahu Kronman, my high school Jewish philosophy teacher at the Yeshivah of Flatbush, had a saying printed on the top of his classroom: “You will never find God in this world. That's what makes life tragic. But to stop searching for God makes life meaningless”

Thus, holiness is not the ineffable quality of a place we're supposed to find, nor is it some magical incantation we can articulate that will change the nature of something. Rather, it's a **measure** of our relationship with God: the more we follow his *mitzvot* and elevate the world around us, the closer we bring ourselves to a state of holiness, fulfilling God's original vision of creating us in “his image.” In that respect, holiness can be viewed as a spectrum. So when we sanctify *Shabbat*, we elevate an ordinary day one degree closer to God. And the *kodesh ha'kodashim* represents the closest any human can get physically to God.

Rabbi Yeshayahu Kronman, my high school Jewish philosophy teacher at the Yeshivah of Flatbush, had a saying printed on the top of his classroom: “You will never find God in this world. That's what makes life tragic. But to stop searching for God makes life meaningless” The cynical 17-year-old version of me thought that aphorism was a bit trite, something you might find printed on a decorative mug. It stuck with me, though, because it gets at a deeper truth: religious life is hard, but when practiced with consistency and persistence, it is deeply meaningful. And reformulated around this week's *parasha*, it captures a fundamental truth about the asymptotic nature of holiness: we will never achieve perfect holiness in this world, which can be very humbling and sometimes a bit of a drag. But to stop striving for holiness would be to admit defeat and leave ourselves, our families, and our community in a darker and emptier place.

Daniel and Danielle moved to Scarsdale 11 years ago from the Upper East Side and have raised four children here: Steven (15, SAR), Marlana (13, Leffell), Elizabeth (11, SAR), and William (8, SAR). Daniel is only a quarter Syrian, which explains his pale complexion and the fact that he usually wears socks to shul. Danielle married an SY mostly to eat hummus on Passover and she regrets nothing.

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