

On Holiness

On a hot desert day, 3200 years ago (give or take a century), God asked Moses to call a meeting of all men, women, and children — the entire flock.

"Be Holy," God said, in a bold, take-no-prisoners way.

The children of Israel were baffled. Should we meditate? Gather our shattered souls? Bring wonder into the world? Muse? Ponder? Eat yogurt? Why should I be holy?

"Because I am holy," said God. "I made you in My image, and if I'm holy, you're holy."

And God proceeded to rattle off dozens of laws covering every moment of every day. What you can eat. How to talk to parents. How to treat converts. Paying your workers on time. Don't place a plate of fudge in front of a dieter. No robbing, stealing or sleeping with your aunt. And of course, Love your neighbor.

"Get it"? Asks God.

"Sure. I keep Your rules, and I'm holy."

"Not rules. *Mitzvot*."

"Whatever. I do Your mitzvot, and I'm holy."

"They're not My *mitzvot* - they're yours! A gift.

I don't need Your gifts."

God rumbled, which isn't common in the desert. Maybe He grumbled. Regardless, He was angry. "For this, I took you out of *Mitzrayim*?" He said.

"Feed the poor because I feed the poor, Keep the Sabbath because I keep the Sabbath. Atone on Yom Kippur because I atoned on Yom Kippur. And don't shave with a razor because I said not to." God is impatient.

"Oh. Follow Your rules; I mean *mitzvot*, and "Poof," I'm holy."

"No. The *mitzvot* won't make you holy. But stopping to realize throughout the day the unique role you play in the world and how you help make it better, is what makes you holy."

"How do I do that?"

"וְחַי בָּהֶם" Live *mitzvot*. Work your daily routine around them. When and with whom to have sex. Don't go גלוי ראש. Put something on your head. Give an old man a seat on the subway and control yourself when someone violates your מקום קבוע.

Suddenly, God sums up in a fatherly tone, which is his normal way of speaking. "Be honest. Be fair. You can't help but be holy."

A light bulb appears.

"Oh. I get it" as if finally figuring out what the real difference is between the רבן and תנא קמא "The *mitzvah* is what I do. Holy is what I become!"

God leaves with a thumbs-up and a smile. "Be holy," He says.

