

## What is Holiness?

In this week's Torah portion, *Korach*, Moses appoints his own brother High Priest, and his own cousin Chief Levite. Korach, a Levite, wanted that position. For this and other reasons, Korach assembles 250 distinguished leaders of Israel, and together they confront Moses and Aaron, saying:

You take too much upon yourselves. All of us here are holy, and God is among us. So why do raise yourselves above everyone else in the assembly of the Lord? [Numbers 16:3]

Moses attempts conciliation, but fails. So God makes the earth swallow up Korach and his 250 immediate followers, and launches a plague that kills 14,700 more followers at large.

Let's examine Korach's main argument. It centers on Holiness – in Hebrew, *Kedushah*. He said, "All of us here are holy, and God is among us." What does it mean?

The word *kadosh*, "holy", and its derivatives with the root *kuf-dalet-shin*, appears a full 12,467 times in the combined standard sources: Tanach, Talmud, Midrash and Zohar. So holiness is obviously of central importance in Judaism. And not only in Judaism. A Google search for the word "holiness" yields 24,100,000 returns, including a sidebar that says, "Looking for holiness? Find it at ebay.com." (Good luck.)

The Torah does not define holiness -- *kedushah*. Yet many Jewish rituals use that word. We make *kiddush* on the wine. We recite the *kaddish* and the *kedushah* at services. We marry through *kiddushin*. One would think we understand the concept of being *kadosh* (holy), which is present in each of these actions. But *kadosh* is a divine concept, and therefore, like the concept of God Himself, is felt more than it is understood. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz is reported to have said, "One who knows and feels holiness does not need to discuss it; and one who does not know it cannot be made to know."

God tells us in the Torah that he wants us to be:

*Mamlechet kohanim vegoy kadosh.*

A kingdom of priests and a holy nation. [Ex. 19:6]

In parshat *Kedoshim*, God tells us:

*Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh ani, HaShem elokechem.*

You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy. [Lev. 19:2]

and follows up with the Code of Holiness, a long series of do's and don't's, such as no sex with certain entities, not putting a stumbling block before the blind, not gossiping, observing Shabbat, observing shaatnez, etc. But all this is not enough to give us a definition of holiness. Does it mean that commandments not in Code of Holiness do not make us holy? For example, the commandments of observing kashrut, circumcision, holidays, sacrifices, Temple worship, tithing; reproducing; not coveting, etc., are not in the Code of Holiness. Should we conclude that they do not contribute to holiness?

The dictionary defines holiness as the state of being set apart for the service of God. It applies to people, objects, times, or places, and is associated with divine power. The Encyclopedia Judaica says that "*kadesh*" means "distinguished, set apart", suffused with a divine quality, both majestic and fearsome. It adds that holiness expresses the very nature of God, and that moral perfection is an essential aspect of holiness. Rashi says that holiness means distancing oneself from sexual impropriety. The Torah even implies that there is mortal danger in unauthorized contact with the holy.

The Mishnah teaches that there are ten degrees of holiness in Judaism.

[Kelim 1:5-9] For example,

- The Land of Israel is holier than all other lands.
- Jerusalem is holier than other cities in the Land.
- Temple Mount is holier than other parts of Jerusalem.
- The Holy of Holies is holier than other parts of the Temple.
- And the holiest place in the Holy of Holies is the point centered above the Ark, between the *Keruvim*, the cherubs, from which the Voice of God emanates.

There are other definitions of holiness. Some say it is the elevation of the human being from his animal nature to his being created in the image of God, so that being holy means imitating God. The Midrash explains:

Just as God is gracious and merciful, so you too should be gracious and merciful. [Mekhilta, Canticles 3]

The Ramban, from 13<sup>th</sup>-century Spain, tells us that holiness means doing everything in moderation:

“You shall be holy” means “You should keep distant from sin and licentious behavior”. The Torah prohibits certain sexual behaviors, and prohibits certain foods and drinks. But it permits sex between husband and wife, and [permits] the consumption of kosher meat and [kosher] wine. This might allow a person to act in a lewd manner with his wife [perhaps even in public], gorge himself with meat, inebriate himself with wine, and use vulgar language as much as he desires. The Torah does not forbid any of these things, and he would be allowed to be a vile, disgusting person with the Torah's permission. So, for the Ramban, “Be holy” means “Restrain yourself even with what is permitted.” A holy person is one who is not self-indulgent.

Contemporary rabbi Yaacov Neiman commented on this point as follows: Why should self-indulgence be related to a lack of holiness? Because self-indulgence focuses the mind on self-gratification, and eventually causes people not to be kind to others, that is, not to be “holy”. [Darchei Mussar] Does he mean that holiness is being kind to others?

Others disagree with this “spirit of the law” approach, arguing that when God says “You shall be holy”, He means: “Just as I separate myself, so you should separate yourselves.” Not from excessively self-indulgent behavior, as the Ramban says, but by following *mitzvot* scrupulously, as described in the Talmud. Indeed, the rabbis of the Talmud are referred to as “*Perushim*”, a word later distorted to “Pharisees”, and which literally means “those who separate themselves”.

So being “separate” is central to the notion of holiness. Indeed, God tells Israel in the Torah:

And you shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from other people, so that you should be mine.  
[Lev. 20:26]

The Ramchal, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italian sage, defines holiness as a state in which a person becomes so fully united with God that all else is irrelevant. It is the state described by King David in Psalm 69, when he said:

My soul clings to You. Your right arm sustains me. [Ps 63:9]

To achieve that state, one must avoid all distractions. The Ramchal concludes:

Its beginning is labor and its end reward. Its beginning is exertion and its end a gift. It begins with one sanctifying himself and ends with his being sanctified. [Messilat Yesharim {Path of the Just} 26]

The Malbim, from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Eastern Europe, echoes this notion and says that holiness means separating oneself "from all the ways of the material and natural world." Nevertheless, mainline Jewish teaching encourages Jews to be very much part of the world in which they live. One can be separated and interact at the same time.

But perhaps achieving holiness, under any definition, is too hard for us? Sforino, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italian commentator, notes that since the Torah says, in Genesis, that God created us "in His image" [Gen. 1:26], it means that we *can* be holy, just as God is, just as we are commanded to be. The Torah itself says that God does not give us commandments that we are unable to observe.

So, be holy! You can do it. And you'll recognize it when you feel it.

Shabbat shalom.