

Finding the Holy

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If I had to pick a single word to describe what it is that we strive for as Jews, it would be *Kadosh*, holy. No word appears more often in the Bible, and no concept is more significant. In fact, the second of our two Torah portions this Shabbat is called *Kedoshim*, based on its opening words: *Kedoshim tihiyu ki kadosh ani Adonai Eloheichem*, “You shall be holy, for I, your God, am holy.”

Chapter 19 of Leviticus is referred as the Holiness Code. The Talmud says that it contains *rov gufei Torah*, “the essential principles of Judaism.” As we read this chapter, we find not only the Ten Commandments but other essential teachings of our way of life:

- Provide for the needy.
- Don’t lie.
- Pay the laborer a fair wage at a proper time.
- Do not insult or hurt the disabled.
- Do not stand idly by someone who is in trouble.
- Forgive others. Do not hold a grudge.

- And last but not least, as we've already learned from Leslye: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

But in Judaism, as reflected in this list, holiness is also part of how we interact with the world. It's about how we relate to others, how we conduct business, how we deal with our busy lives. Judaism is a tradition that deals with all aspects of existence, no matter how mundane those aspect may appear to be.

On one hand, then, our tradition asserts that holiness is about separation, setting aside what is holy from what is profane and mundane. Being holy means making an effort to separate ourselves from the everyday and usual and setting time aside in our lives to focus on the spiritual. Thus, we set aside Shabbat, sanctifying it to God and creating a space in our lives to be holy, away from the distractions of our daily lives.

On the other hand, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel argues: "Judaism is a theology of the common deed, of the trivialities of life, dealing not so much with training for the exceptional as with management of the trivial." We are commanded to be part of the world, involved in its minutiae, finding holiness in the everyday. Thus, when we help a person overcome an obstacle in their lives, we're being holy. When we give tzedakah or volunteer to help those less fortunate than ourselves, we're being holy. And when we act in ways that foster tolerance and understanding between people, we're being holy.

And, even more so, in this world of sheltering in place and social distancing, we are finding new ways to connect with each other and discover the holy. Finding

holiness now is about recognizing that moments we might otherwise think of as mundane and insignificant can and should be made holy and special. In every interaction we have in life, we have the opportunity not just to *find* holiness but to *make* holiness, setting aside that moment and sanctifying it. And every time we do, we make ourselves and the world a little more holy.

Perhaps the past few months have reminded us to support local restaurants and grocery stores who seem to be struggling most. Perhaps the past few months have helped raise awareness to the strengths and weaknesses of our healthcare and education system. And maybe it has helped us be grateful for the things that up until now, we may have taken for granted.

Maybe we can find holiness and make holiness by taking stock of what we want to continue after the shelter-in-place orders have ended and social distancing becomes an idea of the distant past. Maybe it is taking more time in the mornings to have that cup of coffee or eat breakfast before going to work. Maybe it is taking more breaks and going on walks in the middle of the day. Could it be that we will want to carve out more time for self-care, family, and friends? Holiness is not just that which separates us from others, but what brings us together. Striving for holiness, then, is creating new, and perhaps healthier norms.

Holiness is part of the inner landscape of our lives. It's not where but how one lives. And it's learning to sanctify life: every moment, every relationship, and every object. In the words of Jewish mystics, it is finding the sacred sparks in all things and learning to release them.

To be holy is to be a blessing: to oneself, to others, and to the world.

Shabbat Shalom.