

D'var Torah

Kedoshim: The paradox of holiness

Allow me a rabbinic parlor trick. Think of a person you have known personally whom you would call "holy." Not knowing anything beyond this description, I would hazard two guesses: 1) in some significant ways, this person does not go along with "the crowd" and 2) when he or she connects with you, the connection is profound. You feel embraced.

These predictions prove accurate for most people because of the nature of holiness. Holiness finds both its source and its expression in two seemingly opposite inclinations: separation and union.

This week's Torah portion, Kedoshim (meaning "holy") addresses sanctity in ritual, speech, sex, law, business, and community relations, among other spheres. It advocates both separation (e.g., from prohibited sexual partners, gossip, deceit, class bias, and impurity) and union (e.g., with neighbors, the innocent who are harmed, God, parents, and the proper sexual partner).

The word "kadosh" (holy) connotes separation because it originally meant "set aside for a dedicated use." It applied first and foremost to contributions that were designated for the Temple. Holiness

achieve holiness. If you want to be holy, find a mountain top away from general society and meditate there. Separate yourself from commerce (take a vow of poverty or live simply); separate yourself from routine speech (take a vow of silence and/or pray much of the day); separate yourself from your own bodily needs and urges (fast or eat simply, bathe in cold water, and/or take a vow of celibacy).

Overall, Jewish tradition and particularly the Book of Leviticus are dedicated to finding holiness in the midst of society, with all its temptations and impurities. Yet separatism has a place in our tradition, too. Mystics and chasidim have sanctified themselves through ascetic and separatist practices. Once a year for 25 hours on Yom Kippur, Jews live like monks. We eschew food, drink, commerce, bathing,

anointing, and sex, to focus exclusively on repenting for our sins and elevating our lives to a new level of holiness.

Holiness draws boundaries. This unequivocally cuts some things off, while separating others as chosen. There are moments in life we call "holy" because we experience them as different and special – outside the bounds of the mundane. Yet boundaries also mark the points of connection. And this is the second aspect of holiness: union.

While many holy experiences are characterized by a sense that something is set apart, there is another kind of holy experience which springs from a sense that nothing at all is separate. This type of holiness – sometimes called "numinous" – is mysterious; it cannot be planned or scheduled. Suddenly, you discover or plug into an awareness that may sound to others like a cliché, but feels to you like a revelation: "I am connected to everything, and everything is part of the One." You feel blessed and comforted by this unity. In religious terms, "ein od" (Deuteronomy 4:39) – there is nothing but God.

If you have one such experience in a lifetime, it can be enough to influence or even transform your sense of reality. Mystics talk about fleeting moments of union with lasting impact – and so do everyday people. Elizabeth Gilbert found – and lost – union in a moment of meditation, as she describes in the bestseller "Eat, Pray, Love." Grief-stricken people sometimes find a reprieve when they see a light or hear a voice which confers both

comfort and sanctity. They experience themselves and everyone else included in a cosmic embrace. Moments of extremis are not required. You can know complete and holy union when you make love with your spouse, witness a sunrise, serve food at a homeless shelter. The commandment to be holy was not given just to Moses or the elders, but to the entire people. Holiness is available to everyone.

A famous verse in Kedoshim points to the quality of unification: "Love your neighbor as yourself. I am God." In a mystical reading, this means that the distinctions we draw between ourselves and our neighbors are insignificant and ephemeral. Your neighbor is as yourself. As children of the One, we are one.

This is heady stuff. How do we apply it in daily life? Three suggestions for this year's run at Parashat Kedoshim: consider your role model, your separations, and your union.

1) Recall the people you first thought of when you began reading this column. Whether or not they fit my description, they

clearly fit your definition of holiness. How might they serve as a role model for increasing holiness in your daily life?

2) What are you letting in (through the media, gossip, reading, routines, friendships, etc.) that you may wish to filter? Do you engage in practices, appropriate or helpful at one time, which are now damaging to your sense of holiness? What is your separate and special use to God, humanity, and yourself?

3) What can you do to foster a sense of union with God, people, and nature? What songs, prayers, settings, or memories inspire an awareness of union? If you have had a "numinous" experience, how can you "feed and water" it, so that it stays alive for you and through you?

"Kedoshim tehiyu, you shall (must) be holy," is a commandment. And it can also be read as a promise: "you shall (will) be holy. Ki kadosh ani. For I, Adonai, your God, am holy." Created in God's image, we, too will be holy. Sooner or later, ready or not, here it comes...



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Rashi comments on the first verse in Kedoshim: "You shall be holy" means you shall be separate." If we are going to be holy, we will have to oppose some popular trends. We will regularly need to distinguish and filter out the unholy. The Holiness Code encourages us to make distinctions – between kosher and non-kosher, between pure and impure, between good and evil.

Many traditions promote separation to