

You Shall Become Holy

Acharei Mot – Kedoshim 5780

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Of all the great slogans and mission statements ever written, this week's Torah portion has one of the best. "I think, therefore I am," "E Pluribus Unum," "Just do it," and "Think Different," have nothing on the mandate given to the Jewish people in Parashat Kedoshim, the second half of this week's double parasha.

We read in this week's Torah portion:

[ויקרא י"ט:ב'](#)

דַּבֵּר אֶל-כָּל-עֵדֻת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ. כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

[Leviticus 19:2](#)

Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy (*Kedoshim tehiyu*), for I, the LORD your God, am holy.

This phrase: You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy is one of the great mission statements given by God to the Jewish people. When read during these times it sets a course not just for the Jewish people but truly for all of humanity.

The medieval commentators read this mitzvah for the Jewish people to be holy in different ways. Rashi sees this instruction as pertaining to the Torah's ethics surrounding sexuality. Ramban, however, sees this injunction as pertaining to an overall separateness. Ramban reads the essence of holiness as being linked to uniqueness and individuation. According to Ramban, the way that God and the Shabbat are unique and separate, we also must try to be unique and separate.

Fast forward, though, several hundred years to the great Hasidic masters and we see a different understanding this powerful verse.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, known as the Kedushat Levi, focuses not on the word "Kedoshim (holy)," instead focusing on the Hebrew word "*tehiyu* (you will be)". However, he transforms that Hebrew word from "you will be," to "you will become."

The Kedushat Levi sees within each of us our inlimited potential to grow, to transform and to bring light into a dark world.

In his commentary, he draws on the wisdom of the famous debate between Hillel and Shammai regarding the candles during Hanukkah. Shammai wants to light eight candles on the first night, decreasing nightly until there is only one left. Hillel, of

course, suggests that we light one candle the first night and add an additional candle each subsequent night.

The Talmud explains that Hillel's reason comes from the fact that we only want to ascend in holiness, never to descend – and on Hanukkah, the candles have inherent holiness. The Kedushat Levi sees a connection between the increase in light on the Hanukkah and the teaching from Pirkei Avot that one mitzvah begets another mitzvah just as one light leads to another light.

The Kedushat Levi links this rising in holiness to the essential character traits of Hillel the Elder and his students. They were renown because of their humility. Hillel always put the opposing argument before his own. His defining human quality was being humble.

The Kedushat Levi sees a connection to the humble quality of Hillel and the humble quality of that lone candle on the first night of Hanukkah. The essence of becoming holy, he explains, is first to embrace humility. When we empty ourselves of the other non-essential stuff, we can begin filling ourselves with the holy. Hillel and his school, in addition to – or perhaps because of – their embrace of humility, were the originators of the concept known in Hebrew as *mosif v'holid* – “building on and adding to.” When we cling to Godliness, we can build and add onto the holiness in our lives – and the lives of others.

The only absolute in holiness is God, and we can only begin to approach God's holiness through first embracing humility he writes. The essence, he writes, is not to *be* holy – but rather to be engaged in the process of becoming holy.

These last six weeks have been a humbling time for all of humanity. We have been shown time and again the limits of our own agency and power.

By limiting our expectations of what we thought was important before the time of Covid 19, we can expand our expectations of what is possible during and hopefully after the time of Covid 19.

Our capacity for lovingkindness may be limitless even though our delivery systems are more constrained. Now is the time for us collectively to let go of the anchors that limited our worldview, so that we can increase the holiness in our lives and the light in others, we can latch onto what we think God wants us to do in this world, and work on *becoming* holy. We don't need to be holy yet. We just need to work on becoming holy and moving in that direction.

Also, by focusing on attaching ourselves to the Holy, we not only know what we need to do during the pandemic – we can begin to chart a course for afterward. How will I use physical closeness? How will I use my words when I am face to face? Will

I allow myself to truly see the other when we need not where masks. I wish you all a Shabbat truly shalom, but also one of personal, communal and global becoming.

Shabbat Shalom.