

Kohelet Discussion

KEDOSHIM

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Today's Torah Portion is Kedoshim, special to me because, 22 years ago, it was my daughter Rebecca's Bat Mitzvah Parshah.

We know that Kedoshim contains a number of Divine Commandments spoken by G-d to Moses to make ourselves holy, beginning with G-d telling us, "You shall be holy for I, the Lord, am holy." And because of our Divine Spirit, our holiness lights the way between us and G-d; being holy keeps the pathway open. And according to commentary, even the highest noblest principles of Judaism can be attained by any Jew, not just tzaddikim.

The Parshah describes a list of 51 Commandments, ranging from respecting your parents and keeping the Sabbath holy, to not worshipping idols, and including the right way to slaughter animals, to leaving part of your harvest for the poor, to not stealing or gossiping, to loving your neighbor as yourself, and on to sexual improprieties. And don't even think about getting a tattoo!

Loving your neighbor as yourself is a major tenet in the Torah as we must first love ourselves and then, further, we all need each other in order to be holy. According to a parable of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, several people were sailing in a ship. One takes out a drill and begins drilling into the floor of the ship. "What are you doing?" the others ask excitedly. "Why should you care?" was the reply. "Aren't I drilling only under my place?" In terms of our unity, obviously even one person compromising himself compromises others.

(I want to mention something in an aside here by The Sefer HaChinuch: "No person can do anything to another which is not Hashem's will. So, if someone is causing anguish, realize it has been decreed by Hashem." Isn't this completely contradictory, or does it simply mean we have the freedom to make choices?). Feel free to shed light on this later.

Since I lack familiarity with the entire continuing Torah story, when I write a D'Var Torah I tend to download every Jewish link on the Internet and then try to figure out how they all relate to the Parshah. It's kind of like driving in concentric circles until you find a specific location. But for Kedoshim, I came up with a theme involving 2 questions: What is holiness? And how do we stay holy in the face of despair and hatred?

What does holiness mean to you? I've thought a lot about it. If we follow the Divine Commandments, is that enough? The Commandments here have deep meanings for the way to live between man-to-man and man-to-G-d. For instance, harming or insulting a person is the same as harming or insulting the image of G-d in that person. The Torah tells us that if you are DRIVEN to feel G-d's Presence, and you DO feel His Presence, then you are holy. But is there a yardstick for measuring our holiness, and how do we know if we're doing it right? Individual people and whole nations have tried to figure out this question, often with disastrous results. But still, we can develop the Divine within us through our actions anywhere and at all times, according to Nechama Barash of the Jerusalem Post.

A very young Rebecca wrote one of her ideas about holiness in her D'Var Torah: "Tiferet is about compassion, balance, harmony and truth, and about Gevurah—justice, discipline, restraint, and

awe..when you yourself act with compassion, others will follow...You will cause a ripple effect among those around you.”

Another important way I believe we keep holy is by giving other people the benefit of the doubt, even if the excuses are far-fetched. Here is a story that reflects that:

The Chofetz Chaim was once staying at an inn in Vilna when a very animalistic man entered and pounded on the table demanding roast duck. The Chofetz Chaim stood afar, shocked by the spectacle, and began to plan a way to approach and censure this individual. The innkeeper rushed to the Chofetz Chaim to try to prevent him from such an attempt. He was simply afraid what the man might do to the Chofetz Chaim should he approach him. “Rebbe, please leave him be – he never learned any other way. At the age of seven he was drafted into the Czar’s army and was taken to Siberia for training. He trained there for eleven years and then, at the age of eighteen, he served in the Czar’s for twenty five years. That was the chinuch (or Jewish education) that he received. All of those years he never learned a word of Torah and never even saw a Jewish face.” A smile spread over the holy face of the Chofetz Chaim as he heard the words of the innkeeper. He approached the individual, greeting him with a warm ‘Shalom Aleichem’. “Is what I’ve heard about you true?”, asked the Chofetz Chaim with awe in his voice. “That you were around non-Jews for so many years, that you weren’t able to learn even a word of the Torah, that they tried to pry you away from the religion of your fathers, tried to force you to eat pig, and you remained a Jew?!?! You wouldn’t convert! Your place in the world to come will be amongst the greatest. The Chofetz Chaim continued with his warm words. “A person such as you, who has merited to be counted amongst those who were willing to give up their lives for Hashem, if you’d decide to continue your life in a mitzvah-abiding manner, you’d be amongst the ‘wealthiest’ in the world!” This man remained in close contact with the Chofetz Chaim, his newfound Rebbe, until he had become fully observant and a true tzaddik.

To me, holiness means being the best of which you are capable at any time. I specify “any” time instead of “all” times because I think our capacity for holiness varies according to our situation. But being your best may mean praying or invoking the Divine Spirit within you every morning, always asking for guidance, always striving harder no matter what the situation. Recognizing who we truly are gives us strength to resist temptations. Holiness is being kind and keeping the Commandment to treat others as you would like to be treated—the Golden Rule. This can be hard even at the best of times, but what about during illness, war, and unspeakable suffering—as we know is the case in Ukraine. There was an article in the Denver Post April 27th reporting an increase of 53% of antisemitic incidents in Colorado in 2021; we are the 8th highest among all states. Understanding the reasons for these things is probably one of the most-asked questions, and yet we do not see G-d’s whole picture. The grown-up Rebecca and I talked about this, and she came up with an analogy of how we should try to approach G-d. Though I probably have not been able to help Rebecca with math since 4th grade, she compared the question to an asymptote, a line that continually approaches a curve but never meets it. (Asymptote. At first I thought she was telling me about an African tribal warrior.) But the point is that we should keep pushing ourselves a little farther, and a little farther. We must always reach for holiness even if we can’t grasp it. And if we’re suffering, we adjust the goalpost of our expectations. We may not be capable of acting as holy on a bad day as on a good, but then instead of blaming ourselves and feeling guilty, we just let that go and continue striving.

For her Bat Mitzvah, Rebecca chose to focus on the line, "You shall not take revenge, and you shall not bear a grudge against your people." She concluded her D'Var Torah with these words: "I have spent my whole speech on just one sentence, in one portion of the Torah. My speech is only a short summary. I can only imagine what I can get from the entire Torah, if I spend the time to look, and how profoundly it can influence my life. I will keep this thought with me as I assume the responsibility of leading an adult Jewish life." And I can say proudly, that's just what she did!