

By Hy Kempler

Shabbat shalom

Dvar Kidoshim, May 7, 2005

This weeks Torah portion begins with an unusual directive “God spoke to Moses as follows. Speak to all of the children of Israel; Be holy for I, your God, am holy.” This is not the first or the last time that the Torah asks that of us but the scenario I just mentioned –gather all the folks and tell them to be holy - is unique. What must we do to achieve holiness? What is human holiness? Is it an emotion, a state or an experience? What does the Parsha suggest?

Rest assured that I will provide at best partial answers to these issues. I will discuss two approaches.

One approach suggested by commentators is- the path to holiness is spelled out in the rest of the Parsha. Adhere to the Mitzvot enumerated. They relate to the most important areas of life and include ethical treatment of parents, workers, strangers, neighbors, the poor, the disabled; sexual morality such as the prohibition of homosexuality; and the reinforcement of monotheism. In short follow these, approximately fifty rules and you will become holy.

How does fulfilling all of these make us holy? The answer is in the idea of Kedoshim. Translated as Perushim –meaning distinguished, separate from other nations. By fulfilling the Mitzvot, Jews will be regarded as God’s people, as exemplars of the best of humanity, and in their moral perfection, God like. In this view holiness is a form of moral perfection.

The second approach involves looking at the holiness directive as highlighting certain Mitzvot. I am suggesting a narrower and more literal reading of the text. Please look at the verse immediately after Kidoshim Tihu. Verse three (P 694) reads “fear your mother and father and observe my Sabbaths I am the lord your God.” The juxtaposition of these commandments with holiness means that they are unique pathways to holiness. .

What is the basis for this claim? We know how important honor and respect for parents are in the Torah. The linkage to holiness occurs again .in Leviticus (20 7-9 p 701-702), “you shall be holy because I am holy. Observe my commandments for I am the Lord who makes you Holy. He who insults his mother and father shall put to death.” The Torah may be suggesting that the creation of a well functioning family is an essential element for the transmission of deep faith. Perhaps parenting is a holy undertaking..

Before we go further you might be asking yourself why are reverence for parents and the Sabbath juxtaposed in Verse 3? Two suggestions.

Samson Raphael Hirsch says that respect for parental authority is a precursor for obedience to God. Another possibility is that they are both connected with creation.

Now to the connection between the Sabbath and holiness. You are familiar with the many references in our Sabbath liturgy and our meditations that affirm this. For example, in a post Musaf meditation in our Siddur we read, “To celebrate Shabbat is to share in holiness”

The tie between Sabbath and holiness is Biblical. In Genesis. 2 Verse 3 (p.12) “Vayivoresch elohim et yom Hashvi Vayikadesh oto.” How did God make it holy? Rashi comments that holiness was expressed through the future gift of manna, the double portion Jews received on Friday in the desert to compensate for manna unavailable on the Sabbath. Rashi may have been alluding to the gift of Menucha –rest – cessation from work what we do to keep ourselves alive - that is part of Sabbath. Some say that we are also given something extra on the Sabbath, a neshama yetara, an extra soul, a foretaste of the world to come..

Abraham Heschel integrates these ideas in his essay on the Sabbath. .Quoting him “The Sabbath is a reminder of the two worlds- this world and

the world to come; it is an example of two worlds. It is joy, holiness and rest; **(Repeat)** joy is part of this world; holiness and rest part of the world to come... We best treat the Sabbath as the majesty of holiness in time. A rest in love and generosity a rest that yields serenity, tranquility and security.“

Finally he says “it’s a day we reclaim our authentic state .. partake of a blessedness **in which we are what we are.**” This last part is amazing! We accept each other and ourselves the way we are. We are good enough. Some of you may remember Mr Rogers that my kids loved to watch on TV and his famous saying was “I love you just the way you are”. Heschel is saying Sabbath is a day free of complaints, a day for appreciation what is. To experience even some of this is a holy moment.

So I have to tell you what holiness means to me. It is an experience during which you appreciate the wonder of the Sabbath – the creation of cessation from usual life, the specialness of time granted us, the acceptance of the good enough in others; and ourselves **plus** some form of enactment of these.

But to get there is a tall order. I had an inkling of this during Sheila and my recent visit to Israel as part of the CJP mission. Don’t worry this is not going to be a solicitation.

It was late Friday afternoon in Jerusalem. Seventy of us had just been bused from Haifa and headed for a gathering at Robinson's gate, close to the Kotel. Naturally we were promised a Felafel snack before our meeting. The shop owner where some of us waited in line began yelling "Shabbat, Shabbat, no more felafel" and we hurriedly chose alternatives. As I looked around I noticed an excitement in the air; people hurrying some with bouquets in hand others carrying special clothing, probably heading home so as if not to be late for the expected guest.

At Robinson's gate we met a young Rabbi. He was dressed informally, had a beard and a guitar slung over his shoulder. After a Lchaim and Schecheyunu he began to strum and sing "Mizmor, Mizmor , Mizmor Shir leyom hasabbath" and we joined him. My eyes closed and I was overcome by a wave of emotion- gratitude, joy reverence. I was excited that Shabbat was coming and I was there.

About an hour later some of us went to a service at Shir Hadash an Orthodox egalitarian Minyan. The place was overflowing. There was a palpable mood of gladness, friendship, community even love especially the way fathers embraced their young children. The group sang almost the entire service. Later we had a wonderful meal and a challenging Dvar. That exemplifies the kind of Sabbath in which holiness can emerge.

In conclusion I've discussed two approaches to the directive of Kiddoshim Tihu. May all of us find the holiness we seek.