



## **D'var Torah Acharei Mot/Kedoshim by Judy Remz**

**April 29, 2023**

Shabbat shalom to you all – my name is Judy Remz.

Years ago, when our daughter was considering whether she would attend high school at Newton North or Gann Academy, we learned that 3 of the teachers on the faculty at Gann were named Mr Kadosh, Mrs Kadosh and Dr Kadosh. Holy holy holy! We knew Gann had to be the school for her!

Which bring me to them dramatic and compelling first sentence of Kedoshim:

*“And the Lord said to Moses, saying,*

*Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.”*

Today I'd like to make some connections that may not be so straightforward. You know those mazes that kids do where you have to start at one place, let's say a picture of a bumble bee and then you have to get through the maze to your destination, let's say where the flower is. So that's the mental image I'd like you to hold in your mind today as I draw the connection between holiness and happiness.

This maze begins --with holiness. I think of holiness in two general categories. The first type of holiness is physical objects that take on the quality of holiness -- such as a Torah scroll or the Kotel. And the second type of holiness is what the pasuk focuses on today -- human action and morality. Looking at this pasuk in context of the parasha we read first, Acharei Mot, we learn that B'nai Yisrael is commanded to avoid spiritual contamination – no idolatry, no adultery. In this pasuk we're looking at, “You shall be holy for I the Lord your

God am holy”, we are asked to be holy; holiness here means our human attempt to imitate God.

Nachmanides (rabbi and philosopher from the 13<sup>th</sup> century) explains that holiness is not the observance of any particular category of mitzvot. You can live the letter of the law but in fact, be selfish and self indulgent. Nachmanides explains that God is looking for more than obedience to the law. The commandment to be holy tells us to live our life with moderation, refraining from what is forbidden but also refraining from too much of what is permitted.

Or as Rabbi Micha’el Rosenberg (as one of my favorite teachers from Meah), says in an essay on this pasuk, “The commandment we see in today’s parasha is to act in such a way as to be considered holy.”

Many commentators point out the significance that Moshe gives this commandment to ALL the Jewish people at once. The usual way to transmit the mitzvot (per Eruvin 54b according to the Stone chumash, pg 656) is that Moshe would teach privately to Aharon; then Nadav and Avihu with Moshe repeating the lesson. Then the priests would enter and Moshe would repeat it again, and eventually, the mitzvot would make their way to Bnai Yisrael. According to the commentary in the Stone Chumash for this pasuk, because of the extreme importance of this chapter, all Jews were required to hear it first hand. Quoting the commentary “the commandment to be holy applies to everyone and ...every Jew has the potential for holiness. “

According to the Hatam Sofer, a scholar and rabbi in Eastern Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who says “this section [of the Torah] was proclaimed in an assembly [of the people]. The Torah does not seek a holiness of solitude or separation. On the contrary... you shall be holy in the midst of the community as you are mingling with other human beings.”

So we’ve established the starting point of our maze. I want to take us through the maze with the end point being happiness. Similar to holiness, it’s a little hard to pin down. Happiness is not acquisition. Happiness is not just pleasure. Happiness is not a destination that you check off boxes (career, family, nice house in Newton). Happiness is not the opposite of sadness. As Sheri Mandell, says in her writings on grief and resilience, happiness and sadness are siblings.

Happiness is a simcha, to enjoy the presence of others, and to give joy to others.

Art Green wrote a delightful book called "Judaism's 10 Best Ideas". The first chapter is entitled "Happiness as a Religious Precept". He describes that joy is the attitude that Judaism seeks to instill. "Simcha shel mitzvah" – a mitzvah, of course, can mean an act of kindness or a ritual. Art writes of a Hasidic story which I'm going to paraphrase. "It is a pious custom to bake your own matzah... To make matzah properly, you need to use water that has been left standing overnight....To make his own matzah, an elderly rabbi was seen carrying 2 heavy buckets full of water with a yoke around his neck. A neighbor riding by in a horse drawn cart saw him and said 'Come here rabbi! Put your buckets on my wagon and we'll give you a ride.' The rabbi looked up smiling and said 'I have the joy of doing this mitzvah only once a year and you want me to give it away to a horse?'" In this way, the burden itself has become a source of joy.

You've probably heard of Dr. Tal Ben Shahar, who taught the most popular course at Harvard in positive psychology. Here's a summary of what his research shows, quoting from an article where he was interviewed.

"Happiness is mostly dependent on our state of mind, not on our status or the state of our bank account. Barring extreme circumstances, our level of well-being is determined by what we choose to focus on and by our interpretation of external events. Do we focus on the empty part or the full part of the glass? Do we view failures as catastrophic, or do we see them as learning opportunities?"

Tal's recipe for happiness continues by saying express gratitude whenever possible. In another article I read about him, Tal blends his research with his Jewish practice. He references that first words uttered in the morning as Jews are expressions of gratitude — 'Modeh ani', grateful I am. He writes "The sentence structure of saying 'grateful' first instead of 'I am' is unusual. The first word is about appreciation and gratitude rather than 'I'. There is great wisdom in this."

He goes on to say "The number one predictor of happiness is the time we spend with people we care about and who care about us. The most important

source of happiness may be the person sitting next to you. Appreciate them and savor the time you spend together.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks talks about the morning prayers too in his essay on joy. (<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/reeh/deep-power-of-joy/>).

He says that every day “we begin our morning prayers with a litany of thanks, that we are here, with a world to live in, family and friends to love and be loved by, about to start a day full of possibilities, in which, by acts of loving kindness, we allow God’s presence to flow through us into the lives of others.”

Happiness and gratitude go hand in hand. In Tehillim 57, King David expresses gratitude for his safe delivery from danger as he seeks shelter in a cave. Please remember the number 57 as I tie this all together.

If you take the gematria for Simcha – it is 353. You add gratitude (psalm 57). 353 plus 57 equals 410. 410 is the gematria for Kadosh.

And with that, we’ve made it to the end of the maze. Shabbat shalom!