



How Can We Reconcile Individual Holiness with the Holiness of the Community?

What Does it Mean to Be Holy?

Parashat Kedoshim is bursting to the brim with mitzvot – especially interpersonal mitzvot, teaching us proper relationships such as, honoring parents, providing for the poor, avoiding bearing grudges and taking revenge, while loving others like ourselves. Our *Parasha* opens with the mitzvah to be holy, yet what does it mean to be holy? How do we define it? Rashi explains that to be holy is to separate ourselves from sexual immorality and from sin, for wherever we find a barrier against sexual immorality, we find holiness. Likewise, our Sages teach that קְדוּשָׁה/*kedoshim* means פְּרוּשִׁים/*perushim* – ‘separate’ (*Sifra, Parashat Shemini* 12). The first time the root ש-ד-ק/*k-d-sh* – ‘holy’ is used is in connection with Shabbat, which Hashem blessed and set aside from the rest of the weekdays (*Bereishit* 2:3). Under the marriage canopy the groom sanctifies his bride with a ring and declares that she is hereby מְקַדְּשֶׁת/*mekudeshet* from the root ש-ד-ק/*k-d-sh*. With this declaration he designates his betrothed and sets her apart from other women, to be his wife. Likewise, the Jewish people are set apart from the nations of the world to be designated as Hashem’s beloved partner. Through keeping His mitzvot, we affect the entire creation and become partners with Hashem. Therefore, we must be extremely careful to separate ourselves from any act that infringes on our exclusive relationship with Him, which might cause a barrier that conceals His infinite light. Yet, does our quest for קְדוּשָׁה/*kedusha* – ‘holiness’ require separation from others in order to develop our personal innate holiness? Is it even possible for everyone to achieve holiness? Perhaps, holiness is only a few select high-level Chassidic masters or, perhaps just for Rabbis, Rebbetzins and Kohanim?

Every Jew Can Attain Holiness

Since *Parashat Kedoshim* alerts us to be holy and resemble our Maker, some people might think that only very few select people in each generation can achieve this level. Yet, among Israel, anyone who so desires is able to climb the ladder of piety until he reaches holiness. G-d instructed Moshe to assemble “the entire congregation of Israel” when giving them the commandment to be holy in order to make it clear that holiness is not something achievable only by the few. People shouldn’t claim that high standards of morality and ethics are only for the special pious, elite. Rather, every single Jew has the potential to be holy (Alshich). Indeed, every Israelite is commanded: וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמַלְכֵת כְּהֹנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ – “You shall be to Me a kingdom of Kohanim and a holy nation” (*Shemot* 19:6). Similarly, Ohr HaChaim explains that Moshe addresses “the entire community” in order to teach us that each and every person can attain holiness, for there is no essential distinction between the people of Israel.” I recall being a new *ba’alat teshuvah* (returnee to Judaism) in Diaspora Yeshiva, where we constituted a bunch of barefoot, hippies with dreadlocks and unconventional, colorful, cotton tunics. Nevertheless, Rabbi Goldstein spurred all of us to reach the loftiest Torah achievements by repeatedly proclaiming, “Each one of you must strive to be a Moshe Rabbeinu! As the Rambam says, ‘Every person has the potential to be righteous like Moshe Rabbeinu’” (Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 5:2).

Separating from the World for the Sake of Devotion to the Divine

In our ‘spirituality-seeking’ day and age, we may conceive of ‘holiness’ as meditating on a mountain top and engaging in ‘silent retreats.’ Indeed, ‘holy people’ of other religions around

the globe practice various forms of separation from the world at large such as meditative practices, vows of silence, celibacy, or other ways of cloistering themselves away from the general population. In Judaism, too, some people believe that serving Hashem requires a certain disconnect from the world, in order to free ourselves to devote all our strength and abilities to the Divine. Although we can find teachings in Judaism that seem to confirm this view, it is only for the sake of avoiding evil that a person sometimes needs to escape the company of others (Rambam, *Hilchot Deot* 6:1). This approach is only directed at avoiding the negative. Yet, to reach true holiness it is necessary to join others in serving G-d both through Torah and Tefilah. These foundations of Jewish holy life take precedence over Kabbalistic or Chassidic spiritual practices. Jewish meditation should never be seen as a core practice, of Judaism that replaces mitzvot, as holiness is not a matter of contemplation. Rather, it is a result of actions within a social context.

Spirituality and Meditation Do not Replace Torah & Mizvot

Fulfilling the will of G-d in doing mitzvot are the core practices of Judaism: Respecting our mother and father, observing Shabbat, leaving gleanings for the poor, paying workers promptly, treating the deaf and blind justly, rendering fair judgment in court, and living alongside our fellow without hatred or grudge, and, indeed, with love; these are actions that engender holiness. Therefore, rather than withdrawing and removing ourselves from the community, the opportunity to make the greatest strides toward the Divine is within the confines of the earthly world and specifically within the Jewish community ([Yehoshua Gerstein](#)). Rabbi Nachman's call for *hitbodedut* (literally to be alone) – so popular in our times – implies taking a daily, hourly break from other responsibilities in order to go out into nature alone and talk with Hashem. With all due respect and great admiration to those self-disciplined individuals who succeed in freeing time from their daily schedule for this spiritual practice, we must be aware of the pitfall of taking this practice to an extreme, ignoring the needs of family and community for the sake of individual spiritual elevation. In contrast, I really love the emphasis of the Chabad movement on 'Ahavat Yisrael' – totally extending themselves to help other yidden, whether to kosher their kitchen, comfort a mourner, bake challah for hundreds of people, or reach out to assimilated Jews in every nook and cranny, even at great expense to their own personal Torah learning. Now, that is what I call קדושה/kedusha – 'holiness.'

Community is Prerequisite for Holiness

How can we keep the mitzvah 'to be holy' that emphasizes being part of the Jewish community while at the same time requires a certain separation? This dichotomy makes the mitzvah קדושים תהיו/kedushim tiheyu – "you shall be holy" one of the most difficult mitzvot in the Torah. It implies celebrating the Divine spark within each and every individual, accepting our special spiritual contribution, while consciously and purposefully including that unique individuality within the greater Jewish community.

ספר ויקרא פרק יט פסוק ב דבר אל כל עדת בני ישראל ואמרת אליהם קדושים תהיו כי קדוש אני השם אלהיכם:

"Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them, You shall be holy, for I, Hashem, your G-d, am holy" (*Vayikra* 19:2).

Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel: [This] teaches us that this passage was stated in the assembly [of the entire congregation of Israel] because most of the fundamental teachings of the Torah are dependent on it (Rashi, *Vayikra* 19:2).

The mitzvah to be holy was taught publicly, to communicate to us that the holiness we seek is found in the community. The words of Rashi teach us that it is impossible to reach holiness without being united as a congregation. This section relates equally to Jews of different social status and ages: the Kohen, the judge, the son, the farmer etc. The complete fulfillment of the Torah depends upon all the different sectors of Jews, within all their various social framework. Therefore, this parasha was said in the assembly of everyone because only the complete nation can carry it into action (Maor v'Shemesh). The fact that the command **תִּהְיוּ קְדוֹשִׁים**/*kedushim tiheyu* – “you shall be holy” is written in the plural, furthermore highlights that holiness requires a community. “Hashem does not unite His name to an individual, for an individual who is not connected to the general community is not the goal at all” (*Meshech Chachma Vayikra 18:4*). I always emphasize to my conversion students the importance to be part of the Jewish community. This includes making efforts to participate in our special Shabbat and holiday programs. Indeed, there is no better way than experiencing the community, where everyone stops working, stops driving cars, stops turning on and off electrical devices, and attends only to Hashem, family, friends, Torah, and tefilah. This kind of joint communal holy practice represents the unique spirituality of Judaism – a combination of physical and spiritual revitalization where an entire community works together to create an ideal time and space in which we can get a taste of the perfected world ([Based on Dr. Steven Kepnes](#))