

Standing quietly on the hill, prayer book in hand, I looked out at the sunset and thought to myself “what a beautiful world we live in.” Cliche, yes, but oh so true. Standing out in nature, praying the silent Amidah on a Friday night surrounded by people who had been strangers only a few weeks before but who were now friends. It is astonishing what a few weeks can do when you devote yourself to an experience.

It is that moment, on the hill, that I think of when I try to describe the idea behind the word *Kadosh* to my students. We translate *Kadosh*, and its various companions with the Hebrew root *kuf dalet shin* as “holy” or “holiness.” Yet we know that another meaning of this root is “separate” or “other.” That there is the *kadosh*, the holy, and there is the regular, the ordinary - the *chol*. We are told in Leviticus, more than once, “You shall be holy, for I Adonai your God am Holy.” Yet, nowhere in the Torah are we told what holiness is nor how we are to achieve it. Only that we must be it.

The Torah tells us many things that we are expected to do, that we are expected to believe. But it is our commentators, our sages, rabbis and scholars throughout the ages who give us the explanation of how to go about practicing what the Torah tells us. One example is from Deuteronomy chapter 6, best known for being a part of the V’ahavta prayer. “And these words, which I command you this day...you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.” We read these words all the time but what did God mean when they were given to our ancestors? It is the sages, our commentators, who took these words and gave us tefillin for our hearts and eyes, and the mezuzah for our doorposts and gates.

Torah does not give us the specifics about holiness but our tradition, through our sages, commentators, rabbis and scholars, does teach us a number of paths we can walk upon in order to achieve holiness. Let us explore three different interpretations of what it means to be holy together.

Alan Morinis, one of our current teachers of Mussar, a Jewish spiritual practice that gives concrete instructions on how to live a meaningful and ethical life, wrote the following on his blog:

To become holy is the purpose of a human life, yours and mine and everyone's. Because we have free will, it's possible to become completely redirected away from this goal and, as a result, to dedicate a precious life to the accumulation of possessions or power or wealth or any number of lesser diversions. Read the obituary column and be astounded at the things some people put at the center of their lives and pursue with passion. But the Torah is unequivocal: we are here to become elevated spiritual people or, in its own language, to become holy.¹

But the Torah is unequivocal: we are here to become holy.

Yet, if holiness is an aspect of God, which Torah says it is, is holiness something we need to seek out - or is it something within us that we need to allow out? I believe deeply in the words of Genesis 1:27 - "So God created human in God's own image, in the image of God God created human; male and female God created them." If this is the case, that we are all made in God's image, then perhaps we are not seeking to become holy, perhaps we are holy to begin with and we are seeking that which is within us and not what is outside of ourselves.

¹ https://mussarinstitute.org/Yashar/2018-07/mussar_lens.php

Rabbi David Z. Vaisberg wrote:

We often preach that human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim* - in God's image (Genesis 1:27) - and we Reform Jews typically invoke this concept in the context of treating other human beings with justice and kindness. This axiomatic belief in being created in God's image also helps, though, when we consider the breadth and depth of human potential - specifically Jewish potential. When we consider what it truly means for human beings to be made in God's image, one option is to understand that it is the psyche - the human mind - that makes us godlike; it is our knowledge our ability to understand, discern, learn, and judge, that makes us resemblances of the Divine.²

If this is the case, if our psyche is what makes us resemble the Divine, then perhaps it is also where we find the essence of holiness. We can observe this innate humanness in one another, as the following Hassidic story shows:

A Jew once told his friend Rabbi Kaiman of Cracow that among his disciples there was one in whose face one could still see the full image of God. Kaiman took a candle and went to the House of Study where the disciples slept. He studied every face intently, but did not find what he was seeking. "I guess you didn't look behind the stove," said the Yehudi when his friend told him of his vain search; and he accompanied him back. Behind the stove they found young Shelomo Leib. Rabbi Kaiman looked at him for a very long time by the light of his candle. "It is true," he said then. "It is true."³

² Page 185 of *The Fragile Zionist*

³ <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/26367?lang=bi> ; <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/45030?lang=bi>

If we can remember that each one of us is blessed with a piece of the Divine, perhaps that will help lead us to embracing the holiness within us, and thus begin the work of freeing the holiness that exists inside each one of us.

Another potential answer for how we understand holiness comes from Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, better known as Rashi, who lived in France in the 11th century. A well respected scholar, his comments on holiness have shaped many Jews' understandings of what it means to be holy. Rashi explains that, in his view, holiness is a condition that arises from staying away from defilement. Arising from the understanding that holiness is about being separate from the ordinary. "His interpretation is based on the location of the discussion of holiness in the Torah, which immediately follows a discussion of illicit sexual relations."⁴

Neil Gilman, in his book *Sacred Fragments* further extrapolates upon Rashi,

"This "separated" quality is probably the basic meaning of the Hebrew word *kadosh*. Much like the English word "distinguished," which can mean both "separate" and "special," *kadosh* begins by meaning "separate" and ends by meaning "special" or "sacred," "holy," "elevated".⁵

The idea that humanity is inherently holy, that all we have to do is not defile ourselves, is quite powerful. It is radically different than the Christian view of humanity, through their belief in Original Sin. Judaism does not share this belief, but rather our tradition teaches that we choose our own path. That free will requires that we have the option of choosing the wrong path.

⁴ Alan Morinis Mussar Institute blog post

⁵ Page 229 of *Sacred Fragments*

But, as in all things, we have yet another interpretation about what holiness is. Nachmanides, also known as Ramban, a leading Sephardic rabbi who was born in Spain and died in the Holy Land, saw things differently. He argued that while some behaviors could not be seen as defiling, they were certainly not things we would view as holy.

For example, one could eat kosher food like a glutton. Or one could engage in completely permitted sexual relations but do so in an obsessed and preoccupied way. Or drink kosher wine to the point that you end up under the table. He further went on to say that it was possible to be “a scoundrel with the permission of the Torah” and is credited with introducing the notion of self-restraint even within the realm of acts which Torah views as permitted as a criterion for holiness.⁶

Self-restraint as a path to holiness. I believe many of us struggle with self-restraint, I know that I do. One personal example is my struggle to only eat some popcorn not all the popcorn. Another is to know when to read the comments on a news article or Twitter thread, and when I should know to turn off my phone. Yet another is knowing when to engage with someone and when it would be better to not engage with someone. All of these examples require applying the practice of self-restraint. Practicing self-restraint is one approach to bringing to the forefront the holiness within each one of us.

Another perspective on self-restraint arises out of the beauty of stopping, of slowing down, of waiting. We find the connection between stopping and holiness in Genesis chapter two.

⁶ https://mussarinstitute.org/Yashar/2018-07/mussar_lens.php

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that God had done, and God rested on the seventh day from all the work that God had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that God had done in creation.

Here holiness, *Kadosh*, is translated as “hallowed.” Rabbi Alan Ullman comments on these verses:

This is not just the first mention of Shabbat in the Torah, it is also the first occurrence of the word *קדש*, holiness. Holiness here—and throughout the Bible—is defined by the act of stopping. Before we can discover the holiness within our lives, we must first imitate God and stop.⁷

Stopping what we are actively involved in, whether it is working, eating, or speaking, requires self-restraint. Self-restraint requires us to listen to our inner voice, our conscience, or perhaps we could call it the Divine spark that is inside each one of us.

A third approach to understanding what we are to comprehend from the commandment “You shall be holy, for I Adonai your God am Holy.” - arises from Rabbi Hayyim ben Moshe ibn Attar’s Torah commentary, *Or HaChaim*, written in the 18th century. The following is from his commentary on Leviticus 19:2

...[O]ur verse may reflect something we have learned in *Kidushin* 39: "If a person sits quietly and refrains from committing a transgression he is given a reward as if he had performed a positive commandment. This is the meaning of our verse. If you are presented with an opportunity to commit a sin and you refrain from grasping that opportunity, you have fulfilled the commandment to be or to become holy. The reason

⁷ <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/24820?lang=bi>

God commanded Moses to tell this commandment directly to the whole congregation of Israel was to inform them directly of this and to show them how easy it is to be counted amongst the people described as "holy." Every single individual can achieve that spiritual level by merely fighting off the desire to violate a commandment when the opportunity presents itself. Every Israelite is on the same spiritual level concerning the acquisition of this merit.⁸

Separating. Self-restraint or stopping. Refraining from transgressing a commandment. Three ways our tradition teaches us that we can achieve God's desire that human beings be holy.

Three paths that we can walk today, on this holiest of days, as well as every day of our life. Too often we believe that the right thing, the thing we are supposed to do, is beyond our capability.

Be holy? Who has time for that? I have bills to pay, a boss who does not understand me, children who have more activities than I do, student loans, credit cards, my house needs work. Be holy?

Add one more thing to my list?

Yes. Be holy. Add one more thing to your list. And if these three paths:

Separating.

Self-restraint or stopping.

Refraining from transgressing a commandment.

seem beyond your reach, they are not. One way you can add "be holy" to your life right now, is to keep Shabbat - and Yom Kippur is considered the Sabbath of Sabbaths. How you choose to keep Shabbat, how you choose to keep or observe Yom Kippur is up to you. Some people fast.

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https://www.sefaria.org/Or_HaChaim_on_Leviticus.19.2?vhe=On_Your_Way&ven=Or_Hachayim_trans_Eliyahu_Munk&lang=bi

Some people attend services. Some people spend time communing with nature. Some people journal or meditate. Taking the time to observe, to practice self-restraint, to separate from our daily routine. These are all ways in which we can each become holy, if only for a moment, an hour, a day. Being holy is something that is within our grasp. It is something we are each capable of doing.

I will conclude with the words from a poem titled “Show Me,” written by Alden Solovy.

Show me the works of your hands

And the deeds of your heart

And I will cause holiness

To pass through you

Like the wind through the trees

Summoning your soul

To mingle with Mine.

Set your mind to all

That is kind and just,

Compassionate and good.

Set your hand to all

That is right and true,

Charitable and healing.

Incline your heart to all

That is righteous and holy,

Glorious and full of wonder.⁹

⁹ © 2019 Alden Solovy and tobendlight.com.