



WEEKLY PARASHA

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Being Holy or Becoming Holy

The Torah commands us not to be holy, but to become holy

Is *kedusha*, holiness, a good thing or a bad thing? Certainly, in its privileged and particularist expressions it can lead to conflict, discord, war and violence. Fights over who has rights to sacred ground, which religion is holy and whose scripture is sacred have plagued us for centuries and have been the cause of immeasurable loss of life.

But what about an egalitarian approach to holiness? Why not believe that we are all equally holy? The first person to express this notion was Korach. Challenging Moshe's leadership, he declared, "The entire community, they are all holy, and God is in their midst. So why do you lord it over the community of the Lord?" (Num. 16:3). Now, Korach was making cynical use of this universal concept of holiness. In order to promote himself as leader, he was saying that we are all equal, that no one had a right to be leader.

Putting aside Korach's obvious demagoguery, we can still ask if his approach to holiness was in fact correct. What could be wrong with seeing everyone as holy?

The problem with this sentiment is not its egalitarian nature, but its fundamental misunderstanding of what *kedusha* truly is. Korach saw *kedusha* just as he saw leadership - as a lofty status, a rank, a privilege. This is why he wanted to be leader, not to serve the people better, but to have all the honor that comes with being a leader.

A true leader, however, sees leadership as an obligation, a responsibility, and as a sacred duty. Moshe's only goal was to serve God and to serve the people. This humblest of all men, never wanted the honor: "God, send someone else. Anyone but me." Of course, too much humility is also a failing. A leader who does not recognize his role and his status will ultimately fall short of leading and serving the people properly. But one who leads for the sake of the honor serves no one but himself. If leadership comes with status it does so for a purpose: to serve and to lead others.

As it is with leadership, so it is with *kedusha*. For Korach, holiness was a status, a static state of *being*. It implied privilege and entitlement. True *kedusha*, however, does not reassure us that we are better. True *kedusha* calls upon us to *become* better. The Torah

commands us not to be holy, but to become holy. “*Kedoshim ti’hiyu*, Holy you shall become, for I the Lord your God am holy.” (Lev. 19:2). The command to become holy, to strive for holiness, points us upwards and outwards. Each day, we must strive to become more God-like, to transform ourselves and to transform the world. This *kedusha* is not about being, it is about becoming.

Shabbat exemplifies this. Shabbat is a *kedusha* that is ultimately focused outwards. It starts with our being distinct – the covenant between ourselves and God. But its end is to bring holiness into the larger world – the universal message of God as creator, of human dignity, of the right to rest and to be free. The holiness of Shabbat spreads into the week, making our work holy as well, pointing us towards a higher purpose, towards *tikkun olam*, and finally towards a world that is a more perfect world, a messianic world.

The *kedusha* of the Kohanim is similar. The priestly caste was given special honor. But this was to enable them to serve effectively as God’s representatives both within the Temple and outside it. To honor that *kedusha*, a Kohen would have to devote his life to spiritual growth and Godly acts. To make the *kedusha* an ends in itself would be to defile it.

The same is true in regards to us as a people. The concept of chosenness is perhaps one of the most challenging for a Jew to articulate and defend in today’s egalitarian society. A close look at the relevant verses, however, reveals that we are not told that we are chosen and that we are holy;

rather, we are commanded to become chosen, to become holy: “If you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you *shall become* a chosen treasure... And you *shall become* unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). It is a *kedusha* that does not tell us that we are better than the rest of the world, but asks us what it is that we can do to make the world a better place.

Kedusha as a state of becoming is an elusive destination always to be reached for, yet never to be grasped. It inspires us to grow, to become closer to God. As soon as believe we are holy and entitled we fall prey to the Korachs of the world. It is our task to reject Korach’s assertion that we are all holy. To embrace the Torah’s mandate we all must become holy.

Shabbat Shalom!

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