

Parashat Kedoshim

The Holiness of Humanity

Concerning the opening verse of *Parashat Kedoshim*, Hermann Cohen, one of the most important Jewish philosophers of the nineteenth century, drew a distinction between its two clauses: “You shall be holy; for I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). The first is formulated as an imperative, because the attainment of *kedushah* (holiness) requires active striving; the second is a nominative equation, because God’s holiness is inherent.¹

Cohen’s views profoundly influenced Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who wrote his doctoral thesis on Cohen’s philosophy at the University of Berlin. Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, that time and time again the Rav demonstrated that *kedushah* is pursued and actualized by man. Holiness can be created by flesh and blood.² Man’s greatness is his unique ability among all creations to invest an object, place, or even time with sanctity. Let us take an example from each category: the Torah scroll (object), the Temple Mount (place), and Shabbat (time).

The Embodied Torah

At first glance, the Torah scroll seems to be inherently holy. After all, the names of God, including the Tetragrammaton, grace its columns. Still, the Rav pointed out, there is a necessary human element that grants the parchment sanctity. The person preparing the parchment and the scribe writing Scripture must both be observant Jews. The scroll would not be sacred if either act was performed by a non-Jew or non-observant Jew.³

Not only does the Jew imbue the parchment and ink with holiness, but in a way the Jew can become an embodiment of the Torah itself. For example, the Rav observed this with respect to how Yaakov was carried directly by his children, the same way the Ark was borne by the Levites. “God’s word was part of Yaakov’s personality, engraved not on dead matter but living tissue. If the stone tablets were not to be carried by oxen, then living tablets certainly must not be carried this way.”⁴

A Tale of Two Mounts

The Roman governor Tineius (Turnus) Rufus once had a dispute with Rabbi Akiva over the beauty of nature. He asked him why, if God prefers the circumcised, He does not create us in that state. Rabbi Akiva responded with a question: Since they’re superior to plain old wheat kernels, why doesn’t the earth produce bread and pastries?⁵

¹ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 96.

² Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 47.

³ Rabbi Benjamin Yudin, “Kiddush—Positive Testimony,” *Jewish Action*, Spring 1998 (5758), <https://jewishaction.com/religion/kiddush-positive-testimony/> (accessed June 8, 2021).

⁴ *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 4:29. See also Soloveitchik, “A Yid Is Geglicach.”

⁵ *Midrash Tanchuma, Tazria*, §5.

The Rav explained that what Rabbi Akiva is getting at is the need to expend effort. Sanctity in this world can be created only through initiative, self-sacrifice, toil, and even pain. To sacrifice is to create holiness. Without struggle, *kedushah* cannot come into being.

This principle also underlies the difference in halachic status between Mount Sinai and the Temple Mount. Nothing prohibits us today from ascending Mount Sinai, where the holy Torah was revealed and given to the Jewish people. Despite being the site of the greatest revelation in human history, none of Mount Sinai's holiness has endured. When heaven receded from earth, the holiness lifted with it.

At the very same time, Halachah forbids us from treading on those areas of the Temple Mount on which the Temple stood eons ago. No earthly power can eliminate its vestiges of holiness. The reason is because hundreds of years before the first Temple stood Avraham prepared Yitzchak as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah. When holiness is born of sacrifice, it has staying power. It is the human element, absent from Sinai and present at the *Akedah*, Binding of Yitzchak, that made all the difference.⁶

Sanctifying the Sanctified

On the face of it, Shabbat is a perfect example of inherent holiness. Unlike the festivals, we do not determine when Shabbat falls; its sanctity is independent of human calculations and declarations. The seven-day cycle that began with the first week of creation has never stopped.⁷ Nevertheless, the Rav showed how Shabbat has significant human input.

First, consider the following description of Shabbat: "...these are My appointed festivals. For six days may you perform labor, but the seventh day is a day of complete rest..." (Leviticus 23:2-3). Although Shabbat's sanctity was ordained at the end of creation, Shabbat is listed here as first among the festivals that the Jewish people sanctify.⁸

In addition, the Rav posited that Friday night Kiddush contributes something to the inherent sanctity of Shabbat. One of his main proofs is a Talmudic passage which discusses why Kiddush should be recited as early as possible on Friday night and why there is no similar law regarding Havdalah. By ushering in Shabbat as early as possible, we demonstrate how much we cherish it; by delaying the departure of Shabbat, we show that it is not a burden.⁹ Why, the Rav asked, does the recitation of Kiddush matter? What effect can human speech have on the divine order of things? Apparently, Kiddush does bestow some level of holiness on the day, without which it would be incomplete. Kiddush does not merely mark Shabbat's sanctity, it helps constitute it together with God.¹⁰

If something is already sacred, however, by what mechanism does man add holiness? Perhaps the holiness of Shabbat has two aspects: a prohibition against profane work, and a sanctity akin to that of the festivals. God instituted the first at the beginning of

⁶ Lustiger, *Derashot ha-Rav*, 171.

⁷ *Pesachim* 117b.

⁸ Yudin, "Kiddush—Positive Testimony."

⁹ *Pesachim* 105b.

¹⁰ Rabbi Chaim Navon, "Holiness," <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/halakha/studies-halakha/philosophy-halakha/holiness> (accessed August 5, 2021).

time; man actively realizes the second every single week. Shabbat is, indeed, the first of the festivals, and in this regard depends utterly on the Jewish people's sanctification.

The Rav's third proof for man's role in sanctifying Shabbat is the notion of *tosefet Shabbat*, adding time from Friday onto Shabbat.¹¹ One wonders, are the twenty-five hours of Shabbat not already set by the Torah? Again, on some level we are responsible for some of Shabbat's *kedushah*. Through our intent and active engagement, the day becomes sanctified.

Exploring the Rav's Insight

From the Rav's sweeping account of holiness as emerging from man's intention and action we can distill three lessons.

First, we have the power within us to attain *kedushah*. It is in, rather than out of, our hands.

Second, since it depends on human effort, it is within every single person's reach. It is not the exclusive province of the elite.

Third, holiness cannot only be some kind of transcendental state of being. It can and should be pursued in the realm we inhabit, in all aspects of our daily lives. The Rav put it beautifully:

The Halakhah reversed the spiritual direction of *homo religiosus*. Instead of yearning to rise from below to above, from earth to heaven, from the images and shadows of reality to the plenitude of a lofty existence..., the Halakhah occupies itself with the lower realms. When halakhic man pines for God, he does not venture to rise up to Him but rather strives to bring down His divine presence into the midst of our concrete world.¹²

¹¹ See *Rosh ha-Shanah* 9a.

¹² Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 44–45.