

Holiness

If I were to walk down Railroad Avenue right now and ask a complete stranger what the holiest day of the Jewish year is, odds are, they would think I was nuts. But if they had any knowledge of Judaism, I bet they would say Yom Kippur and they would be correct. Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year in the Jewish calendar. We all know this. While shabbat is the holiest day of the week, Yom Kippur, known as *shabbat shabbaton* or the “sabbaths of sabbaths” is the most sacred day of the year. Similar to shabbat, there is a complete cessation of work and many more prohibitions and rules to follow. We aren’t supposed to eat, wear leather, bathe, and the list goes on. But what does “holy” even mean in the Jewish context?

The idea of this sermon came to me back in 2018 after our community came together to discuss an important issue. Nearly 75 congregants sat in a large circle in the social hall and listened to fellow members share personal stories and opinions about interfaith marriage and specifically how they felt about them taking place in our synagogue. It was a moving event and I was delighted, not only with the turnout, but also with the decorum and respect everyone exhibited. You never know how discussions and forums will go when the topic elicits such knee-jerk reactions. The vast majority of those present made it clear that our new policy at the time had tremendous support in allowing such marriages to take place under a *huppah* right here on this *bima*. It was an historic moment for Beth Israel.

As you can imagine, I felt great relief at the conclusion of this town-hall meeting since this topic had been on my mind for over a year and there was finally closure. In the following days, however, I continued to think about what our community had just experienced and I specifically thought about some of the comments that our friends made. Many comments have stayed with me from that forum, but one, in particular, served as the germ for this talk today. To be fair, it was shared by several participants and it had to do with the concept of holiness. It went something like this:

We are a Jewish community and what sets us apart from a secular organization is that Jews occupy a special place in this spiritual home. This is the one place where we can designate an area as holy and reserved only for Jews. The *bima* in the sanctuary is that sacred spot.

I wondered at the time if there was any truth to this—that the *bima* was holier than other areas of the synagogue and thus not a place for a non-Jew to stand either during a Jewish wedding or just in general. What are we saying when we refer to anything as holy, from shabbat to a Torah scroll to this very day?

For five years I've thought about this conversation and it seems only appropriate at this time to talk about holiness.

The Hebrew word for holy is *kodesh*. We say a derivative of this word all the time, especially when we recite blessings. *Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, vitzivanu*, etc. We bless you Adonai our God, Creator of the Cosmos, who makes us holy with God's commandments, and commands us to light the shabbat candles, pursue justice, engage in words of Torah and so on.

We sanctify many events by singing the *kiddush* over the wine.

We recite the *kaddish* over our loved ones.

The Hebrew name for marriage is *kiddushin*.

Couples will say to each other under the *chuppah*, *harei aht mekudeshet li*, "behold you are sanctified to me with this ring."

The home that a couple builds together is called a *mikdash me'at*, a small place of holiness.

We hear the word *kadesh* at the Passover seder.

And we chant the *kedusha* as part of the Amidah.

All of these words share the same root, *kadash*, which means holy, separate, sacred, and hallowed. We see this word throughout the Torah, too. When Moses meets God at the burning bush and says, *Hineni*, "Here I am," God replies, "Do not draw near, take off the shoes from your feet for the place where you stand (*admat kodesh hu*) is holy ground."¹

¹ Exodus 3:4-5

This word is written almost 10,000 times in the Talmud and in most cases it is used to refer to God and the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. It is also used in reference to the Hebrew language, known as *lashon hakodesh*.

Holiness for the rabbis of the Talmud came in two major categories, hierarchical and non-hierarchical. Hierarchical holiness was the holiness associated with places and objects, or space. For example, a text I remember studying in Rabbinical school from Tractate Megillah teaches:

Residents of a city who sold the city square may buy with its money (i.e. the profit from the sale of the square) a synagogue; [if they sold] a synagogue, [they may buy] an ark ... [if they sold] scrolls [of the prophets], [they may buy] a Torah scroll. But if they sold a Torah scroll, they may not buy scrolls [of the prophets]... [if they sold] an ark, [they may not buy] a synagogue, [if they sold] a synagogue, [they may not buy] a city square...²

Since the Torah was presumably given directly to us from God, it has the most holiness, followed by the other books of the Tanakh. And then an ark is considered more holy than a synagogue as a whole because it is deemed as being closer to God and the Torah. There is a ranking or hierarchy of holiness when it comes to certain ritual objects.

Spaces themselves can also be holy, such as Israel, also known as “The Holy Land.” The inner sanctum of the Temple in Jerusalem, where the tablets of the covenant were kept, was called *kodesh kodeshim*, the “Holy of Holies.” Even today, the ark behind me is called the *aron ha’kodesh*, the holy Ark, and it houses the Torah scrolls, which are called, *sifrei kodesh*, the holy books.

The big take-away with hierarchal holiness is that holiness has to do with proximity to that which we consider most holy, God.

Non-hierarchical holiness, on the other hand, is very different. The Jewish people fit into this category as we are commanded to be holy, *kedoshin*

² BT Megillah 25b-26a

t'hiyu, “You shall be holy for I, your God am holy.” We will hear these words this afternoon when we read from the “Holiness Code” in Leviticus.

One of my favorite teachings of this text is that no one actually ever achieves holiness. No Jew can ever stand up and pronounce to the world, “I am now holy.” But we strive to become holy in order to get closer to God. We do this by following the mitzvot, performing deeds that are deemed ethical, eating what we’re commanded to eat and being a mensch. When *kohanim*, or priests existed, they were considered more holy than the average Israelite, but since they aren’t around any more, we’re all the same.

Another way that holiness manifests is through time. Yom Kippur is holy time. Passover is holy time. Shabbat is holy time. In the second creation story we read: *God blessed the seventh day, and made it holy; because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that God had made.*³

This is not just the first mention of Shabbat in the Torah, it is also the first occurrence of the word *kodesh*. Holiness in this instance and in many others throughout the Bible, is defined by the act of stopping and recognizing something special.

We mark time as holy with blessings, both at the beginning (ie. candle lighting), and sometimes at the end (ie. *havdallah*), so that we know when we can get back to our normal activities. One of my Rabbinical school professors, Dr. Stephen M. Passamaneck z”l, said one thing in class that I will never forget: “I love Lobster Thermidor, but you won’t ever catch me eating it on shabbat out of respect for the sanctity of the day.” Fair enough.

We also have Jewish lifecycle rituals that mark our own time in this world as holy such as baby namings, *b’nei mitzvah* services, weddings, and funerals. All of these events that happen at specific times give us space to recognize holiness, or sacred, set-apart time. I appreciate how Judaism separates our time which allows us to distinguish between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between the holy and the mundane.

³ Genesis 2:3

There are two categories of holiness that I want to explore for the rest of our discussion this morning.

The rabbis teach that some things, such as a Torah scroll, have intrinsic holiness. What this means is that they can only be used for their intended purpose and if damaged beyond repair, must be respectfully buried or stored. This goes back to that text about not being able to use the funds from a sold Torah to buy something of lesser holiness. The Torah's holiness will not transfer to the money exchanged. However, one can intentionally "remove" the holiness of a synagogue so that a community can sell it and purchase a new space or something of higher level holiness. In this case, the sanctity is "transferred" to the funds from the sale, which should in turn be used to purchase or enable holiness. So in this sense, holiness is portable.

The question of a Torah potentially losing its holiness interested Maimonides who writes, "Even a menstruating woman or a non-Jew, may hold a Torah scroll and read it. The words of Torah do not contract ritual impurity."⁴ They may actually take hold of a Torah and read from it for a Torah cannot become impure. If this is the case with respect to the Torah, then in typical Talmudic fashion, it must be so with the *bima* and any other place deemed holy. This *halakhic* teaching makes me wonder if another of our customs at Beth Israel should be reviewed. Interestingly, the rabbis had a much bigger issue with an uncircumcised Jewish man handling the Torah than someone who is not Jewish.

Moving along, we also learn that holy objects, used for a purpose other than that for which they were intended, can lower their sanctity for a specific time. If we were to rent out the synagogue as a dance hall, it would insult its holiness, but it isn't clear that it would remove it entirely. This is similar to a prayer book. It should only be used as a prayer book but if you use it as a doorstop, you lessen its holiness until it's used properly once again. Holiness is not impacted if either are used by someone who isn't Jewish.

⁴ Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ahava: Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah 9:8

As for a synagogue *bima* and ark, *halakhic* literature is largely silent on the question of opening the ark and entirely silent on whether non-Jews may do this or stand on a *bima*. I think it is safe to assume that *halakha* would allow it as non-Jews are allowed to handle a Torah.

The synagogue ark, like the one behind me, symbolizes something of great holiness (the first ark) but is not itself that thing and actually functions on a third level of holiness. A Torah is considered first level holiness that must always be treated as a sacred object, though it can't lose its holiness by contact from any person. The Torah's garments and dressings are second level. The ark is third level holiness and the *bima*, which is part of the building would be fourth level holiness. An interfaith wedding does not take away holiness from the synagogue. Indeed, it adds to it since a Jewish wedding, by nature, is holy time.

Finally, let's talk about a *kehillah kedosha*, a holy community. What does it mean for us to be called holy? We know we can't achieve holiness individually, even though we should still try. One of my favorite Jewish philosophers is Martin Buber. If you haven't read *I and Thou*, make sure you add it to your Jewish library because it is a classic and accessible. Buber teaches that holiness is not found *in* specific people but in relationships *with* other people. When we recognize the hidden divinity in someone else and when we connect with another person, those are holy moments. A holy community is one in which everyone strives to do just this. While we might never attain the label of holy, we can experience moments of holiness.

Going back to that famous verse from Leviticus which you will hear this afternoon, "You shall be holy," it is important to know that the Hebrew is phrased in the plural. The Etz Hayim Torah Commentary teaches that "the plural phrasing suggests...that holiness is most easily achieved in the context of community. It is difficult to live a life of holiness without others."⁵ This command is given to the whole Israelite community. Being on the path towards holiness is not something done by one person or even

⁵ Lieber, David L., editor. *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*. The Rabbinical Assembly, 2001. p. 693

a small group, but rather by a whole community of people, together. The Torah does not seek a holiness of solitude.

But of course, being in sync with a whole community is a challenge, let alone trying to attain holiness. My rabbinic school professor and dean, Rabbi Dvora Weisberg, shares what I think is the most important lesson about a community achieving holiness, writing, “When we see ourselves as members of the people Israel, of a people called to be holy, we let go of the unbearable burden of attaining perfection as individuals. Each of us can choose the mitzvot that allow us to express our unique Jewish self, knowing that through our individual Jewish lives, we are contributing to the Jewish whole. *Am Yisrael* is holy not because each of us upholds at all times the highest expression of Judaism, but because each of us brings to the community a spark of holiness.”⁶

Each one of us here is a spark of *kedusha*. I love this image and I hope it reminds us to always treat one another with love and respect. May this New Year bring us closer to each other and to our sacred heritage, and may all of these sparks form a beautiful flame and thus be a light unto all who see us.

⁶ <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/what-makes-us-holy>