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Kedoshim Tihyu: Embracing Holiness

How many of you are feeling holy now? Powerful music, ancient words, the pageantry of the Torah scrolls donned in white covers arrayed before the congregation. Could almost make the atheists among us feel God's presence! These are the trappings of religious life, but is this holiness?

Isaiah prayed: *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh Adonai Tzvaot, M'lo khol ha'aretz kvodo*¹—a sentiment we echo in the Kedusha prayer—Holy, holy, holy is the God of hosts, the whole world is filled with God's glory. All space and all time are holy, but in our daily lives, how often do we sense it?

According to Jewish tradition because holiness is often concealed, we need specific times, places, and rituals designated as holy to make manifest this inherent holiness. The Holy of Holies in the Temple was the holiest place on earth, the High Priest was the holiest person, and the holiest time is Yom Kippur. Once a year, the holiness of person, place and time converged to give expression to the holiness of the entire world, and, in turn, infuse that holiness into the surrounding world. They came together when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the Temple, on Yom Kippur and pronounced God's name. This moment was so concentrated with spiritual energy, that a rope would be tied around the High Priest's ankle so that he could be dragged out of the Holy of Holies in case he collapsed there. No one else was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies so this was the only way to rescue him in case he fainted there. Now that's some holy moment!

We don't have a High Priest or a Temple today, but we have this day, Yom Kippur; a day that continues to capture the attention and focus of so many of us. There's a palpable spiritual energy on Kol Nidre, perhaps from the music and the pageantry, perhaps from our yearning for connection to God, perhaps it comes from our longing to learn something about ourselves and our world that will inspire us in the coming year. For many of us, we want this day to move us, enhance our insight, and perhaps even transform us. Then the day ends and we head off to our kugels and cold cuts, and we ponder, how was my experience today? The rituals and traditions of this day are designed to move us. Sometimes they work. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes we experience moments of transcendence, and sometimes Yom Kippur feels like an ordinary day with a grumbling stomach. In fact, we are hungry. We arrived here hungry. But is it hunger for physical nutrition (of which, lets face it, we are all amply blessed) or is it a hunger for spiritual sustenance...for a sense of holiness? And even if we have a gratifying experience, is there not more to holiness than a moment, even a day of spiritual uplift?

¹ Isaiah 6:3.

On Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of humankind, I talked about the sanctity of each human being and the importance of our understanding what it's like to walk in the shoes of someone of a different race in order to create a more just and compassionate society. Through the dramatic reading of the Akeidah on Rosh Hashanah morning, I wanted you to glimpse the humanity of Abraham who was a great public figure, but who, I imagined, struggled with his private persona and his intimate relationships because of his fear of appearing weak and indecisive when God called him to sacrifice Isaac. I speculated how his inability to confront his shame and vulnerability, cut him off from living a deep and wholehearted life, and asked us to look at how we might be limiting ourselves in our own lives because of our fear of being vulnerable. At the Chavurah service, through a skit about a group on a fishing expedition, the Klei Kodesh explored how holiness is expressed in our interactions with each other—how well we are living the dictum found in the Holiness Code of loving our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. We were all in the same boat together embellishing a classic midrash² that teaches that if a person drills a hole where they are seated, it doesn't just affect that person, but the seaworthiness of the entire vessel. The health and well-being of our world relies on understanding how our actions impact others and the world around us.

Tonight and in the coming year, I would like to expand on the notion of holiness found in this story and explore how we might embrace holiness in our lives. Admittedly, in a non-Orthodox community such as ours, some may find the subject of holiness off-putting. Others will be cynical because they have seen immoral or unethical behavior on the part of those who claim to be religious. Yet as Jews, Reform, Orthodox, or otherwise, holiness is a concept I believe we must grapple with and reclaim for ourselves.

There's a popular misconception that holiness is reserved for saintly individuals who can dedicate their time and attention to being highly developed spiritual beings. Think the Dalai Lama, Mother Theresa, Ghandi... For the rest of us, well... maybe there's Yom Kippur and a few scattered times inbetween. But Leviticus 19, called the Holiness Code, which we will read tomorrow afternoon, challenges the notion that holiness is reserved for a few or is limited to transcendent moments. In fact, the Holiness Code doesn't discuss holiness as a feeling, but as a way for all of us to lead our lives.

The Holiness Code begins with God telling Moses: "Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them, "You shall be holy for I, the Eternal your God, am holy."³ God tells Moses that the obligation of holiness falls on everyone—*kol edat bnai Yisrael*—the whole Israelite community, not just the leaders or the wealthy or the learned ones, but on everyone. Then the chapter continues with a whole list of concrete things that each of us can do to be holy—from revering our parents to observing Shabbat, from leaving the corners of our fields to the poor to promptly paying the wages of those whose services we use. We are told that holiness entails judging someone fairly in a court of law regardless of their wealth or stature, not stealing, not being deceitful, not putting a stumbling block before the blind or cursing the deaf. The list is summed up with the

² Vayikra Rabba 4:6.

³ Leviticus 19:1-2.

overarching principle that you should love your neighbor as yourself—the golden rule. So holiness is not some lofty goal, but one that we can achieve depending on how we treat others and ourselves.

Last year at Beth Emet we explored the theme of Building Bridges of Understanding. As part of that theme, I spoke on Rosh Hashanah about how we have been deepening our relationship with the Second Baptist Church. This past year we also hosted a highly successful interfaith weekend of community service—Unity Weekend. We participated in a Muslim-Jewish bike ride over the summer, and we hosted Israeli scholars Gershom Gorenberg and Aviva Zornberg. These events were rich and important in terms of bridge-building, and, in the coming year, we will continue to strengthen the bridges we have built. Embracing holiness deepens and expands the work we did last year by reminding us of our responsibilities to ourselves and to those in our own community in addition to the larger world.

Holiness applies to our inner and our outer lives, how we treat ourselves and others. The first time the word holy—*kadosh*—is used in Torah is in reference to Shabbat. *Vayivarech elohim et yom hashvi'i, vayikadaish oto*—God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.⁴ And we are reminded towards the beginning of the Holiness Code that observing the Shabbat is part of holy living. Shabbat is a day for ourselves, our community, and God. It's a time to rest and recharge ourselves and a time for reflection. It's also an opportunity to spend leisurely time with those we love. In our 24/7 world, the concept of a day dedicated to refraining from engaging in our day to day tasks is at once refreshing and daunting. Shabbat is a day for rest, a time to read, study holy texts, socialize, and engage in rituals that refresh our souls. In our narcissistic society, where we can be seduced into overly focusing on ourselves and our needs, it might be hard to see how caring for ourselves is holy. But I'm not talking about the obsessive self-centeredness we see displayed in the media. I'm talking about nurturing an inner life that can sustain us and guide us to live with greater wisdom.

Then the Holiness Code teaches us of our obligations to others. The climax of this chapter is: love your neighbor as yourself.⁵ There are two challenges that this dictum raises. One is: How can we overcome the temptation to objectify another when our natural tendency is to focus on our own needs? And the second is: What if we don't love ourselves? How can we love others? Both these issues return me to my first point that holy living requires us to develop a spiritual life. Nurturing ourselves through cultivating a spiritual life, enables us to see the holiness in ourselves and others and to reach out to others lovingly.

Let me give you an example of this idea in action. A few weeks ago a school bookkeeper in Decatur, Georgia, applied this principle deftly when she averted a school shooting by showing love to the gunman. On August 20, Michael Hill entered Ronald E. McNair Discovery Learning Academy with an AK-47 type weapon where he encountered Antoinette Tuff. For 25 minutes she talked with him until he put down his gun and 500

⁴ Genesis 2:3.

⁵ Leviticus 19:18

rounds of ammunition and let the police take him away. A few shots were fired but no one was hurt. Since no one was harmed, this story didn't get a lot of press. In fact, I didn't know anything about it until a friend of mine told me about it. In a 911 tape that's gripping and moving, Tuff showed compassion to the gunman by sharing her own troubles. She told him about her recent divorce after 33 years of marriage and about her disabled child. When he told her that he didn't care about his life, she shared that she had considered suicide. She told Hill that she was proud of him for not hurting anyone. She told police that the young man needed to be taken to a mental hospital. Towards the end of her encounter with him she said: "It's going to be all right, sweetie. I just want you to know I love you, though, OK?... We all go through something in life... You're going to be OK." Despite how terrified she was, Antoinette Tuff saw him as a human being, not a monster, and she tried to help him. She could relate to him because of her own pain and how she was struggling to manage the difficulties in her life. When asked how she was able to act this way in such a scary and tense situation, she mentioned her faith. She had cultivated the inner resources necessary to be able to effectively show love and compassion for this troubled and potentially dangerous man. In an interview with Anderson Cooper on CNN she said, "I was just praying. . . . in the inside of myself and saying 'God, what do I say now? What do I do now?' I just kept saying that on the inside because I knew that I had no words to say." Through her prayers she found the words to say, calling Hill, "sweetie" and "baby" and telling him that "we're not going to hate you." She said that part of what helped her was a sermon she had heard the previous Sunday, entitled, "Anchored in the Lord."

This is holiness worthy of its name.

Most of us will never be called upon to love our neighbors as ourselves in such extreme conditions. But if Antoinette Tuff could rise to such a level of spiritual awareness, of sacred purpose, to show love at such a terrifying and tense time, is it not incumbent upon each of us to strive to respond to the more mundane situations in our lives that try our patience, with greater wisdom, equanimity, and love?

You know how short we can be with our children, our partners, our parents, our siblings; how often we respond to our colleagues and our friends, to say nothing of those we don't like, based on our own needs and emotions. *You know* how we talk about each other instead of to each other. Instead of recognizing and acknowledging the source of our own stress or pain or anxiety, *you know* how we take out that hurt on others.

In addition to cultivating an inner spiritual life, what else can we do to bring holiness to our interpersonal relationships? The Holiness Code teaches us not to gossip or curse the deaf. These injunctions teach us that we shouldn't talk about someone else to others if it could be damaging to them, even if it's true, and we shouldn't take advantage of someone else or treat anyone with contempt. These commandments remind us to behave considerately and openly with each other. They remind us to refrain from posting something nasty online and to consider how our actions might hurt or embarrass someone. And right before we are taught the golden rule, the Holiness Code teaches us to reprove someone if they've done something wrong, not to incur guilt because of them,

but also not to bear a grudge against them. If someone is doing something wrong, we have an obligation to call them on it, but not to embarrass or shame them. The purpose of our bringing a negative behavior to someone's attention is to help them correct it. This means it needs to be done with care and concern for the person, not out of spite or malice. I can hear Antoinette Tuff behave in this way on the 911 tape when she convinced Michael Hill to put down his gun and ammunition and turn himself in. She was not judgmental or angry, but compassionate and caring. Some will say we need armed guards at schools to make them safer. I say we need more Antoinette Tuffs!

I mention these particular commandments this evening because they are critical to our daily lives and to building a holy community. Sometimes people I meet ask me: Why should I be involved in a religious community? There's so much hypocrisy there. People talk about how they should behave, but they don't live up to the rhetoric. To which I usually respond, it's true that the same imperfect people you encounter at work, in school, on the train, in traffic, and in the grocery store, can also be found in synagogues and churches and mosques; we are not magically transformed by walking through the doors of our houses of worship. My hope is that we come here looking to improve ourselves, that each of us feels responsible for our own growth and for the quality of our community. It's not enough for the clergy, staff, or lay leadership to treat others with dignity and respect and to reproach those who act poorly in our midst. We are mutually responsible for each other. If we are angry or frustrated or disappointed in someone, each of us has the responsibility to discuss it with that person directly. If we see someone in need, each of us has the obligation to offer a helping hand. There are lots of kind and well-meaning people in our community, but we have a long way to go to create the holy community that the Torah envisions for us. "The Torah essentially says, one must endeavor to transcend one's narrow interests and refrain from seeing other people as a means to an end; to acknowledge that my needs don't take precedence over anyone else's; to see people as subjects rather than objects."⁶ This doesn't mean we should paper over conflict with feigned kindness, but that we need to consider how our words and actions have the power to harm or heal ourselves and others. It means that we should be a place where we hold each other to a higher standard that might not be demanded from us elsewhere, and that with considerate honesty, compassion and love, we support each other's growth.

As we explore how we can bring greater holiness into our lives, there's one final commandment that I would like to bring to your attention tonight. The Holiness Code demands: Don't stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.⁷ We are all aware of the situation in Syria, if only from afar; the use of chemical weapons on civilians and the deteriorating humanitarian conditions there. 1.6 million Syrians have streamed into Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and millions more are suffering in their own homes. I don't pretend to have great insight into, or knowledge of, the geopolitics of the situation, but I do believe we can make the world a better place by caring for those who have been harmed by this war. I also know that our tradition teaches that all peaceful options must

⁶ Elie Leshem, "Why I'm not apologizing to everyone this year." *The Times of Israel*, September 13, 2013

⁷ Leviticus 19:16

be pursued before force is used, but that force is sometimes necessary.⁸ “We cannot stand idly,” the Holiness Codes says, while millions suffer. In this week’s emetmail, I included a link to the Jewish Coalition for Disaster Relief, which is collecting humanitarian aid for Syrians living in refugee camps in Jordan. I urge you tomorrow night to go online, perhaps even before your first bite of food, to make a donation. If you are hosting others at your home, perhaps have a laptop or iPad browser open to the Coalition’s website so that others can do so as well. The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer that we recite on these holy days, reminds us of the precariousness of life and the efficacy of prayer, turning in repentance, and Tzedakah. Today we pray for peace and for our world leaders to act with wisdom and compassion. If you haven’t done so already, designate some of your tzedakah dollars this season for Syrian relief.

In the Book of Exodus, God tells the Israelites to build the Tabernacle, a holy dwelling place for God. Yet when the directive to build the Tabernacle is given, it ends with a grammatical anomaly. *V’asu li mikdash, v’shachanti b’tocham*. Create for me a sanctuary that I might dwell among them.⁹ Among them, not in it, to which Rashi teaches, in each of their hearts. The purpose of a holy place is not to confine holiness to one place but rather to instill it in each of us so that holiness permeates every place, all times, and each person. As Isaiah taught: *M’lo khol ha’aretz kvodo*—the whole earth is filled with God’s glory. Nurturing our spiritual lives, working on our interpersonal behaviors, and standing up for justice and compassion reveal the holiness inherent in our world. Where it is hidden, let us, like Antoinette Tuff, do our part to reveal it in all its glory.

May our exploration of holiness together in a community that’s supportive and nurturing remind us of our obligations to ourselves, each other, and the world around us. And may the spiritual energy generated from this holiest of days, invigorate us in the coming year to look inward, reach outward, and grow together as a holy community.

⁸ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Melachim 6:1.

⁹ Exodus 25:8.