

Rabbi Noa Kushner
Parashat Kedoshim
Take Care Of My Garden
April 29, 2023

1.

This week we have one of the most mysterious commands in all of torah

And your teaching, Mona, helped me to finally begin to understand it

We have a mysterious command
Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh Adonai
Be holy because I am holy

Which is great if we know what it means, irrefutably, to be holy
I mean if you are sure what it means to be holy
Maybe you can get a pass at the last part of services today
If you know what it means to be holy, without a doubt, you might give yourself a pass on a lot of things

In fact, and this might surprise you,
Personally, as a person who seeks holiness
When people indicate they know, without a doubt, how to be holy, I get nervous

Which is why I am comforted that after spending a few days with the rabbis on this verse
Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh Adonai
I can tell you there is not a consensus on what it means to be holy because God is holy

Rambam: Maybe it is a general idea, a headline for the laws that follow

Rashi: Maybe it is about separating ourselves in ways, boundaries that offer the possibilities of decency and dignity

Mei Hashiloah: Preparedness, intentionality

What I am saying is that the answers are all over the map
And I realize the rabbis don't know what it means either to be holy in general

They have ideas but they are not sure

And that gives me comfort

Not only because the people who are so sure about holiness make me nervous

But because I realized, after reading this verse many times Mona
That while we can and we are supposed to know why we do things that are "good" "ethical" "moral"

We're not always supposed to know exactly why the things that make us holy make us holy, there is a mystery there

And that unknowing, that mystery is precisely the point

Let me make it a little bit sharper

And I realized this after thinking about your teaching and your great question, Mona

Maybe the prohibition of not putting a stumbling block before a blind person

God forbid!

If we are thinking from an ethical, "being good" point of view this is the most obvious, unnecessary law in the world

Maybe the prohibition of not cursing a deaf person

God forbid!

If we thinking from an ethical, "being good" point of view is,
again, is equally the most obvious, unnecessary law in the world
Almost an insulting law

What kind of people does God think we are?!

But maybe these commands are actually there to teach us,
precisely, that there are some things we don't know
That is: why have a command for something so painfully, really
embarrassingly obvious?

To teach us that being holy doesn't always make sense

We may start to understand that while we can often know what
to do to be good

Even if doing it is hard, we can know

We may start to understand that being holy requires more than
being good, it requires something else, it is not just our own
knowledge,

It is not *just* our own assessment

Sometimes it requires *emunah* / faith

But this mysterious verse

Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh Adonai

Be holy because I am holy

Which to me is kind of reads like God saying, "Because I said so"

Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh Adonai

Be holy because I am holy

Do the right thing even when you cannot make a case for the
outcome

The opposite of effective altruism

In fact, holiness is perhaps what I like to call, "Ineffective
altruism" —

This mysterious command
Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh Adonai
Be holy because I am holy
Is teaching us a new mode of decision making, one where our
perspective is not the beginning, middle and end

So even if it seems like the law seems like most obvious,
extraneous thing in the world to me
Something as obvious or useless as a law for not cursing
someone who will never, ever hear.
Or, even though I am not sure what will come of doing this
I will

2.

I heard a story last night
There was a man who was a Hazzan his whole life in the same
community
He was beloved by his people, he led them
And he sat in the same chair every shabbat
And at the end of his long life he died
And sadly he died, he died before his grandson's bar mitzvah
He died but he was able to teach his grandson many of his
melodies
When his grandson sang these melodies, the congregation
would cry
So beloved was this grandfather Hazzan

Then, on the shabbat morning of the grandson's bar mitzvah
The grandfather had died, he was no longer there
But the little sister of the bar mitzvah boy
She was about three

She came into the synagogue, not really having been there on her own before — she had been a baby, carried
But on this shabbat she came in and out of hundreds of chairs
She went and sat in her grandfather's chair —
She did not know it was her grandfather's chair
She just sat there and proclaimed, in the way very little children do, "This is my chair" and she refused to move

Maybe holiness is being a part of something larger we don't understand
Something that only makes sense if we consider that it spans generations

Maybe holiness is something that holds parts of the world we will never see because we are too young or too old

Maybe holiness is occupying a chair, even if we don't know why, even if it looks like every other chair in the room.

3.

You probably remember what happened at the burning bush
God calls to Moses from a bush that was on fire but not destroyed saying,

"Moses, I have heard the cries of Israel, and you will help me free Israel from slavery." It is a big speech and I imagine God practicing it many times in front of the mirror.

Moses, as you might remember, is not at all interested
He does not trust himself, he turns god down several times
You could say he doesn't think he is good enough, and he can't see the point of trying

Now in this moment God has a difficult challenge.
See God cannot free Israel without Moses --
God needs to teach Moses that who Moses *is enough right now*
to be a key part of making what needs to happen, happen, *and*
God must show Moses the promise of who he might eventually
grow to be.
Both.

How does God do it? Well, when Moses asks God for some kind
of proof,
Asks God for God to give God's name,
You know, so that Moses has something to show Israel
The equivalent of a divine calling card,
in response,
God gives Moses the best name ever:

Ehyeh asher ehyeh.
Ehyeh asher ehyeh can be understood as, "I am what I am" —
but equally can mean, "I will be what I will be."
Both.

What a crazy name! What kind of a name is this?
It cannot be just a name, it must be a teaching.

See, remember God needs to *model* for Moshe how to be whole
and ready now
God needs, Israel needs Moses *now*
without giving up on the possibility of what might be in the
future.
God needs to show Moses that *what he sees now is not the*
whole story

Right? Because, if God were *just* to say, "I am who I am," as in, "everything you need to know is right here, you can understand the situation from where you stand right now" things are actually looking fairly bleak.

That is, there is little to no indication at the burning bush that God, who, let's face it, has been completely out of the picture for generations and generations of slavery, is ready for a come back. As I like to say, God has been playing in mainly local theaters at this point

Not to mention, there is zero indication that Moshe, who is basically a fugitive shepherd has any interpersonal skills, let alone any leadership capacity.

However, if God *only* talks about the future, if God were only to say, "I will be what I will be,"

Moshe might not be able to find the blessing, yes the holiness in the person he is right now at this fiery, confusing moment.

You see, Moshe doesn't just need to know he'll be great one day, he also actually needs to know he already is someone who turns aside and hears the voice of God when no one else will dare to listen *or even acknowledge the value of doing such a thing.*

Moses needs to know that just as God is holy now

Moses, too is, yes — HOLY, just as he is right now
Even if he can't see it

Even if it doesn't make sense

Ehyeh asher ehyeh is not only "I will be what I will be"

Ehyeh asher ehyeh is "I am what I am"

No matter what happens or does not happen in the future.

What I am saying, see, is that if we rely on what we understand

If we rely on what we see around us alone

We may miss the great opportunities of this moment and of our lives

Perhaps admitting to holiness, the mystery of it

Perhaps following commands in the name of holiness

Allows for mysterious outcomes we ourselves would never predict

But that we might indeed have a hand in shaping

4.

Ehyeh asher ehyeh "I will be what I will be"

"I am what I am"

Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh Adonai. / You will be holy because I am holy.

Hear it? (ehyeh, tihyu, it is the same verb, "to be")

Both verses ask us to refrain from thinking we can know everything from where we are now

And both phrases remind us that just as God is undeniably holy now and has the potential for holiness both

So are we, so it is and can be for us

God says to us in the midrash (rabbah)
I have a garden (the world) and you have a garden (your soul)
How about you take care of my garden and I'll take care of
yours?

How about you take care of my garden?
Not just in the ways clear to you, in the mysterious ones too
Do me a favor, don't curse people even if they can't ever hear
Do me a favor, pray, say *shema* instead
Do this for me and I'll take care of your garden
I'll tend to the garden of your souls.
And you will flower in ways that from here, from today you
cannot even see

