

Aharei Mot-Kedoshim 5767

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My teacher, Rabbi Neil Gillman, in a class on Jewish theology, once posited that for most people, religious affiliation and identification boiled down to three “B”’s, which I’m certain I’ve mentioned to us before: Behaving, Believing, and Belonging. These three concepts achieve varying degrees of importance, or even presence, in the lives and mindsets of differently affiliated people. Practically, this means that, for some, it is behavior that is most essential in their religious self concept. Their observance of Shabbat, for example, or of Kashrut, is their primary expression of Jewish affiliation. For others, it is belief that is most prominent. Their belief in God’s presence and guidance is what keeps them tied to Judaism. For still others, belonging is the most operative concept in their Jewish lives. The sense of being unique and being connected to others who are similarly unique anchors them firmly within the Jewish community. For most people, I imagine, each of these concepts has had its 15 minutes of fame in our personal religious lives. As we grow and develop in our senses of self as members of the Jewish collective, there are times when belief is most important, times when behavior is what keeps us going, and times when the sense of belonging warmly embraces us.

Our *Parashiyot* this week, *Aharei Mot/Kedoshim*, are filled with examples of mitzvot that relate to these three concepts. Even only in the section from which we read this morning, there are countless mitzvot for us to cite as examples. Here are but three of them. Behaving: these kinds of mitzvot are perhaps the most obvious and numerous in our parasha. So let's take one that's purely about behavior. We read toward the beginning of our *k'riyah* this morning, את חקתי תשמורו בהמתך לא תרביע כלאים שדך לא תזרע כלאים, ובגד כלאים שעטנו לא יעלה עליך. "You shall observe my laws: You shall not let your cattle mate with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; you shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two kinds of material." No explanation for the reason behind these statutes is given. In fact, the final injunction, against שעטנו, or a mixture of fabrics in one garment, is often cited as the paradigmatic example of a law with no clear rationale. Just do it, or don't as the case may be. Belonging: Later in our parasha we read: "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I Adonai am your God." The mitzvah of loving and caring for the stranger comes directly out of the communal experience of having been enslaved in Egypt. It's as if the Torah is saying here, 'You are a part of

this group, the former Egyptian slaves. Welcome others into your midst, and remember what it means to be a part of this group, especially in your interactions with others.’ Finally, believing: we see this in two forms—the negative and the positive. “Do not turn to ghosts and do not inquire of familiar spirits, to be defiled by them: I Adonai am your God.” We read here of what not to believe—do not believe in the power of ghosts and soothsayers to save you. Rather, as we read a bit later on, “I Adonai am your God who freed you from the land of Egypt. You shall faithfully observe all my laws and all my rules: I am Adonai.” Believe in God’s proven power to save and redeem, and show your faith through these mitzvot.

We find in these chapters an embarrassment of riches, numerous events, laws, and details from which we could draw tremendous meaning. But rather than continuing to focus on those details, I want to take a more global view of the parasha, to see what the details look like from a distance. This section of our Torah, known as the holiness code, begins with the words: קדושים תהיו כי קדוש אני ה' אלקיכם; You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy. This raises the question: What is it to be holy?

We often think of holiness as something set apart, something more, something better, something higher—in other words, something other. This

understanding of holiness bears itself out in the actual meaning of the word קודש, or holy. להקדיש, one of the verb forms of this word, means to dedicate, consecrate, or put aside. We can see this kind of multiple but related meaning in English as well—both to sanctify and to sanction have the same root.

Thinking of holiness as separateness, as we do, gives the word an air of mystery. If being holy is something other, then I can't entirely know what's involved. This mystery resonates powerfully—we often think of God's holiness as mysterious. We can't entirely know God's ways, but we call them holy. However, our parasha's call for us to be holy requires a little more information. *How* are we to be holy? *Why*?

The many mitzvot recorded in our parasha tell us a lot about the how. If we look at all of these mitzvot, we see that they form a nexus of behaving, believing, and belonging. While in sheer number, the behaving mitzvot certainly overwhelm the others, the ideas of believing in God and not turning to fortune tellers, and belonging to a people who were freed from Egyptian bondage are sufficiently significant to stand equally alongside behavior. Whereas for many of us, at many different times in our lives and religious journeys, we prefer one of these concepts to the others, our parasha's details align in such a way as to teach us that holiness is about achieving a balance

between all three. Only through behavior, belief, and belonging to a greater collective can we fully enter into a life of holiness.

This message is a potent one. Only in community with others, grounded by our shared beliefs, and united by our actions, can we achieve holiness. But as modern Jews, it's not exactly enough. While this message speaks to the positive results of buying into this system, the only motivation it gives us is essentially "because God said so." The mystery and remoteness of God's ways that we saw as positive just a moment ago make it hard for us to obey God's will with no corroborating reasons. So why, then, should we put ourselves on the path to holiness?

For better or worse, our traditional sources do not give us any concrete answers. However, a midrash from the *Sifra*, the *midrash halakhah* on the book of *Vayikra*, makes an astounding observation. It seems, from the midrash, that the rabbis living in the 2nd and 3rd centuries were struggling with some of the same questions. Drawing from the mitzvot in our parasha, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said: A person should not say, 'It is impossible that I could wear Sh'atnez; it is impossible that I could ever eat pork; it is impossible that I could ever participate in a forbidden sexual relationship; rather, it is quite possible. In Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah's mind, none of these sins is inherently distasteful. On the contrary. The crucial element

that prevents a person from committing these acts is choice. One chooses to follow God's decrees, and to seek holiness, at least in part, by refraining from these acts. As modern Jews, we choose to be a part of the Jewish community. We choose to have faith, and we choose to lead lives of mitzvot. May our collective choices to behave, believe, and belong continue to lead us together along the path of קדושה, of holiness.