

What is Holiness?

Now, let me begin by saying a few words about Hebrew. Hebrew is a pretty awesome language. It's the language of the Jewish people and it's been around for thousands of years. Often, when you want to find out the meaning of a word or name, especially a name, you need to go back to the Hebrew root.

For example, let's take a cool name like A-N-J-A: Anja! Just picked it up off the top of my head!

עִבְרִית

Ivrit

Anja is named for her father's mother's mother whose name was Annie. Anja is a form that comes from the Norwegian tradition and is also a variation that is similar to what is utilized in Russian, Polish, Croatian, Danish, German, Swedish, Finnish, Dutch, Slovenian, Macedonian, and Serbian.

But all of them go back to the original name Hannah or Hannah, as it



is pronounced in Hebrew.

This name first appears in the *Tanakh* in the Hebrew bible –

Hannah is a woman who

prays for a child and

eventually is blessed with a

child whom she names

Shmuel or Samuel or today,

Sam or Sammy who becomes

a great prophet and leader of the Jewish people.

Hannah comes from the word *hen*, meaning “gracious” or “bringing goodness!” Not a bad name at all!

So, let’s try that same approach with a keyword from this week’s double *parashah*: *Kedoshim*.

The Torah tells us at the beginning of the second *parashah* of this morning’s double-set:

“*Va’yidaber Adonai el Moshe Leimor: dabeir el kol adat Bnei Yisrael v’amarata aleihem: Kedoshim Teheyu ki kadosh ani Adonai Eloheikhem – Adonai* spoke to Moshe saying: speak to the entire Israelite community and say to them: ‘BE HOLY! For I, *Adonai*, your God, am Holy.’”

This is a very powerful opening – while normally Moshe is asked to convey a message to the Israelites, here it states *kol adat Bnei Yisrael* – the whole community, the entire people. We know that this is an all CAPS type of message.

So what are we being asked here? To be *Kadosh*. But what does that mean exactly?

In order to answer that, let’s think of other words have this root.

Kadosh – holiness, *kiddush*, the prayer sanctifying Shabbat or a holiday – usually made over a cup of wine, *kaddish*, the prayer that has several forms recited throughout the service, *kedushah*, the holiest part of the service, in the middle of the *Amidah*, the standing silent prayer.

So, they all have the same root – *kuf*, *dalet*, *shin*, but what does it mean?

It is not an easy word to translate.

I will start with its most common translation: holiness or holy.

What does holiness mean to you?

Sacred.

Special.

Distinct.

Set apart.

Something holy is something that is unique, not like everything else. The ultimate source of this, according to the *Torah* is God, God's self. As the Torah states: "*Ki Ani Kadosh* – I, God, am Holy or I, God, am the Source of Holiness.

So, at a simple level – it means to make something special and we do this in various ways. The gifts brought to the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Holy



Temple in Jerusalem were designated as *kadesh*, or: "set aside." We can do that with each other, too. Think of the wedding; it contains two parts with one cup of wine for each of the bridal pair. The first part, *eirusin*, is a betrothal, an engagement and the second half which contains the seven wedding blessings is called *kiddushin*, sanctification.

You have literally set this person who means so much to you aside, elevating them as special, as unique, and holy.

In our more egalitarian formulation, we see each of the partners as setting the other apart, different from all others. Once you have performed *kiddushin*, you are each holy to each other in a way that is different from your relationships with all other people.

But beyond setting aside, there is another layer to holiness, to *kedushah* that I want to explore with you today.

To approach that second part of *kedushah*, we can return to the original verse in the *Torah* that states: “*Kedoshim Teheyu* – Be holy for I, Adonai am Holy.” God declares that the ultimate object that is set apart is in fact the Divine.

If we are confined by space and time and God is not, that then is the most extreme difference that could exist. God is totally set apart.

But later in the *Torah*, we are instructed explicitly to follow God.

How can we follow God, if God is totally different, totally set apart, beyond time and space, totally holy?

To answer this conundrum, we must turn both to the rest of the *parashah* and to one of my favorite *Talmudic sugyot* – one of my favorite rabbinic teachings. First, the rabbinic teaching from the *Talmud* in *Masekhet Sotah*, which Rabbi Fel and I completed just before *Pesah* for our annual *siyyum*, celebration of completion.

The *Talmud* asks: “Is it possible for a mortal person to follow God’s Presence? Rather, the *Torah* is teaching us the following: we should follow the attributes of the Holy One. Just as God clothes the naked, you should clothe the naked.

Just as God visited the sick, you should visit the sick. Just as God comforted mourners, you should comfort the mourner and just as God buries the dead, you should bury the dead.” (*Sotah* 14a)

To be holy is to act in a holy way, in an ethical way, in a way, that sadly, not everyone always acts. Being holy is about how we should act.

And now, we turn back to our *parashah*, to our *Torah* reading; *Leviticus* 19 is part of what is known as the Holiness Code – a section of the *Torah* filled with moral teachings that touch on almost every part of life.

There is holiness in time – today, Shabbat. There is holiness in how we treat animals. There is holiness in how we relate to all people and how we care for those in need and there is a unique holiness to our most intimate relationships.

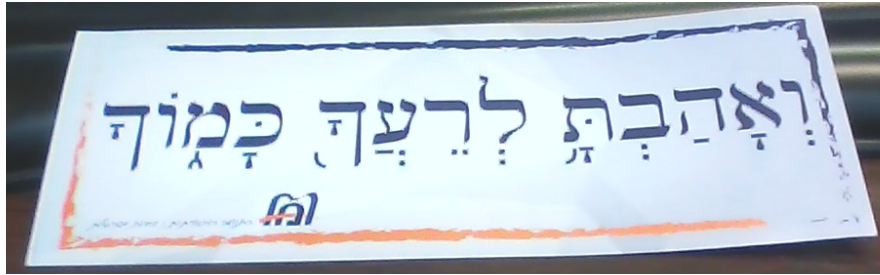
The core of this holiness code is the 19th chapter of *Leviticus* and its *mitzvot*, its commandments "cut across all categories of life. They deal with ritual, with business ethics, with proper behavior toward the poor and the afflicted, and with family relations."

We must remember that for the *Torah* there is no difference between what we might call "secular" and "religious;" for the *Torah*, they are all part of one continuum and we are supposed to elevate, make holy, make special our behavior in all these areas.

The list in chapter 19 includes: Shabbat, revering your parents, not making idols, the holiness of sacrifices, the ethics of leaving the corner of your fields for the poor.

It continues with not stealing, dealing deceitfully or falsely, not defrauding another, paying your employees on the day they work, not insulting the deaf or placing a stumbling block before the blind.

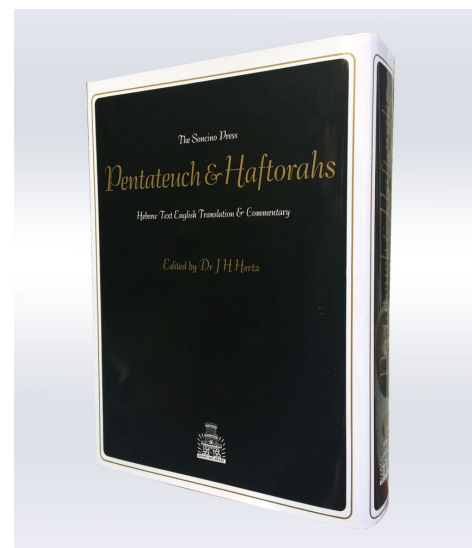
While the list goes on, the *Torah* summarizes it in part by commanding us "*Ve'ahavta L'reiakhah Kamokha* – you shall love your fellow humans as yourself."



When we treat each other with respect and kindness – the way we would want to be treated, then we live a life of holiness. If we live up to the moral values expressed in this reading (and beyond), then we approach a degree of sanctity in our lives; we make ourselves holy, distinct, set aside, like God, God’s self.

As Rabbi Hertz wrote in 1936 in the famous Hertz *humash* (Jewish bible), “holy stands for the fullness of God’s ethical qualities – for more than goodness (*tov*), more than purity (or sanctity) (*tahor*), more than righteousness (*tzaddik*); it embraces all these in their ideal completeness.”

That’s why the rabbis most often referred to God as the *Kadosh Barukh Hu* – the Holy Blessed One. This name for God, shortened by some as the “KBH” (I love that name for God!) – focusses on God’s essence. The KBH is the ultimate source of holiness – the source of goodness, sanctity and righteousness, the ethical impulse urging us to be better people, the initiator and sustainer of the universe always sending out divine energy that is there to assist us. And not always, but sometimes, we can sense that



sanctity in a moment, in a decision, in a behavior, and we feel some of God's presence, of God's holiness, of God's *kedushah*.

That may be the core of what Judaism is all about – we are asked to take everything in life – the *hol* – the ordinary and imbue it with holiness, with *kedushah*, not merely by making things special and appreciating them – though that is important too – but by transforming them with the way we act, with the way we sanctify time.

And so, we are left with something that initially felt so abstract and distant from us – a concept like holiness and we realize that we too, like God, can be engaged in holiness.

We can set it as our goals, it becomes our aspiration.

We can elevate or sanctify time, objects, places, and people and thus, we become like God, even becoming able to follow in God's ways.

May we all take this message to heart and BE HOLY!