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# Parshat Kedoshim: On the Holiness of Boundaries and the Sanctity of Community

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Parshat Kedoshim opens with a famous call to sanctity:

1 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 2  
Speak to the entire congregation of the  
children of Israel, and say to them, You shall  
be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.

א וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב דַּבֵּר אֶל־כָּל־עֵדֻת  
בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ  
אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: (ויקרא יט: א-ב)

This injunction toward holiness is vague. How does one become holy? What is the meaning of *kedusha*? Rashi offers the following explanation:

You shall be holy: Separate yourselves from  
sexual immorality and from sin, for wherever one  
finds a barrier against sexual immorality, one  
finds holiness. (Rashi on Leviticus 19:1-2)

קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ - הוּו פְרוֹשִׁים מִן הָעֲרִוּוּת וּמִן  
הָעֲבִירָה, שְׁכֵל מִקוֹם שֶׁאַתָּה מוֹצֵא גֵדֵר עֲרוּה  
אַתָּה מוֹצֵא קְדוּשָׁה. (רש"י עַל וִיקְרָא יט:ב)

The very core of *kedusha*, on this interpretation, is separation. Build the proper barriers; distance yourself from illicit connections and prurient behaviors, and you will, of necessity, discover sanctity. The pursuit of holiness requires, above all, boundaries. Boundaries that keep the self in check and the other at bay. Boundaries that safeguard one person's integrity and another person's safety. Boundaries that respect the gap that always, always lays between two agents. There, in this controlled, ego-contained space of *tzimtzum* (self-contraction), perhaps room opens up for the Other (or other) to enter.

So foundational are these boundaries, says Rashi, that much of the Torah depends on them. Commenting on the words that precede the holiness command--

Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel

דַּבֵּר אֶל־כָּל־עֵדֻת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל

he writes:

[This] teaches us that this passage was stated in the  
assembly [of the entire congregation of Israel] because  
most of the fundamental teachings of the Torah are  
dependent on it. (Rashi on Lev. 19:1-2)

מִלְמַד שֶׁנֶּאֱמַרְה פְּרָשָׁה זֹ  
בְהִקְהָל, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁרַב גּוֹפֵי תוֹרָה  
תְּלוּיִן בָּהּ: (רש"י עַל וִיקְרָא יט:ב)

This teaching of the primacy of *prishut* (separation) was so central to the project of the Torah that it had to be declared to the entirety of the people. Everyone had to hear the message because nearly everything of import flows from it. Boundaries are *the* fundamental building blocks of relationships of *kedusha*.

This paradoxical assertion of the necessity of distance for closeness was heard by our ancestors more than once, always at times of peak intimacy. When Moshe met God at the burning bush, for example, he was invited both to approach God and to stay away.

<p>4 ...God called to him from within the thorn bush, and He said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am!" 5 And He said, "Do not draw near here. Take your shoes off your feet, because the place upon which you stand is holy soil." (Exodus 3:4-5)</p>	<p>ד ... וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹקִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּבָּה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר ה' הִנְנִי ה וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תִּקְרַב הָלֵם שֶׁל־נַעֲלֶיךָ מֵעַל הַגִּלְיוֹךְ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמְתִּי־קֹדֶשׁ הוּא: (שמות ג: ד-ה)</p>
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"*Moshe, Moshe*"--come close, says God. "*Al tikrav*"--but not too close. For you are in the presence of holiness which demands a crack of distance. Similarly, at Har Sinai, the nexus of sanctity, connection, and boundaries appears.

<p>10 And the Lord said to Moses, "Go to the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and they shall wash their garments. 11 And they shall be prepared for the third day, for on the third day, the Lord will descend before the eyes of all the people upon Mount Sinai. 12 And you shall set boundaries for the people around, saying, Beware of ascending the mountain or touching its edge; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. (Ex. 19:10-12)</p>	<p>י וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵךְ אֶל־הָעָם וְקִדְשָׁתָם הַיּוֹם וּמָחָר וְכַבְּסוּ שְׂמֹלֵתָם: יא וְהָיוּ נְכִינִים לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יֵרֵד ה' לְעֵינֵי כָל־הָעָם עַל־הַר סִינַי: יב וְהִגַּבְלֹת אֶת־הָעָם סָבִיב לְאֹמַר הַשְּׂמֵרוּ לָכֶם עֲלוֹת בְּהָר וּנְגַע בְּקִצְהוּ כָל־הַנֹּגַע בְּהָר מוֹת יוּמָת: (שמות יט: י-יב)</p>
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At the moment of greatest contact with the divine, the people must be reminded that they cannot fully approach the divine--not in a bush, not on a mountain, not anywhere. Boundaries must be drawn to remind them and us that it is precisely in the gap between humanity and divinity (and between human beings) that relationships are built and that *kedusha* blossoms.

And yet, there are limits to these limits, of course, because as much as boundaries can build, they also can block and alienate. The *Maor V'Shemesh*, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman HaLevi Epstein (1754-1823), offers a beautiful twist in this vein on Rashi's initial insights. He writes:

“And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them, You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.” [Lev. 19:1-2] Rashi explains: “[This] teaches us that this passage was stated in the assembly [of the entire congregation of Israel] because most of the fundamental teachings of the Torah are dependent on it. ‘You shall be holy’: Separate yourselves, etc.” [Rashi, ad loc.] The words of Rashi require explanation. What are we taught from the fact that this section was said en masse? Indeed, all of the commandments that were to be performed by the collective were said to the collective...

The truth is that a person must [go so far as to] escape to the forest and separate himself from the masses to save himself from bad thoughts and bad actions. But this only works to overcome those things that hold one back from worship of God. To achieve a higher holiness, though, one cannot be meritorious until one cleaves to people of God, to those who serve God in truth, and joins them in service like prayer and Torah study. The essence of the commandments is found in gathering together with God-seekers. Then one can achieve the highest holiness...

This is the meaning of the verse “And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel,” about which Rashi said, “This teaches us that this passage was stated in the assembly [of the entire congregation of Israel].” “You shall be holy” was said en masse to remind us that a person cannot achieve holiness unless s/he is en masse, together with the community in serving God. For “most of the fundamental teachings of the Torah are dependent on it”--on communal prayer and the like.

וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר דבר אל כל עדת בני ישראל ואמרת אליהם קדושים תהיו כי קדוש אני ה' אלהיכם וגו'. ופירש רש"י ז"ל מלמד שנאמרה פרשה זו בהקהל מפני שרוב גופי תורה תלויין בה קדושים תהיו הוו פרושים וכו'. ודברי רש"י צריכים ביאור מה מלמדנו בזה שפרשה זו נאמרה בהקהל. ועוד מסתמא כל המצוות הנוהגות בכללות ישראל נאמרו בהקהל... והאמת הוא שכן צריך האדם לברוח ליערות ולפרוש עצמו מן המון עם כדי שינצל מדעות רעות וממעשים רעים [כמו שכתב הרמב"ם בהלכות דעות (פ"ו ה"א)], אך זאת אינו מועיל אלא להנצל מן הדברים המעכבים עבודת ה' יתברך, אבל להשיג הקדושה העליונה אינו זוכה עד שידבק עצמו אל אנשי ה' עובדי ה' באמת ולהשתתף עמהם יחד בעבודה רבה הן בתפילה והן בלימוד התורה, ועיקר המצוות הכלליות יהיה בכנסיה יחד עם מבקשי ה' ואז יוכל להשיג הקדושה העליונה. . . .

וזוהו פירוש הפסוק וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר דבר אל כל עדת בני ישראל ופירש רש"י מלמד שנאמרה פרשה זו בהקהל, פירוש פרשה זו של קדושים תהיו בהקהל היינו שאי אפשר לאדם שיזכה אל הקדושה אלא אם כן שיהיה בכנסיה יחד עם הקהל בעבודת ה', מפני שרוב גופי התורה תלויין בה דהיינו תפילה בציבור ודומיהן: (ספר מאור ושמש - פרשת קדושים)

The absolute push toward boundaries as the basis of relationship is here given its own boundaries. Citing Maimonides, the *Maor V'Shemesh* concedes that separation from sin, *prishut*, is core to the pursuit of holiness. We must do all we can to escape the forces that keep us away from the deepest calling of our souls, the people and places that keep us down. But this isolation, this running *from*, brings only first-order holiness. To achieve "*kedusha elyona*," second-order "higher holiness," one must run *toward* something *together with* others. For this, one must actively seek a community of seekers.

For the *Maor V'Shemesh*, the very call to boundaried living--to "*kedoshim tehiyu*"-- is simultaneously a charge regarding the imperative of relationality. *Prishut* is only a check on the necessity of *kahal* (community) in the pursuit of "*rov gufei Torah*" (the fundamentals of Torah) for *ha-kol* "*teluyah ba*." Everything, spiritually speaking, depends on our connections to others, on our ability to draw near.

πWhen God said "*el kol adat bnei yisrael*," "to the entire congregation of the children of Israel," to be holy, God did so to reign in the message and to clarify it. Holiness indeed requires boundaries, but let that not stand in the way of the cultivation of intimacies. Let those spaces only enable relationships to grow healthfully. Let our rightful caution and respectful distancing not make us afraid of coming close, but rather guide us toward greater connections to God and to those who seek sanctity.



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