

Making God Holy

Amram Alzman (LC '17), Associate Director of Youth Programs, Keshet



Parashat Kedoshim, the second of the two parashiyot that we read this week, ends just as it begins: with an imperative for us, the Children of Israel, to be holy. Our parashah opens with, “קדשים תהיו/You shall be holy,” and the penultimate verse tells us that, “והייתם לי קדשים/You shall be holy to Me, for I God am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine” (Lev. 20:26). Although almost identical, our parashah ends with the idea that we are not just holy in general, but are specifically designed as holy to God. How, then, are we supposed to not just be holy, but holy to God?

One of the ways in which we exercise this holiness is by making distinctions between the holy and the ordinary: in particular, through carving out sacred time in the calendars. *Pirkei Derabbi Eliezer*, commenting on the first-ever havdalah (after the first-ever Shabbat when Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden), notes that, “Everyone who does make havdalah, the Holy Blessed One calls them to be God’s holy treasure, and delivers them from affliction” (20:28). It then goes on to cite the penultimate verse from our parashah: “As it is said, ‘**And you shall be holy to me, for I God am holy**’” (ibid.). We have a responsibility to, every week, find ways to separate the holy from the ordinary. Even though the seventh day is already inherently holy, our holiness to God highlights the importance of our work in marking the end of our holy time as we enter the rather ordinary week. Havdalah itself is named after our ability to separate the holy from the ordinary—and it is that ritual act of separation that allows us to end Shabbat and begin our weeks.

However, we also can leverage our holiness to create something holy out of something completely ordinary. Exodus Rabbah (commenting on Exod. 12:2) connects the idea that we are to be holy to God, to the commandment to

sanctify the new month, the very first mitzvah that the Israelites are given:

*“This month shall mark for you (Exod 12:2):”
One who sees the new moon—how should they bless it? At the time when Israel sanctifies the new month, there were some among the sages who said, “Blessed is the One who renews the months;” others among them who said, “Blessed is the one who sanctifies Israel,” for if Israel did not sanctify the new month, then there would be no sanctification of the new month at all. And we should not be astonished that the Holy Blessed One made Israel holy, as it is said, “**And you shall be holy to Me, for I God am holy.**” Because they are made holy by the heavens, that which Israel sanctifies is made holy.*

In other words, we, Israel, are the ones who make Rosh Hodesh, the new month and the new moon, holy through noticing it and through our prayers and blessings—and without us doing so, then the first of the new month would just be any other day. In the present moment, we combine the two blessings mentioned in this midrash in *Musaf* for Rosh Hodesh, and include a blessing that ends with, “Who makes Israel and the new months holy.” This midrash also helps further bring into focus another idea: we are not just commanded to be holy (as we are at the beginning of the parashah) but we are made holy through God and in turn have the power to turn otherwise ordinary things, such as a normal date on the calendar, or the almost invisible new moon, holy.

While Shabbat is inherently holy, and our role is merely to mark its holiness through our words and rituals, the new month is different. The moon waxes and wanes on its own

schedule; without us doing anything, Rosh Hodesh would not exist. Shabbat exists on its own, but we must actively create Rosh Hodesh by imbuing what otherwise be any other date on the calendar with holiness.

When the new month was established by the *beit din* (and not just based on the calendar, as we do it today), it was declared sacred only once it was decided that the new month had indeed begun. Witnesses would present themselves to the court, saying that they had witnessed the new month; after the court had verified the legitimacy of the witnesses, they would declare that the new month had begun and alert other communities of the new month. The process of elevating the seemingly ordinary date on a calendar and making it into something holy is what makes us unique and what it means to be not just holy, but holy to God specifically. This midrash also helps us understand something crucial about the ways that holiness and chosenness intersect: Perhaps we are holy because of our ability to encounter the ordinary dates on a calendar, the invisible moon, and see their holiness and elevate them above the ordinary. And just God has the ability to take ordinary things make them holy, render the invisible visible and marked through their holiness, we have that power as well.

Our second midrash ends: “Said the Holy Blessed One: I, I am already holy, and for my own sake I make things holy. Rather, behold: I make Israel Holy, and they make me holy, as it is written, **‘And you shall be holy to Me.’**”

Being holy to God is to be in the world and find new ways to make the ordinary sacred—even when it is sometimes hidden from view like the new moon—and, in doing so, we are also, making God holy. Our role is not just to take and celebrate the things that are already holy, like Shabbat, but to constantly find ways to elevate the things, the people, and their experiences that have not been seen as holy in the past. In the process, we can, in turn, make God holy as well.