

Yom Kippur Drash 2008/5769

Against the green walls of Sha'ar Zahav's building on 290 Dolores Street you may have noticed some vibrant red letters. They spell out "Congregation Sha'ar Zahav" in English, followed by some Hebrew: the letter kuf, two funny little marks, and another kuf. The Hebrew is an abbreviation for the words "kehilla kedusha."

"Kehilla" is the Hebrew word for synagogue or congregation. It means "community." "Kedusha" is the Hebrew word for holiness. You have heard this word before, or one of its many related forms: the mourner's **kaddish**; the blessing over wine or **kiddush**; the **kedusha** prayer—"kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, Adonai z'vaot"—and also, especially recently, in the form "**kiddushin**," which in Hebrew means marriage.

Some form of the word "kadosh" occurs 850 times in the Torah; some theologians, noting its frequency, have said that Jewish theology is a theology of holiness.

We are a kehilla kedusha, a holy community. But what does that mean?

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Today's Torah portion, drawn from Leviticus 16, provides one answer to that question. The passage we've just heard describes the ritual of Aaron the priest on Yom Kippur—how he should approach the ark, how he should purify it, and how he should make atonement for himself, his family and the Jewish people. Aaron's job on Yom Kippur was no less than to ensure that the Israeli people, the *kehilla*, was cleansed of their sins and made holy, made a *kehilla kedusha*.

Let's take a closer look, then, at what Aaron did. Being an ancient Near Easterner, Aaron believed that the way to make the kehilla holy was to sprinkle goat blood all over everything. Hm. Fortunately for you, I did not bring any goat blood with me today.

But let's not be too literal. If we take another look, what we will find is that all of Aaron's rituals were designed to separate himself from the everyday, from what theologians like to call the "profane" world. **In our culture, we often think about the sacred and the profane as opposites.** To make something sacred or holy, it seems natural to us that you would have to leave the profane or everyday world behind.

Journeying from the profane to the sacred is just what Aaron and later, what the Kohen Gadol, the high priest of the Temple in Jerusalem, seem to do. On Yom Kippur alone, the high priest took off his golden vestments. Dressed in the simplest of white clothes, he left behind him the public square, the crowds in the Women's Court where the sefer Torah was read, the services of the Levites in the Temple Court where the sacrifices were made, and walked alone through the Sanctuary to the Holy of Holies. No one else could follow him there. Used to a large number of hangers-on, this busy man was absolutely alone on the holy day, face to face only with himself and his God, prepared to hear the still, small voice within.

Is this holiness, then? Are we to remove ourselves from the world? Are we supposed to leave our community behind and go to a sacred place where we can be all alone?

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So it would seem—but that is not the whole story. **My message to you on this day is that we cannot find holiness if we only look within. Judaism teaches us that we find holiness in the context of community.**

Listen to the other voice we hear on this day of fasting and prayer. On a day when we take so many pains to separate ourselves from the world, we hear a voice that is not at all still or small. It is the voice of Isaiah the prophet, asking Aaron the priest a difficult question.

Is this the fast I have chosen? A day to bow down your head?

Right after a Torah portion which suggests we should separate ourselves from the world to be holy, we read Isaiah, who asks, with righteous indignation, why do we separate the sacred and the profane? What good does it do us if we fast, if we pour out our hearts to God, but we do not feed the hungry and care for the orphaned?

Isaiah says:

Is not this the fast I have chosen?
To loose the fetters of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free?

How can we be holy, Isaiah asks, if we do not do good, if we do not work to make our world a better place?

You see the contradiction. The parsha seems to give detailed instructions on how to separate ourselves from the world. Isaiah admonishes us to be a part of the world.

How can we do both? Which do we do first? Are we supposed to take a meditative inward journey in order to be able to listen to the still, small voice? Or are we supposed to go out into the world, listening to Isaiah's loud, prophetic voice calling us to action? What path do we as a community pursue to attain holiness?

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Our culture here in the United States tells us that the path to holiness is through silence and solitude. The poet William Wordsworth complained, "The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending; we lay waste our power." In many ways, I believe he is right. Setting aside the everyday world is so difficult. I know, I've tried.

Last Yom Kippur, I made a vow to keep the Sabbath. It was my way of trying to pursue holiness. I knew I was already too involved with the world. I thought I needed some time to separate myself from it.

You see, Judaism is a very cyclical religion. We don't just separate ourselves from the everyday world on Yom Kippur. We are supposed to have a holy day every Shabbat, a day when we do no manner of work.

So, I promised myself that I would finally, this year, prepare for Shabbat. I vowed that I would light the Shabbat candles each Friday night and that my little family would break challah together, then spend the next day removed from the workaday world. I did not pretend I would be *shomer shabbas*. I knew I would cook and use money and so forth. But I hoped to use the phone to call my family, and to use money to buy a restaurant meal, and generally to treat Shabbat as a time apart.

Well, that lasted all of three weeks.

Kol Nidre, Dear God, all the vows I have vowed to you--may I be absolved from them for this and the coming year.

Each Shabbat, the profane world hurls itself upon me like a hurricane. The winds of my daily life wrap me around, they flood me and I feel I can't resist. The phone rings and instead of my brother in Pennsylvania, it is a client with an urgent need to talk. I open my computer thinking only to look up a word or phrase, and I can't resist, I open my email inbox and release a whirlwind of to-dos.

I know I have a choice. I can leave it all behind. But I am like the young, able-bodied people who refused to leave Galveston, fascinated by the force of the wind and waves. I find it almost impossible to pull myself away from the intense stimulation of daily life.

I know that for many of us, the insistence of the workaday world has only grown stronger these past few weeks. How can we not worry about our homes and our jobs—and the homes and jobs of others--when the markets are gyrating so wildly, even after the bell has rung and Wall Street is supposed to be dark and silent? How can we not worry about our health and well-being, when health care premiums rise and our incomes decline or stagnate? How can we not worry about the State of Israel when Iran threatens its destruction and its government is in upheaval? How can we not follow the news in the middle of an election year that in California will decide whether the holiness of our marriages, our kidushin, will remain legal?

I'm sorry Isaiah. I—we--don't have any trouble being a part of the world. I know so many of you here in this great hall...

... and I know that you do spend so much of your time caring for the poor and the orphaned, the sick and the hungry, the closeted and the oppressed.

I am not saying that we—that I--can't do more. I know I can do more. That's my frustration. I feel I can never do enough. I feel I have to stay plugged in all the time just to make the teeniest, tiniest little change in a world that seems so very broken. And I know many, many of you feel the same way.

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Yet here we all are. Today, the computers are turned off. I hope the cell phones are turned off!

I look around this grand, ornate space, and I see hundreds of people who have chosen to leave the spin cycle for just one day. Look around. Each of us has pulled ourselves away from our work this Thursday, October 9, the tenth of the month of Tishrei, in order to create, like Aaron, a holy time and space. Each of us has made the choice to leave the very important and necessary work of our lives. We have made the choice to come here.

Why have we chosen to separate ourselves from the world on this day, a work day in the middle of an election when there is so very much important work out there to do? I am going to give Isaiah a second chance. A few chapters before today's haftarah, Isaiah speaks to the Jewish people in the voice of the Holy One:

Listen to Me, you who pursue justice
You who seek the Lord:
Look to the rock you were hewn from,
To the quarry you were dug from,
Look back to Abraham your father
And to Sarah who brought you forth.
For he was only one when I called him,
But I blessed him and made him many. (51:1-2)

Isaiah—the same Isaiah who tells us today to not assume justice comes from prayer alone--calls on those of us who pursue justice to take the time to remember who we are. He calls on us to come back to our Rock and Redeemer, the God of fathers and our mothers. He calls on us to pursue the sacred as well as to pursue justice.

Is this another contradiction? How can we be sacred and profane at once? Here is where the lesson gets a bit difficult, a bit confusing. But what would a Yom Kippur drash be without a few twists and turns?

In our culture, we believe that the everyday world is noisy and chaotic and full of people. And we believe that the holy must be quiet and still and something we can only understand when we are on our own. Doesn't this sound reasonable? Everyday = noisy = lots of people. Sacred = quiet = individual meditation.

It may sound reasonable, but it's not a very Jewish equation. What Isaiah is telling us is that there is a **relationship between the sacred and the profane, between the community and the individual**. It takes both of them to create holiness. We can't be holy if we do not pursue justice in the world at large. And we can't pursue justice unless we take the time to listen to the still, quiet voice within. **Judaism teaches us that we find holiness in the context of community.**

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It is so tempting to believe that we could be holy if only we could completely withdraw from the world. I have a friend who decided the only way he could find holiness was by going on a six month silent retreat in the mountains of Nepal. A bit extreme, I suppose. But here, on the West Coast, many of us believe we will not be able to hear the "still, small voice" unless we retreat from the city to a quiet, special place in nature.

When I first began to study this portion, that's also what I thought. **I thought the message of Leviticus 16, of the story of Aaron the priest, was that we had to remove ourselves from the world in order to become holy. But I've learned from Isaiah that Jewish tradition tells us otherwise.**

I started this drash by talking about the instances of the word "kadosh" in our liturgy. What I notice is that the prayers invoking God's holiness are among the very few prayers that require a minyan, a community of people. The mourner's kaddish requires a minyan. The kedusha prayer requires a minyan. A marriage ceremony, the kiddushin, requires witnesses and by its nature reaffirms community.

I notice as well that Aaron the priest did not go to the wilderness to find holiness. This is a very important point. Aaron did go alone into the Holy of Holies, but the Holy of Holies was not some distant, isolated spot. It was surrounded, in fact, by thousands of people waiting and hoping and praying for Aaron's return.

Aaron found holiness in the center of his community, a still, sacred point in the center of a whirlwind of activity.

We are blown about by the winds of the world, but within every hurricane is a still, small center. For miles out on either side of a hurricane, winds and rain whip the earth, but in the very center is a place, we are told, of complete calm. **You can only find that space of complete stillness *within* the winds.**

Today, in this room, we are in the center of the hurricane. Outside, on Van Ness Avenue, commerce and politics continue. Here we are calm.

Even in this quiet space, though, like Aaron, we are not alone. We experience kedusha, holiness, when we are surrounded by our kehilla, our community. Jewish tradition tells us

that the still small voice comes most clearly when we start from community and move inward.

A friend, reading this drash, asked me: what is that still small voice? For what do we listen? I'm sorry. I cannot tell you. For each person, the voice is different.

Recall that each of us is made *b'tselem elohim*, in the image of God. When we quiet ourselves and listen, what we hear is God within, however we understand God. We hear—or maybe it is that we feel—the rock we were hewn from, the quarry we were dug from.

Perhaps the reason we take that inner journey surrounded by community is that, as Walt Whitman says, “In the faces of men and women I see God”: in every face around me I see a reflection of the Divine.

If the winds of our daily life are too strong for us, if we cannot hear the divine voice within, we can reach out to our beloved ones, to Abraham our father and to Sarah our mother, that is, to our kehilla, to the many members of the extended Jewish community. In their faces—in the faces of those around you right now—you can see a visible reminder of the Rock from which we were hewn, our Creator.

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It's Yom Kippur, so we have plenty of time. I'd like to take a few minutes now for us to find that still, quiet center, to listen for that still, small voice. Please stand up.

First, look around.

Now, take a deep breath. Another. Breathe again.

You may want to close your eyes.

Listen now to the breath of your community. In their breath, in our breath, you may start to hear the still small voice.

[pause]

We are a kehilla kedusha, a holy community.

May you be inscribed in the book of life. Amen.

*This drash was stimulated, in part, by “Goodness and Worship: A Perspective on Old Testament Holiness” by Jon Huntzinger in *The Holiness Manifesto*, Edited by Kevin W. Mannoia and Dan Thorsen (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans) 2008.