

Being Holy

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Parshat Emor

They shall be holy to their G*d, we read in Leviticus 21:6. But what does it mean to be holy? The Hebrew word *kadosh* carries the meaning of being set aside, much as does the Hawaiian word *kapu* (equivalent to the Polynesian *taboo*). Each word – *kadosh* and *kapu* – has two parts in its meaning. That which is *kadosh/kapu* is set aside for a certain purpose and is therefore set aside from any other purpose. In the Hawaiian tradition, for example, certain flowers were *kapu for* the *ali'i nui* (royalty) and therefore *kapu from* all others. Only the *ali'i nui* were permitted to wear leis made from such flowers. Similarly, the feathers of certain birds were *kapu for* the *ali'i nui* and hence *kapu from* all others; only the *ali'i nui* were permitted to wear garments woven from the feathers of those birds.

Well, that lesson in ancient Hawaiian sociology is interesting, but what does it have to do with our Torah reading? We are commanded to be holy to G*d, and being holy/*kadosh* means being set aside for a particular purpose. The same linguistic root gives us the word *kiddushin*, marriage. In marriage, the partners are set aside for each other and therefore set aside from all others, just as we find implied in the Hawaiian *kapu*. By the Commandment of Leviticus 21:6, then, we are commanded to set ourselves aside for G*d (the Hebrew preposition will admit of a translation as either *to* or *for*) and therefore from all others.

The obvious (and virtually trivial) meaning is that we are not to worship other gods. But there is another, a deeper level to this Commandment, brought by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (the "Netziv"), the mentor of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook.

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The Netziv notes that there are many who wish to be holy, but they desire holiness for the fame and recognition it may bring them. Certainly, seeking recognition and fame through the pursuit of holiness is a higher spiritual level than seeking the same recognition through less worthy endeavors. But, as the Netziv points out, real holiness means being holy for G*d and not for one's own pride or, as we so often find today, one's "self-development."

In earlier days, certain of the Talmudic sages (known as the יורדי המרכבה, the *yordei ha'merkavah*, those who "descended" in or to the Chariot), inspired by the vision of the Prophet Ezekiel (Ch. 1), would engage in the deepest meditations in order to fling their souls into the spiritual realm, just for the sake of experiencing a glimpse of the Divine Throne-Chariot, just in order to enter, for the briefest moment, the Divine Throne Room. They did so not in order to be recognized and respected and not for the sake of some "self-development," but just to experience that incredible level of holiness and spirituality.

Just so does this verse instruct us to do. Not to be holy because people will admire us (although, we must acknowledge, they will). Not to be holy because we will feel better about ourselves as a result (although, we must acknowledge, we will). Not even to be holy because by doing so we will fulfill a Commandment of the Torah (although, we must acknowledge, we will). We are to be holy to G*d, just for the sake of connecting in some manner with G*d, just because we know that, in some manner, it is pleasing to G*d that we do so. Not for the fame and recognition, not for the good feeling, not even for the sake of fulfilling a Mitzvah, but for the sake of the relationality, to be able to enter into a Buberian *I-Thou* relationship with G*d.

To learning truly to speak the primary word *I-Thou*, may we soon be guided.

Shabbat Shalom.