

Shabbat Kedoshim 5784
May 11, 2024

Evan and Vivian, thank you for focusing our attention on empathy, equity, and love. Our parasha, Kedoshim, includes many of the most important mitzvot of our Torah, and it also includes an eclectic mix of topics, from fair weights and measures in the marketplace to the composition of clothing fabric, from sexual ethics, to a ban on child sacrifice and a prohibition against speaking to ghosts. Your dad's characterizations of Leviticus aside, Vivian, I think this part is actually anything but dry. And amidst the broad range of ideas, there's a through line that you've both picked up on. That is a series of mitzvot to treat our fellow human beings with dignity and with fairness. As you taught us, Evan, it is to love the stranger, to not put a stumbling block before the blind, to not reap to the edges of our fields so that the hungry can come and eat, and as you taught us Vivian, it is to love our fellow human beings as we love ourselves.

Chapter 19 of Leviticus is the peak of what's known as the Holiness Code. Sitting at the physical center of the Torah scroll, it opens

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

דַּבֵּר אֶל־כָּל־עַדְת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ
אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

God says to Moses, "Speak to all of the community of the children of Israel and say to them. Be holy, because I Adonai, your God, am holy."

Let's stop for a second and not take this for granted. You would expect in a religion that being holy has to do with activities that draw us near to G-d. Praying all day and night, studying sacred texts, performing rituals. When we speak about a holy person in other traditions today, say the Pope or the Dalai Lama, these are people who dedicate their time to contemplation or service of G-d, who wear special clothing and live in special, sanctified places and are treated with reverence. Maybe they meditate or fast or chant special words.

But in Leviticus the list of what it means to be holy is totally different. Don't steal, don't lie, don't defraud your fellow person. Don't hate, don't harm, don't bear a grudge or seek revenge. Treat your elders with respect. Venerate your parents. Look out for the vulnerable. Share what you have. And, rather than set aside a rarified leader or set of acolytes as holy, in Torah ALL of the people are holy. All of the people are explicitly gathered and addressed together.

What's the connection between these interpersonal mitzvot and holiness? Rabbi Zev Wolf of Zotamir, also known as Or HaMeir, says that all of the people were assembled because every one of them, and every one of us, has a role to play in making that connection between other people and G-d. We have, in the words of Kohelet Rabbah, "great power to liken the creature's form to that of the Creator." This means, Or Ha-Meir says, that we have "the ability to perceive the sublime lights ... to see only the divinity that is garbed there..."

In other words, what holiness means for the Jewish people is seeing the divine light that resides inside of every human being, even every creature on the earth. That's why holiness includes things like not hating. It's why holiness includes loving the stranger. It's why holiness includes not gossiping and putting braille on elevator buttons. That's why it includes running a homeless shelter and not mocking or shaming anyone. So for Jews, we draw near to G-d by focusing on other human beings, by honoring G-d's light within other human beings.

Some of you know that I was in Israel this week on a rabbinic delegation with J Street and T'ruah. We listened to the stories of survivors of October 7th, we heard from the family members of hostages, we talked with pollsters and political analysts in Tel Aviv and in Ramallah. We heard from a member of the Knesset and a spokesman for the IDF, and a leader of Achim L'Neshek (Brothers and Sisters in Arms) an army reservist group that used to lead the democracy protests and now have organized a massive nationwide civil infrastructure for Israelis to provide for each other

since October 7th. We sat with Jewish and Palestinian leaders of NGO's who are working urgently and desperately to provide humanitarian aid to Gaza, and for human rights, shared society, two states, and peace. We visited hostage square in Tel Aviv, Netiv HaAsarah, a moshav on the northern border of Gaza where 20 people were murdered on October 7th, as well as the Nova Festival site where a makeshift memorial has been created. We visited Khirbet Zanuta, a Palestinian village in the South Hebron Hills that was destroyed by settlers on October 28th and visited the home of a Palestinian human rights activist in the region.

It was an incredibly packed, incredibly meaningful experience, and there's much more to say than I can capture today. I'll be sharing stories and insights from the trip over the next many weeks, but for now I just want to share a story of my first morning. Before the official itinerary began I went to visit kibbutz Shefayim, to the north of Tel Aviv, where the residents of Kfar Aza are now living temporarily as they wait for more permanent lodging.

Many of you know that CBE has built a relationship with Kfar Aza, one of the three kibbutzim that was most destroyed on October 7th. On Monday morning, I got in a taxi in Tel Aviv to make my way north, and as the Bukhari driver told me about his family members in Brighton Beach, while Ein Li Eretz Acheret was playing on the radio, (Ein Li Eretz Acheret is a song by Gali Atari has become a popular anthem in Israel, particularly since October 7th. The words mean, "I have no other land.") as the song is playing, the 10 am siren goes off, because it's Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, and everywhere in the country every car stops, every pedestrian stops. Everyone at their workplaces and schools stop. And stand in reverent silence as the siren sounds for two minutes. We're on the highway and step into the median, and all the guys on their motorcycles and the cab drivers and the truck drivers stop and get out and stand in perfect stillness for a full two minutes remembering the six million who died. And then the siren finishes and we all get back in our cars and drive away.

When I get to Shefayim I sit with Liora, who tells me about hiding in her safe room with her two granddaughters for 35 hours on October 7th, with the battle raging all around them and terrorists fighting gun battles in their house, and one of her granddaughters using what's app to guide rescuers to know where to go and what to do. She tells about her son Tal, who was the commander of the civil defense unit for Kfar Aza, and was one of the first to respond to the attack and was shot dead. But as he lay dying he managed to reach the neighboring kibbutz and warn them, and no one died in that kibbutz, so Liora takes comfort that he gave his life to save others. She sits next to Yuri, who tells his terrible and unbelievable story of survival on that day that involved jumping from his window to escape fire and smoke inhalation in his safe room, and then being kidnapped as a hostage and escaping his kidnappers, running barefoot in only his underwear hiding in bush until he was rescued. Before October 7th, as an assistant to the mayor of Kfar Aza, Yuri had dedicated himself to building an economic development center for Gaza, believing that most of the people of Gaza just want a better life, good schools, a place to go to work every day, and that one day there would be peace. He said that his view of Gazans was shattered on October 7th. But he said, "We have no choice. We can't keep killing each other. We have to find another way." Liora added, "There needs to be a Palestinian state. I've never understood why we would think that only we would deserve a state. If we deserve it they deserve it too."

This was the beginning of my trip, on Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, Jewish survivors of hate and bloodshed insisting on life and hope and peace, determined to get out of the loop of violence. Again and again, the people I talked to who lived through October 7th and the months since, people who experienced hate made deadly, said that their values did not change. That they refuse to hate, they refuse to lose hope, they refuse to support more killing in their name. This is true for Maoz Inon, a businessman whose parents both died on October 7th, whose story I will tell you on another day, and for Hila Fenlon, who hid in a shelter with seven people in the dark with no air, no phone, no electricity, no internet, and yet said, "Our values have not changed since October 7th. We should be more careful but we should not change. We should still be seeking peace." It was

true for Gilad Shoham, who spoke to us about his son Tal who remains in captivity in Gaza and his two grandchildren Naveh and Yahel who were also taken captive with their mom but are home now but are not OK. Gilad was out protesting in the streets of Tel Aviv just hours after he met with us, calling for all Israelis to leave their homes and join him in the streets to demand that the government agree to a ceasefire deal that would free the hostages.

It was true for my friend Melila who lives in Jerusalem, who told me about the grief circles of Israeli and Palestinian women she's been organizing starting as early as October 10th, about the layers of sadness that these women are sharing with each other, so much sadness, about how they are healing and witnessing each other despite all of the forces that would keep them apart. "What is this conversation you are having in the States?", she asked me. "It's crazy. It's like people don't understand that we all live here and we are all so intertwined." I heard it from a man who asked us not to use his name but invited us to his home in the South Hebron Hills and told us a story that I will tell you another day of a moment when he could have chosen hate but instead chose to dedicate his life to nonviolence. I heard it from Nidal Foqaha of the Palestinian Peace Coalition in Ramallah, who said, "The two state solution is the most viable option. It requires courageous compromises on both sides, but the one state alternatives are not viable or relevant at all." It's true for Khalil Shiqaqi, the Palestinian pollster and Brandeis professor, who has been tracking public opinion in Gaza and the West Bank through more than 200 polls since 1993. He found this March that 62% of Gazans support a two state solution, and that for those who had deaths in their family the rates of support were even higher.

As devastating as so many things were on this trip – the hostage deal fell through while we were there and the incursion into Rafah began; we talked to Israeli human rights leaders who were in desperation at their inability to help the people of Gaza and we saw a line of trucks full of humanitarian aid that were waiting and unable to get in; and I will never forget standing in the

clearing at the Nova festival looking at the sweet young faces of the dead, two of whom reminded me of my own sons.

But also and just as importantly, I was reminded to listen first and always to the people who live there who are working day in and day out to use their great power to perceive the sublime divine light in every creature. Those who are lifting up the humanity of the other, who refuse to be bowed by this grueling horrific war, who refuse to be hardened against one another, but who, each in their own way, persistently honor and work for life. We did not pretend that they are the majority. We know that they are not the majority, in Israel or in the West Bank. But they are the voices we need now, and they said to us that we are the voices they need now. That while their fellow countrymen and women are too traumatized and hardened to believe that a Palestinian state is feasible or desirable right now, they need us who have more distance to believe in them, to believe in their ability to find the light in one another across the great divide of hate.

Tomorrow night is Yom HaZikaron, Israeli Memorial Day, and this year it will be one of the saddest in history. At CBE tomorrow night we will be participating in the traditional ceremony that honors and remembers all Israeli dead. But first, tomorrow afternoon, we will be streaming from Israel the joint Israeli-Palestinian Memorial Ceremony, that honors and grieves all innocent lives lost of both peoples. It will be the largest shared memorial ceremony in history, and CBE is the official location for the New York observance. Israeli recording artist Achinoam Nini will be here to perform, and together we will recognize our shared humanity and our shared grief. And then the very next night is Yom HaAtzmaut, Israeli Independence Day, and here at CBE we will honor that day this coming Friday night with our annual Hope for Our Future Award ceremony, in which we honor an Israeli NGO that is working for a future that gives us hope. This year, we'll honor Rabbi Noa Sattath and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, whose joint Israeli-Palestinian legal team work to defend the civil and human rights of both Israelis and Palestinians. Rabbi Sattath will be here to accept the award. The banquet is also a fundraiser for their work, 100% of proceeds go to support them, and we invite you to join us.

The Talmud, in Masechet Sanhedrin 106b, tells us, הקב"ה ליבא בעי
"the Holy Blessed One, the Compassionate One, desires the heart." That's
all G-d wants from us, each of us in our way, to give our whole hearts to
seeing the divine presence in each other. That is what it means to fulfill the
overarching command of our parasha: "Kedoshim tihiyu: Be holy, for I
Adonai, your God, am holy." May we strive to live up to this command.

Shabbat Shalom.