

# Gratitude from the Torah

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## Parashat Kedoshim

### What is the Connection Between Holiness and Gratitude?

#### How do we Define the Term קְדוּשָׁה/kedusha – Holiness?

Before taking on the Torah way of life, I had no idea what it meant to be holy. The word ‘holy’ in the slang of my mother tongue was used as a derogatory term denoting someone who tried to be better than others. In my teenage hippy circles, no one took the word or the true concept of קְדוּשָׁה/kedusha – ‘holiness’ seriously, because no one wanted to be holy. We all just wanted to be natural and free. It took some time until I started to understand the complexity of the concept of קְדוּשָׁה/kedusha. It is not by chance that Parashat Kedoshim is always read in the first week of the month of Iyar in which the land of Israel returned to Jewish sovereignty after 2000 years of exile. I feel very blessed to have experienced moments of kedusha when deeply in prayer at holy places in the Holy Land such as the Kotel, Kever Rachel, and the Machpelah. The entire Land of Israel is indeed Holy. I also experience the feeling of holiness everywhere in Israel, especially in the waters of the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) and in nature here in Bat Ayin. Whenever I return from abroad, as soon as the wheels of the airplane touch the ground and we clap I get this special feeling of the holiness of the land that touches me to tears. As I view the rolling hills of Gush Etzion this feeling is intensified, from all the beautiful nature sites I have visited in the entire world, the inner beauty of Eretz Yisrael stands out from any other land, in its holiness. One of the main meanings of the root ק-ד-ש/k-d-sh is to be apart. The first time the word is used in the Torah is about Shabbat, “G-d blessed the Shabbat and sanctified it” (*Bereishit* 2:3). I always understood this to mean that just as the Shabbat is set apart to be separate from the mundane weekdays, so does holiness denote elevated separateness from our lower instincts. For me – “To be holy” – means rising to our divine selves rather than letting our animal souls dominate. Therefore, I cringe when I hear children say, לֹא לִי/lo ba li – “I don’t feel like...” – an expression stating the desire to follow our lower urges. Why should I honor let alone revere my parents if I don’t feel like it? Why should I get up for an elderly person on a crowded bus if I am tired? Why should I hold myself back from taking something that belongs to another if I want it?...

#### What is the Connection between Holiness and the Entire Community of Israel?

We are called upon to be holy just as Hashem is holy and *Parashat Kedoshim* – which means ‘holy’ – gives us directions on how to live our lives as a holy people both on the individual and communal level:

סֵפֶר וִיקְרָא פֶּרֶק יֵט פִּסּוּק א

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר דַּבֵּר אֶל כָּל עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוּשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: (ג) אִישׁ אִמּוֹ וְאָבִיו תִּירָאוּ וְאֵת שְׁבֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ: אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

“Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them, You shall be holy, for I, Hashem, your G-d, am holy. Every person shall fear his mother and father, and you shall observe My Shabbats. I am Hashem, your G-d” (*Vayikra* 19:1-3).

This section was stated in the assembly of the entire congregation of Israel because most of the fundamental teachings of the Torah are dependent on it (i.e., they are encapsulated in this parasha), (Rashi based on *Torat Kohanim* 19:1; *Vayikra Rabbah* 24:5).

The commentaries are puzzled about why specifically Parashat Kedoshim is paraphrased with “Speak to the entire congregation of Israel” an expression never used in any other place in the Torah. Among the many answers given, I find the Maor’ v’Shemesh explanation especially relevant to us who live in the meditative mountaintop of Bat Ayin. Although we must sometimes seclude ourselves to avoid negative influences that may lead us to evil ways, this approach is only beneficial to avoid evil. Rashi teaches us that it is impossible to attain holiness without being united. To reach holiness it is necessary to join others in serving Hashem together as a community. Therefore, the mitzvot in Parashat Kedoshim relates equally to Jews of all different social states and ages, the Kohen, the judge, the farmer, and the elder. This section was said in assembly because only our nation in its completeness can carry it into action. I’m grateful for living in the unique Bat Ayin community comprised of scholars, artists, and farmers, and for running the micro-community of women of Midreshet B’erot Bat Ayin who engage in intense Torah learning as part of an integrated, participatory approach to Torah living. We can only fully serve Hashem as part of a holy community. When we are united as a community, the divine spark of each person’s soul merges with the rest of the community to embody the cosmic soul of the Shechinah (Divine Feminine Indwelling Presence).

### **Who Has the Ability to Climb the Ladder of Piety to Reach Holiness?**

I connect with Alshich who explains that since this section alerts us to be holy and resemble our Creator, some people may think that only a very few selective people in each generation could reach the level of holiness. Yet, among Israel, anyone who so desires can climb the ladder of piety, until he reaches holiness. Therefore, Moshe assembled everyone to show that we all have the potential to be holy. It makes me happy and grateful to realize that together with my fellow Jews I have the opportunity to become G-d-like by rising to the level of kedusha. *Parashat Kedoshim*, moreover, offers the recipe for exactly how to reach this lofty level through the performance of no less than 51 mitzvot. (*Parashat Kedoshim* has the greatest amount of mitzvot per verse in the entire Torah). Each of the mitzvot of *Parashat Kedoshim* can be read with the mindful perspective of gratitude. These mitzvot can help us to summon the courage and strength, not to mention the will, to reach higher, toward the good and the holy. Even amid the struggles and imperfections of regular people, we can feel gratitude for the mitzvah guidelines that guide us to strive to do good and become holy. With an additional layer of gratitude, *Parashat Kedoshim* can become more than a checklist of behaviors and attitudes by which we are called to live.

### **Examples of How to be Grateful for the Mitzvot of Parashat Kedoshim**

Here are some examples of reading some of the mitzvot of Parashat Kedoshim through the lens of gratitude:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not fully reap the corner of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the Eternal am your G-d.” (*Vayikra* 19:9-10).

In fulfilling my sacred responsibility of tzedakah, I can see it not only as a way to extend myself to others but also as an aspect of recognizing and acknowledging the good that I enjoy. There is always reason to be grateful for being in the position of being the giver rather than the recipient. We can

best show our *hakarat hatov* (recognizing the good) for our blessings when we share them with others. I'm grateful for Hashem's blessings of abundance that enable me to share with those less fortunate. I'm even thankful to share mulberries with various birds, whose singing I enjoy especially on Shabbat when I swing on my hammock in my enchanted garden.

"Love your neighbor as yourself, I am Hashem" (*Vayikra* 19:18).

You may ask yourself, "I may not love everything about my neighbor, but can I recognize what is good in her? Can I use *hakarat hatov* to appreciate and honor how she adds to our world?"

"You shall rise before the aged and you shall respect the elderly, and you shall fear your G-d. I am Hashem" (*Vayikra* 19:32).

The elders among us may have worked hard and contributed much to the community throughout their long lives. Yet they often don't receive the appreciation and respect due to them. This reflects a personal and communal failure to fulfill the mitzvah of respecting the elderly. As a community, we can do better. How would our engagement with our elders change if we viewed them not only through the lens of *kavod* (honor), but also through *hakarat hatov* and gratitude? (Based on Rabbi Eric S. Gurvis, *Hakarat HaTov - Gratitude: Our Daily Struggle for Kedushah*).

### **Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Kedoshim - Some Tips for How to Strengthen Gratitude for Holiness**

The Hebrew term for gratitude is *hakarat hatov*, literally, 'recognizing the good.' The good is already here. Practicing gratitude means being fully aware of the good that is already yours. Rabbi Bachya Ibn Pekuda, explains in *Duties of the Heart* that although every person has gifts, and there is good all around us, there is a tendency to not recognize it for several reasons, including:

- We are too absorbed in worldly things. Physical and material pleasures can never fully satisfy us. This endless pursuit of gratification can keep us from appreciating what we do have.
- We become so accustomed to our gifts that we take them for granted or become blind to them.
- We focus on the negative, rather than the positive. We waste too much energy focusing on others' mistakes instead of emphasizing the good they bring into our lives.
- **Fulfill the Mitzvah of Loving Your Neighbor as Yourself** - by telling someone the good points you notice in her and why you're grateful for them. Tell a significant person in your life that you are thankful for him or her and why.
- **Honor Your Parents by Showing Gratitude** - for everything your parents have done for you and honor them with a visit or at least a weekly phone call. Send them photos often, of yourself and your children and grandchildren if you have any, and drop them an old-fashioned postcard whenever possible from places you visit.
- **Express Gratitude by Sharing Your Gifts with Others** - Whenever you feel blessed with abundance, take the opportunity to share with others. Organic fruits from your garden are a loving gift, but so are homemade oatmeal cookies, and sundried tomatoes! Giving your time by offering help to a family blessed with many children is a wonderful way of showing gratitude for being blessed with time to spare while fulfilling the mitzvah of loving your fellow like yourself.