



"Honoring Tradition, Celebrating Diversity, and Building a Jewish Future"

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Cultivating the *Middah* (soul-quality) of Personal *Kedushah* (Holiness)

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Shanah tovah.

We read in the Mishnah: *One should pray the Amidah with great sincerity. Even if the king asks: How are you? One should not respond; and even if a snake wraps itself around your heel, one should not interrupt the prayer.* ⁱNow, I hasten to point out that Rabbi Obadiah Bartenura, a 15th century Italian commentator, explains that this only applies to a Jewish king, for a *Yiddishe* monarch – we should only be so fortunate! – would surely know about the importance of the silent prayer and this very teaching, but if it's a gentile king, you better say "Hello, sir," back, lest you be executed on the spot! Bartenura goes on to explain that the snake on your leg is likely to be harmless, anyway, but if a scorpion climbs up your leg, it's definitely appropriate to stop.

I thought of this Mishnah when a friend told me this story about Rabbi Israel Salanter. A Lithuanian rabbi living at the eve of the modern world, Salanter worried that excessive attention to the ritual mitzvot was not preparing people to live in the world. Rabbi Salanter passed a meticulously observant Jew during these Ten Days of Awe. Rabbi Salanter's Hasid, his follower, was so engrossed in prayer and reflection that he failed to greet his Rebbe, whereupon Salanter protested: "Just because you are so pious, does this give you the right to deny me my 'Good morning'?" ⁱⁱⁱThe Rabbi saw a community busy with the details of the commandments but painfully lacking in heart and soul. He realized that even as his community was scrupulous in its observance of the ritual commandments, it was not attentive enough to the spiritual outlook and practices the mitzvot should engender. The 613 mitzvot – and all their elaborations – are mostly about external behaviors; but underlying them are motivations and attitudes which are harder to legislate yet which shape how we experience and how we act in the world. Now, let's be honest – excessively scrupulous attention to the precise fulfillment of the mitzvot is not a problem for this community today! Yet no less than for the East European Jews of Salanter's generation, we too can benefit from the insights of the ages about how to nurture and live a richer and more satisfying inner life.

Rabbi Salanter mined the vast Jewish literature about ethical behavior and identified a series of *middot*, qualities of character, which an ethical person should cultivate and cherish. He founded a movement for Jewish spiritual renewal, writing books and organizing yeshivas dedicated to *mussar*; *Mussar* originally stood for the entirety of the Jewish ethical tradition but since Rabbi Salanter's day has meant attention to personal ethics through study and the cultivation of character. The organized study of *mussar* literature and practices – and the



cultivation of the attendant *middot*, qualities of character – have become a source of learning, renewal and spiritual transformation for many contemporary Jews. Here at Beth El this year, our education programs will be learning about and seeking to cultivate in our children these qualities of character, focusing on a different *middah* – a different character quality – each month. And I thought: if we are going to ask our children to do this, shouldn't we ask ourselves to do so as well?

Rabbi Salanter came up with a list – as many others have as well– of the *middot*, the qualities of character that a person should cultivate – humility, patience, gratitude, compassion, silence, truth, fortitude... We have chosen several of his and some of our own to work on this year. But underlying all of these is a fundamental attitude, the first *middah*, the initial quality which orients the soul to the rest. That is the *middah*, the soul-character, of *kedushah*, holiness.

As the Jewish people are gathering at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah, there is a smaller, preliminary breakout meeting before the big plenary. At this gathering, the assembled nation – and, as our tradition teaches, all the generations of our people, especially including our own – hears what it's all about. In God's Torah lesson plan, this was labeled "enduring understanding" or colloquially, the take-away. The revelation begins with: "*K'doshim tihiyu...* You shall **become** holy...."ⁱⁱⁱ Moving **towards** *k'dushah*, holiness – this is the human task. Our potential and our goal is to nurture and deepen our individual and communal capacity for holiness.^{iv}

What does Judaism mean by *k'dushah*, holiness? The underlying Hebrew root has the force of "dedicated for, set apart, purposeful." For me, human holiness is our realization and the cultivation of our essential God-like-ness. "*Va'yivra Elohim et ha-adam b'tzalmo* The human was created in the image and likeness of God." There is a terrible tension in this teaching; for, on the hand, we value the dignity of each person and each life, as they are in this moment, all of them and each one somehow holding and reflecting *tzelem Elohim*, the divine image; yet the call at Sinai is dynamic, summoning us to move ever closer towards *k'dushah*. As the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber taught: The Creator imbued the human creation with the divine likeness so that the divine image might unfold in human life and "thereby reveal that not being but becoming is the human task."^v

Not being but becoming is the human task. An early *mussar* teacher, Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzatto, explained that the goal of each human life – the human task unfolding in our lives -is *sh'leimut*, wholeness, integrity.^{vi} *Sheleimut*, wholeness, is another expression for living in a state of spiritual *kedushah*, holiness. And the path to such *sheleimut* is *tikun*, the work of repair, healing and completion. But we come to speak today not of *tikun ha-olam*, the repair of the world, but of the healing of the soul, *tikun ha-nefesh*. (I will speak later during these holy days about *tikun olam*.)

At our wonderful Shabbaton, at Shabbat YAFE, and across our educational programs, we have been speaking about *Kehillah Kedoshah*, sacred community, and we will be teaching and discussing with the congregation various *middot* over the course of the year.



This evening, I want to speak about the *middah*, the quality of **personal kedushah**, individual holiness. I invite you to reflect this evening on the *kedushah*, the holiness and distinctiveness within your own soul and which you bring to the world. For while we are on a path towards becoming holy, *k'doshim tihiyu*, we also are already holy – for, at the core of our faith, is the belief that each one of you is, in your essence, *b'tzelem Elohim*, a reflection of the divine.

It is easy, especially during this season of reflection, to beat ourselves up for our failings. If you are like me, criticism – whether coming from loved ones, co-workers or most especially, from my own internal voice – penetrates much deeper and is remembered longer than blessings or successes. The word *middah* itself though literally means “a measure” – our spiritual work is to cultivate the appropriate quotient of each of our character qualities in appropriate measure, but not to excess. The Torah tradition often opposes the *middah* of *g'vurah*, firmness and strength, against that of *chesed*, loving kindness. We need to discover and cultivate both of these qualities within ourselves; for an excess of *g'vurah*, strength, can result in an unyielding rigidity, and an overabundance of *chesed*, loving kindness, can lead us to engage in patronizing, enabling or infantilizing behaviors.^{vii}

These High Holy days are retrospective and prospective. *Sefer ha-zichronot niftach*...the Book of Remembrances is opened, and we look back at the year gone so swiftly by...and we ask to be written and sealed for the New Year ahead *b'safer chaim v'beracha v'shlemut*, in the Book of Life, the Book of Blessing, the Book of Wholeness.

This evening, as we enter into these days of reflection and self-examination, I ask you to begin by asking yourself, not just “Where have I failed?” but “What are the qualities within me that lead to holiness?”

With love, I ask you a question I am confident you can answer if you will permit yourself to do so: what have you done to merit being here today? What have you written in the Book that makes your life sacred? Truly, we know, that life is unpredictable and often unfair; the length of our days is, in so many ways, out of our hands. Yet what are we doing with the days that we do have – what is the measure of holiness that we bring to our lives and what can we, with humility, celebrate and honor?

I have learned to ask this question from a contemporary Jewish teacher, Erica Brown, who quotes a passage in Tractate Megilah of the Talmud, in which a group of students ask their teacher: “What qualities did you have in your life which merited your long life?”^{viii}

Rabbi Nehunya ben HaKana immediately replied: “In all my days, I never attained honor at someone else's expense. Nor did my fellow's curse go up with me upon my bed. And I was always openhanded with money. ”

Later, he was asked again and this time he said: “In all my days I never accepted gifts. Nor was I ever inflexible by exacting a measure of retribution against those who wronged me. And I was always openhanded with my money. ”



Rabbi Nehunya lived with an inner security that came from generosity of spirit: he offered people his good will, he granted them forgiveness, and shared his material wealth – something that he emphasized each time he was asked. He didn't hold on to things unnecessarily - not resentments, not possessions, not pride. He cultivated the *middah* of giving generously.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korha attributed the quality of his life to how he thought about other people: "In all my days I never gazed at the likeness of a wicked person." Now what did Rabbi Yehoshua mean? Probably this meant that he surrounded himself with people who were supportive of his own spiritual path, those who also were seeking to live lives of holiness; he built for himself a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community.

But perhaps this is also a statement about how Rabbi Yehoshua saw other people around him; he cultivated the twin *middot* of trust and of *kaf zechut*, assuming that others' intentions are good. He did not judge people or jump to conclusions – and therefore was able to discern the goodness in each person since "all the days of my life I never gazed at the likeness of a wicked person." His openness to seeing the good and holy in others enabled him to move through life with greater trust and to believe in the possibility of goodness in others.

When I think of the greatest people I have been blessed to know- my mentor, Phyllis Mintzer, Beth El's Education Director in Rabbi Levine's early years, along with other teachers, therapists, mental health workers, and assorted ordinary folk -I realize that they have all been people who cultivate this *middah*, this quality, of openhearted faith in their own ability to discern the holy sparks within each person they encounter. Rabbi Yehoshua and his contemporary spiritual disciples cultivated the *middot*, the qualities, of trust and of *kaf zechut*, extending the benefit of the doubt. How might your own experience of your family, your workplace and the world be different if you cultivated a practice of assuming that others' are motivated by good intentions, each person acting as they are capable in any particular moment?

In the Talmudic conversation, yet a third teacher, Rabbi Zeira, weighs in; now listen carefully because he had some trouble narrowing down his list! "In all my days I was never angry inside my house. I never walked ahead of someone who was a greater Torah scholar than me, nor did I ever walk a distance of four cubits without words of Torah or without wearing my tefillin. Furthermore, I never slept in the study hall, neither a deep sleep nor even a brief nap. Finally, I never rejoiced when my fellow stumbled nor did I ever call someone else by a derogatory nickname. "

This rabbi lived a life of humility and sensitivity. We actually have no idea how old he was when his life ended, but he understood his life to be full and long because he stayed engaged in all of it. He stayed awake throughout his life and therefore was able to make the most of every moment that he had. Rabbi Zeira nurtured the *middah* of humility; believing he could learn from every encounter and every person, he was always engaged and certainly never played Tetris on his cell phone.



What are the qualities of character, the *middot*, that these rabbis had? They include generosity – generosity of spirit and generosity of resources; forgiveness and compassion to others; trust and assuming that the motivations of others are, in the actors' own eyes at least, for the good; humility about oneself; and living with attention to and gratitude for each moment.

Well, I have to tell you, I've been talking about this Talmudic *sugya* a lot this month and every time I read the list of qualities that these rabbis spoke of, I have to confront the fact that, to quote a certain domestic critic from a younger generation, I am a "fail" at doing just about all those things. I have my work cut out for me and aspire to working on each of these *middot*, these qualities of soul-character, in the coming year. Yet still, here I am, blessed to have completed another year. So why am I here? And if I'm indeed so poor at all those things, what then is the internal locus of my own *k'dushah*, holy work? I'm trying to slow the internal voices and find the holiness in myself – because if I can name the strengths and gifts I have, I can deepen them and thereby move towards the *sheleimut*, the wholeness, of balance, integrity and purpose I yearn for.

Honestly now, these ancient rabbis were no better and no worse than you and me. Yet they did have a deep and abiding faith that, with reflection and wisdom, they could offer a guess about why they deserved to be alive. Erica Brown writes: "Instead of beating themselves [up] for all that they had done wrong in the past and might repeat again in the future, they were able to look back with pride at the lives of virtue that they crafted." ^{ix} They could identify behaviors and tendencies that made the quality of life deep and worthwhile.

We each have different strengths and different challenges; the *middot*, the characteristics of the holy and wholistic soul which need to be cultivated and strengthened within, are different for every one of us. Yet we all can begin by nurturing the *middah*, the quality of *K'dushah*, holiness, distinctiveness. This *middah*, this soul-quality, requires that we believe that we are indeed in God's image and that the divine spark is alive within us.

So my invitation to you, tonight and over these High Holy days, is to explore why you are leading the very particular life you are at this moment. You are alive at this moment in time and history – what are your gifts? By what merit are you alive at this New Year? If we are honest in our *chesbon ha-nefesh*, our accounting of the soul which is at the heart of the spirituality of these Days of Awe, we will balance the harshness of *midat din*, the judgment, critique and self-criticism – which many of us are really good at, although we simultaneously often believe that everyone else around us lacks this capacity! – if we are honest, we will balance our *din*, our judgment, with the *middah* of *chesed*, righteous kindness and the *middah* of *rachamim*, compassionate and accepting love.

As we enter these High Holy days, I ask you to take time to reflect on the *k'dushah*, the distinctiveness of your own life. What good do you bring to the world right now that is your particular gift? Let's take a moment now to lift up and celebrate our strength of character.



How can you cultivate and deepen these qualities in the year ahead, increasing the *k'dushah* within and thereby the quotient of holiness in the world? And what qualities of the soul do you need to nurture this year in your own movement towards *sheleimut*, wholeness?

In this New Year, let us celebrate and honor the qualities and gifts we each bring, thereby meriting fullness of life in the year ahead.

Kein yehi ratzon. Amen.

ⁱ Mishnah Berakhot 5:1.

ⁱⁱ This story- and the inspiration for this derash – come from Rabbi Judy Shanks, Temple Isaiah, Lafayette.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is my personal midrashic conflation of Exodus 19:1-6 with Leviticus 19:1. Comp. Midrash Rabbah (Sh'ma + *anochi*).

^{iv} Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, Intro, .

^v Martin Buber, *The Way Of Response* (New York: Schocken, 1966).

^{vi} Born in Italy in 1707;

^{vii} Morinis, pg. 20. He opposes “unyielding rigidity” against “excessive sentimentality. ”

^{viii} TB Megilla 28a. The translation and commentary on this Talmudic passage is freely adapted from “Live Long and Prosper,” *Weekly Jewish Wisdom* by Erica Brown (erica@ericabrown.com.) August 21, 2014. www.ericabrown.com.

^{ix} Erica Brown.