AT THE CENTER OF ALL THINGS
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Temple Sholom
May 1, 2020

I want to begin by talking about what I won't be talking about tonight. I won't be talking about COVID-19 and the Global Pandemic. Not because I am not thinking about it, in fact precisely because it seems to be all I think about and I need a break, we all need a break. From social distancing, from news obsessing, from numbers tracking and just general worrying.

We can't stop doing any of those things yet, but we can stop talking and thinking about them for a little bit. Based on what I know, sadly it will still be there after shabbes.

One of the blessings of this forced isolation has been the opportunity to read. It's a great escape, when you really can't physically escape.

I like to read anthologies, science fiction is my particular genre of choice but whether its Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Hunger Games or collections of short stories, I love to read books within books, stories so sweeping that one volume cannot contain them.

That's one of the reasons I love the Torah. Not only for its deep insight and wisdom but for its sheer scale, the arch of the story from the creation of the world, the first human beings, the first Jewish family, the Jewish people and ultimately the Jewish nation.

In five-part anthologies, like the Torah it is always the third book that forms the center of the collection and serves in many ways as the literary keystone upon which all of the other books and their stories rest.

So it is that Vayikra (Leviticus), the third book is the center of the Torah. And at the very center of Vayikra is Kedoshim, the Holiness Code, this week's parasha.

Kedoshim is central in more than just location. A pinnacle of spirit and morality, it embodies the high-water mark of all religious writing, in any period. It is the center of the center of the center of things, the bullseye in the target, the pearl within the clamshell in an ocean of words and ideas.

What makes Kedoshim uniquely magnificent is its insistence on a what Rabbi Brad Artson refers to as, "**maximal Judaism** — a Judaism that demands much, teaches even more, and that creates a completely new orientation in the hearts of those who try to take it seriously."

'Kedoshim does not tailor Judaism to fit the personalities or ideologies of any particular group of Jews. It is not of an era or a time, its message is timeless and eternal. Instead of being limited to the events of the day, as this sermon would be if I were to speak about the pandemic, it

posits a lofty set of standards and then challenges Jews of every age to rise up to match its high ideals and exalted holiness.

Kedoshim asks us all to grow beyond our own comfortable conventions, our own sleepy standards, to confront our evasion of excellence, our distraction with the ordinary and the mundane and to strive for greatness, unmoored to reality, or past, present or even future circumstance.

There are some Jews for whom Judaism is primarily a set of behaviors. What matters, for them, is whether or not a Jew performs the required behavior (ritual) in the proper manner. Such people measure "religious Jews" by the number of homes they won't eat in or by the punctilious performance of ritual deeds.

Yet another group of Jews see Judaism exclusively as a form of social action. Ethics, for them, is the sum and total of any "living" Judaism. Marching against injustice, fighting Anti-Semitism, advocating for Israel, petitioning their government and writing letters to the editor — this forms the entirety of what is important in being Jewish. Either of these approaches to Judaism may be right, but neither of them captures the totality of Kedoshim.

Both of these philosophies of Judaism ("Judaism is doing the proper rituals," or "Judaism is fighting injustice") contain an important insight, but both of them reflect only a caricature of the fullness of Judaism as it is presented in the Torah and explained by the rabbis of the Talmud and later texts.

The Zen Buddists teach, that the hardest thing to do in life is to carry two equally precious things in your hands at the same time. It may come from the Talmud principle, taught by Rabbi Simcha Bunim that a person should carrying two verses in your pockets every day. On one should be written the verse, "For my sake the world was created," while on the other should be written the verse, "I am but dust and ashes."

Why because the key to knowing which to hold at any given moment, how to balance two equally important things is that they are not separate but rather indivisible.

At the very center of not only the Torah but of Judaism itself as this week's reading demonstrates is the indivisibility of ritual and ethics. Without seeing any difference, the Torah speaks about paying a laborer his wages promptly, observing Shabbat, honoring parents, not forming idols, the proper mode of sacrifice, and leaving food available for the poor. In this purposeful jumble of ritual and ethical injunctions, the Torah offers only a single justification: "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." What is the bridge between ritual and ethics?

I am the bridge, you are the bridge, human beings in all their untapped holiness are the bridge.

Again as Rabbi Artson explains, “A maximal Jew practices rituals that are rooted in ethics, and acts on an ethical system that finds expression and reinforcement through ritual. Ethical rigor and ritual profundity — that is the Jewish definition of holiness. By blending those two strands, we create a tapestry stronger and more enduring than either individual thread alone.”

The holiness code is the Jewish version of walking the walk and talking the talk.

Our parasha teaches us that ritual requires ethics to root it in the human condition, to force it to express human needs and to channel urges, to serve human growth and to foster insight.

Likewise, ethics requires ritual to lend substance to lofty ideals, to remind, on a regular basis, of ethical commitments already made, and to create a community of shared values and high standards. Ritual without ethics becomes cruel. Ethics without ritual becomes hollow.

One of Judaism’s central insights is to fuse ritual and ethics into a single blazing light — the mitzvah (commandment) — and then to endow that new composite creation with an even higher calling — holiness — to reflect the very nature of God. Our standard is no longer tailored to concede our own imperfections or to cater to our self-interest.

The two need each other to teach restraint, balance, and compassion. By blending ritual and ethics, we shift the focus from our perspective to God’s. “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” You are not a free agent; you are not an independent operator. To quote Jake & Elwood Blues, from the Blues Brothers, “we’re on a mission from God”.

And what does all this have to do with COVID-19? Nothing and everything of course.

The virus doesn’t distinguish between “good Jews” and ‘bad Jews’ it doesn’t care if we are ethical or deceitful. It will infect any human host it can find. That’s the brutality and the injustice of this virus.

But as we have learned and as I observed in my very first sermon about the virus now 10 weeks ago, this is not a test of our faith in God, it’s a test of our faith in each other, our humanity. How we have acted during this crisis, how we have treated ourselves, those stuck at home with us, our employees, the workers we depend on, our civil authorities, our helping organizations. That has been the test of our ability to meet the standard of Kedoshim, of being holy like God is holy.

At the center of the center of the center of Torah is the Holiness Code which calls us to a higher purpose. At the center of the center of the center of the human being is the soul, it too is holy and it too calls upon each of us, commands each of us to strive for maximal humanity, maximal meaning, maximal presence, to be the very best version of ourselves – to be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy; and, each of us were created in God’s image. We can be holy too; nothing in this virus prevents that, indeed everything about it and our communal response demands it. In the end it is wholly up to each one of us.