

Dvar Torah for Kedoshim – May 11, 2019
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Do you like TV game shows?

I, for one, love game shows. Many evenings after dinner, I'll settle down to watch Wheel of Fortune, followed by Jeopardy. Sometimes, I might follow that up with two consecutive episodes of Family Feud, and on an exceptionally decadent evening I might even also do the \$100k Pyramid and the Match Game.

Now of course all of the game shows have different formats and different rules, but they all have contestants trying to answer questions (or in the case of Jeopardy give questions to the answers) to gain points, with the person or team having the most points at the end being declared the winner.

There is one category of question that spans the range of all the game shows, and that is the fill in the blank. "Green _____", or "French _____": That could be 4 words in a crossword puzzle on Wheel of Fortune, or a category in Double Jeopardy, or Steve Harvey or Alec Baldwin (formerly Richard Dawson or Gene Rayburn) saying "we asked 100 people..."

So for all of you out there who have ever mused, "I bet I could win on that show," I have a fill-in-the-blank question for you: "BE _____"

Now you might be thinking, "BE GOOD." Okay. "BE NICE." Um-hmm. As your teammates on Family Feud would encourage you: "Good answer, good answer!"

"BE HAPPY!" That's a good one. You'd just love your spin to land on the \$5000 slot and see Vanna turn up not one but 2 P's.

Now, unless you're sitting in shul on Shabbat *Kedoshim*, listening to a Dvar Torah from one of your fellow congregants, and you're using your very best gamesmanship—you know, that clue that Alex Trebec reads and you didn't really know the answer—I mean the question—but you can figure it out just from the category and the way the clues is worded—without all of that context, I wonder how many people here today would answer "BE HOLY." Be holy?! In spite of the obligatory "Good answer" encouragement from your "Family" teammates, Steve Harvey would give you a look like you had three heads, and most likely you'd get the dreaded buzzer sound and a big strike.

BE KIND. That's good too.

But BE HOLY—who ever says that these days? I doubt anyone here today can remember the last time anyone admonished them with that command.

If you've ever been a boy scout, you know you should BE PREPARED. Or an army recruiter would jingle to you: (singing) BE ALL THAT YOU CAN BE.

The thing is, when we're told to be nice, be good, be kind, or be happy, we have a good sense of what those things mean. And those are all things we can do, although not necessarily easily or totally willingly. We might dislike someone and not want to be nice to them, sometimes we

might want to wallow in our current perceived misery about an undesirable situation and not really want to be happy; we'd rather be naughty than good. But at least we know what each of those things is.

Be holy—how do we do that?

Well, in today's parshah, as we know, we begin with "The LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.'"

What in the world does that mean?

BE SAFE. That's a good one.

BE A MAN.

BE MINDFUL.

Now, from the text, without even having any idea how to be holy, we can immediately grasp the importance of the commandment. First, it's something commanded to the entire assembly, not just the elders, not the leaders, not the men, not the adults, but everyone. And second, there's a reason given: because God is holy. Before the what, the how, then when or the where, you get the why. And that why is really powerful: you are emulating God.

BE YOURSELF.

(singing) BE TRUE TO YOUR SCHOOL.

So how to be holy? Well, God gives us a list of specifics. Revere your parents, observe Shabbat, don't practice idolatry.

To someone not previously familiar with the list of dos and don'ts, most of the things in the verses that follow are pretty sensible, even obvious: don't steal, don't say insulting things to a deaf person, don't trip a blind person, judge fairly, and love your neighbor as yourself. But some are less so: eat a sacrifice before the end of the third day, don't sow fields with two different kinds of seed, don't shave the corners of your beard.

BE QUIET!

(singing) BE MY LOVE...

Oh, one of my favorites: I remember once when my nephew was two years old, I heard his grandmother say "Be..." and he completed it "(BE)HAVE." And as long as we're going down that road, how about "(BE)LIEVE"?

Now, when you're studying a text of Torah in its context, you need to look not only after, but also before the text you're studying. So let's look, what comes just before the beginning of *Parshat Kedoshim*? Well, it's the end of *Parshat Aharei Mot*, a section called the *arayot*, a cataloguing of all the people you're not allowed to have sexual relations with. Both Rashi and Ramban, in their commentaries, focus on this to explain holiness, rather than the following list of rules in this parshah, several of which I just mentioned. Rashi: "Keep aloof from the forbidden sexual relations just mentioned and from sin." Ramban expounds this further (I'm abridging here): "Just like I am holy, you should be holy; just like I am separate, you should be separate. ... The Torah prohibited sexual transgressions and forbidden foods, and permitted

sexual relations between husband and wife and the eating of meat and the drinking of wine. If so, a desirous person will find a place to be lecherous with his wife (or his many wives), or to be among the guzzlers of wine and the gluttons of meat. ... And thus he would be a scoundrel with the permission of the Torah. Therefore, Scripture came, after it specified the prohibitions that it completely forbade, and it commanded a more general rule, that we should be separated from overindulging in those things that are permissible: minimize sexual relations, and only have relations according to the need for execution of the commandment [to be fruitful and multiply].”

Now, I’m not going to dwell on this. Suffice it to say, within much of the Hasidic and ultraorthodox communities, today when they use the term *kedushah*, which we would translate simply as “holiness,” what they are specifically talking about are the rules regulating restrictions on permitted sexual behavior and thoughts.

But let’s move on. How do we, as members of a self-described liberal Jewish community, view being holy, aside from following the specific directives that we read earlier today?

Uh, Pat, can I buy a vowel? How about an “O”? Yes, there’s one “O.”

I think of three approaches that make us holy.

Kadosh #1. Holy is different, and not just different but proud to be different. So often we can just feel right from wrong. You know, and you can see, a whole lot of behaviors that your gut tells you are wrong; don’t do those things. Even if everyone else might be doing them. But also be willing to stand up—or stand out—and proclaim, “we’re not doing that, because we choose to be different (meaning: holy).”

Kadosh #2. A slightly more holistic take on being holy. I like to think of the requirement to “be holy” as encompassing all of those other wonderful, positive “Be fill-in-the-blank” answers. If you choose to be good, to be kind, to be careful, and mindful, and prepared, and be all that you can be, and quiet, and strong, and brave, and if you behave and believe, then you will indeed be leading a holy life.

Kadosh #3. Mix in one more ingredient: the fulfillment of mitzvot. As we say in so many blessings, “*asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav*,” God has made us holy with his commandments.

All of which adds up to *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh!*

As a community, a *kehillah kedoshah*, when we see someone who embodies those ideals, of course we know our response: (singing) BE OUR GUEST.

And since it’s Shabbat, Alex, how about let’s make it a true daily double.

Shabbat shalom.