

Yom Kippur Morning – 5778
Toward a Life of Holiness
September 30, 2017

Given that these are my last High Holidays on this bima, my goal for these sermons has been to crystallize some of the core teachings I have offered over the years, boiling them down to the essence of what I believe and think as a Jew, and as your rabbi.

Last week, I spoke about the essential goodness of the world and how we are called to discover the good around us and to testify to that goodness by the way we live our lives and interact with the world.

This focus on the good is rooted in my core belief about God and the world, which I can express in three short sentences. I'll say it again, in case you missed it last week:

I believe that God exists, not out there somewhere, but in all being. The oneness of God is reflected in the oneness of the entire universe. As a part of that oneness, animated by the divine spark, we are called on to recognize the goodness of all creation and instill our world with holiness.

So, having talked about recognizing and affirming the good, today I'll focus on "instilling our world with holiness." That conversation, too, begins with our foundational story of creation.

You know the story. In the first chapter of Genesis, God creates the world beginning with light, separating it from darkness. Then God divides dry earth from the seas, creates plants, animals and finally, human beings. Nothing comes into being without everything it needs to thrive already in place. And at every stage, God stops, and looks, and declares it GOOD.

Now, good is good. Sometimes it's even great. But God's not done yet. Listen to the text:

"Completed now where heaven and earth and all their array. On the seventh day, God completed the work by stopping. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it **holy** – ceasing from all the creative work God had done."

Shabbat holiness is the crowning achievement of all creation! God's world may be good, but is not complete until it has been endowed with holiness.

Now, if you don't know what holiness is, don't worry. We'll get to that later. For now, I'll just say that nobody really knows exactly what holiness is. This "not-knowing" is part of the definition of holiness.

So we have a good world, and we have a holy world. But we do not have a perfect world. The first hint that something is not right is when God declares something *lo tov* – not good. “It is not good that the human is alone!”

God repairs this flaw by creating a partner for the human. Together, Adam and Eve exercise free-will, forgo immortality and instead choose a life of moral decision-making. Of course, moral decisions have consequences.

Before long, things spiral out of control, and goodness takes a back seat to other human urges. Deceit, jealousy, murder and violence expose the ugly side of human nature. The beautiful, good world God created is no longer good, and the holiness of Shabbat seems lost.

Then comes Noah – a second creation story, a kind of do-over. This time, God imposes the rule of law. Unfortunately, even laws can’t fix a basic flaw in humanity; given the capacity to make real choices, we sometimes make poor ones. The existence of evil in the world is the tradeoff for having free will.

Nevertheless, God doesn’t give up. God looks for another partner who might help manage the consequences of human error, and finds one in Abraham.

Abraham’s first real test comes in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. As you know, the people of these towns were wicked beyond redemption. God decides to destroy them and start over, just as God did with Noah and the flood.

But first, God tells Abraham about the divine plan to destroy the two cities, testing him to see how he would respond. Would Abraham save himself and his family like Noah? Or would he seek justice for the inhabitants of that place? Indeed, Abraham steps up and argues with God:

Abraham came and said, “Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will you wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the fifty who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty...Far be it from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”

Abraham argues the cause of justice. Moreover, he pushes for an even higher standard. You see, not only does Abraham beg God not to destroy the righteous along with the wicked. He also asks God to save the wicked on account of the righteous, allowing them to turn in forgiveness. It is here that Abraham displays his superior moral sense.

It goes without saying that you must not punish the righteous along with the wicked. Abraham’s real argument is much more. He demands that God save the sinners – tempering judgment with mercy. God must spare the righteous because it is right. God should spare the wicked as well, because God is merciful.

The lesson here is more than a powerful case for justice and mercy! By making this argument, Abraham is defining the role of the Jewish people for all generations to come. This story is not about Abraham, it's about us!

Listen to what God says before Abraham comes on the scene:

“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since all the nations are to bless themselves by him? For I have chosen him, that he may teach those who come after him (that's us!) to keep the way of the Eternal by doing what is just and right.”

This is the job description of the Jewish people: “to teach our children to keep the way of the Eternal by doing what is just and right.”

Every day we are called upon to dispense justice. And our tradition demands that we do so with mercy. Tempering justice with mercy sets a high standard of morality that is the gateway to holiness.

Now, if we truly want to know what it means to be holy, the best place to turn is to Leviticus 19, known as the Holiness Code, which we will read this afternoon.

“Kedoshim t'hiyu, ki kadosh ani Adonai Eloheichem – Holy you shall be, for I, Adonai your God, am holy.”

What follows is a manifesto of mitzvot – sacred obligations. This is the next big hint at what holiness is, because mitzvot are the pathway to holiness.

Nechama Leibowitz teaches that holiness is not a human category. It is a religious concept. There is no such thing as a holy person. Holiness is a quality of God – not something we can achieve, but something to strive toward.

In order to help us strive toward holiness, Kedoshim lists more than 60 mitzvot that bring holiness into the world. Two thirds of these mitzvot are ethical. Our sacred obligations begin with honoring parents; leaving the corners of your field for the poor and the stranger. Don't steal, lie or bear false witness. Don't put a stumbling block before the blind.

Kedoshim teaches that holiness begins with strict adherence to moral law. Ethics is the first, necessary step toward holiness.

But it only the first step. Kedoshim prescribes other mitzvot as well. At the top of the list is keeping Shabbat. These ritual, or cultic mitzvahs govern our relationship with God. They are not necessarily logical. They are spiritual by nature. They become more and more mysterious as we read: “You shall not let your cattle mate with another kind, you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed.” And my all time favorite: “You shall not mix linen and wool.”

What is going on here?

Torah has moved us from mitzvot that are rational and ethical, to the non-rational, spiritual realm of holiness. We learn that holiness is beyond reason.

By its nature, then, holiness cannot be completely understood. It dwells in the human experience of awe and wonder. We sense holiness in beauty and in love. Holiness is based on the idea that the world was created by God for a reason and that life is meaningful. The world speaks to us of something greater than ourselves. And that is inherently mysterious.

Rabbi David Wolpe observes:

True holiness has something uncanny about it; like the burning bush, situated on holy ground, it is a fire that is not self-consuming. The holy is a glimpse at the *source* of the ethical. Through sacred action, holiness can be achieved by performing God's work in the world – translating the unfathomable into the tangible. (Rabbi David Wolpe, Mosaic, 3/30/17, adapted)

Now, don't think for a moment that there are two worlds – God's world and our world. There is no material world versus spiritual world, no divine realm and human realm. It is all **ONE**. The Oneness of God **IS** the oneness of the universe.

As Martin Buber teaches in The Way of Man: "In their true essence, the two worlds are one. They only have, as it were, moved apart. But they shall again become one, as they are in their true essence.

"Human beings were created for the purpose of unifying the two worlds. We contribute towards this unity by holy living, in relationship to the world in which we have been set.."

"God wants to come to this world, but God wants to come to it through us. This is the mystery of our existence, the superhuman chance of humankind."

Where does God live? Every seventh grader knows that God is everywhere, but the truth is that God can only live where we let God in.

In Exodus we read: *Asu li mikdash, v'shachanti b'tocham* – Make for Me a holy place, that I might dwell among you."

This is the ultimate purpose of our lives: to let God in. We are here to make room for God in our world by making our little corner of creation holy by performing mitzvot: honoring our parents, comforting the bereaved, celebrating with bride and groom. Love your neighbor as yourself. AND we make room for God by keeping Shabbat, not worshipping false gods, avoiding forbidden mixtures and, yes, not mixing linen and wool.

As religious people, we have never been content simply to lead moral lives. We Jews have the audacity to insist the world is more than it seems. We strive to create a world as it ought to be.

This is the job description of the Jewish people: To recognize that the potential for holiness may be found in all existence. Therefore it is up to us to see it, to lift up the holy, and to sanctify our lives and the place where we live, bringing God's Presence into the world.