



Week 3: Toward Holiness **Arielle Krule, Class of 2025**

“It’s like a *mikvah* in here,” he said. I nodded, intuitively knowing what he meant, but asked, “could you tell me a little bit more about what you mean?” “Well, ya know, out there, we could be messing up over and over again, but we come in here and are shiny and new—it’s like we go through the *mikvah* when we show up and share in a group. Out there, we’re unholy. Here, we become holy together.”

We meet online on Thursday nights in community with people on recovery journeys to talk about the ways in which we leaned into holiness or away from it the previous week. Being in that meeting feels so close to what I think Judaism actually requires from us at this time of year. We’re in one of those transitional times—when we stand between the before and the after—the narrowness and the freedom, the messy kitchens and the clean one. The transition from slavery to the immediate relief of freedom to the much deeper wandering and grappling that is demanded of us while living a free life. Only then, once we have wandered and fallen and gotten back up can we reach for Revelation. Our tradition has leaned so hard into this idea that we actually throughout time have developed a 15-step process, the *seder*, to start that transition.

Even moreso, twice throughout it we’re invited to engage in our own personal *mikvaot*—with two ritual handwashings, during that *seder*. The first without blessing, the second with. While the rabbis have identified why that is, I can’t help but think about how emotionally intelligent their decision was—often, it takes two times to get the restart process right. The first is bumpy and awkward. It feels like going through the motions—it’s a fake it until you make it. The second one, though—that’s when we have created more internal space. The second one is when we actually have the capacity to see what we are doing as transformative and be present for the act. I believe it’s part of the same reason we have a whole seven weeks to wander in our newly found freedom—to gain our sea legs as we learn how to exist with a new relationship to ourselves and others.

Once we have consumed ourselves with the details of removing the *chametz* from our lives—literal and spiritual, this year we are invited to consider the processes through which we as a people and as individuals with the two *parshiyot* that fall at the end of Passover, Kedoshim and Emor.

We are at the point in sefer Vayikra where we've moved into the rules and regulations of "holiness" and how any individual, let alone a whole group of emancipated people in the desert with few disposable resources, can manifest what it means to be created in the image of God. In Kedoshim, the first of these two *parshas*, we learn:

Hashem spoke to Moses, saying:
Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them:
You shall be holy, for I, Hashem your God, am holy.

Later, in Parshat Emor, we learn the consequences for not following the message Moshe lovingly delivered in Kedoshim:

Do not profane my holy name, and I will be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel, I am Hashem your God.

In the verses from Kedoshim, we learn about what it means to be holy in Jewish tradition. The *midrash Sifra Kedoshim* explains "*kedoshim tihyu*," "you shall be holy" as "*perushim tihyu*," "you shall be separate." Holiness is not an affirmation of the ordinary, as we have been accustomed to in modern life. It's also not about being sanctimonious. For Judaism, to make something holy is to make it different and separate, and therefore unique.

In the verse in Emor, though, we receive a different vision for holy-making, as we read about how God herself becomes holy among us. The ultimate *Individuated Being* actually achieves holiness through immersion in a group of imperfection.

So, which is it? How is it that we become holy? Do we become holy through our connection with God, or does God's holiness expand through our individual and communal actions?

Our Sages grapple with this very question in Talmud Bavli Niddah 34a.

This incident occurred during **a pilgrimage Festival**, either Passover, Sukkot, or Shavuot, **and the Sages rendered the ritual impurity of an *am ha'aretz* during a pilgrimage Festival as purity.**

As it is written: “And all the men of Israel gathered to the city, like one man, united [*haverim*]” (Judges 20:11).

Whenever all the Jewish people gather in a single place, such as on a pilgrimage Festival, **the verse renders all of them *haverim***, even one who is an ignoramus.

The rabbis in this passage suggest that when people gather for a sacred meeting, the very act of being together in devotion to a greater vision or Higher Power actually transforms the impure into pure. There is something about participation in the group that has a purifying, sanctifying effect. In these settings, the thing that makes you “unfit” or “unclean” is actually the thing that enables your purification process and lifts you up. In this place, being unfit is what makes you fit.

This group gathers because we are in recovery of some sort. We have all landed in a place of *Mitzrayim* (of narrowness), that pushed some of us to a point of admitting we could not be cornered back anymore. We come and we share the variety of ways we have leaned into self-righteous sanctimoniousness over sanctity, missed the mark, or unsuccessfully attempted a watered down version of the paradigm of holiness.

The rejection of the charade of normal life and pretending things are fine is *actually* our qualification for entry to the group. The very thing that made us separate is actually what makes us a group. When you’re in that room, the experience of strength and *tikvah* (hope) is its own version of purification, a *mikvah* of sorts. It’s actually what brings us to redemption.

And despite this, and my belief in the necessity of community in the healing process, the cynic in me comes back to disbelief in the idea that God needs us to be whole. Isn’t the transformation of purity uni-directional, such that we need to make ourselves like God, but God should not need us?

In his commentary on Vayikra 22, [Sforno](#) brings us back to the original language and reminds us that God needs us, too:

“And I will become sanctified among the Children of Israel”—so that I may continue to perform miracles for them as I had vowed to do....

It’s only when God is immersed in the people that God can perform miracles to be witnessed and beheld. It is only when we are in community with others that our healing can be seen, affirmed, challenged, and ultimately sustained.

In the [eighth chapter of Mishnah Yoma](#), Rabbi Akiva exclaims our fortune at this relationship that is sustained through transition and renewal:

How fortunate are you, the Children of Israel! Before Whom are you purified and Who purifies you? It's Hashem in Shamayim.... Just as a ritual bath purifies the impure, so too, Hashem purifies Israel.

With our own hands, we have the choice to heal or damage, push away or join closer, close or open. Each day, we make decisions about how to exert our power in the world. Every morning and at countless opportunities throughout the day, there will come a moment of some type of ceremonial hand washing (*netilat yadayim*) to reset our tools for holiness. In doing so, we remember our move from freedom from slavery (*individuation*) to freedom in Torah (*the collective*).

With gratitude to Rabbi Dan Smokler for his divrei Torah and insight on these parshiyot.

Selah is a spiritual community of people in recovery and those who love them, grounded in Jewish tradition. If you or someone you love could benefit from a group of people who pray, learn, and celebrate together, please reach out.

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