

Shabbat Emor – May 14, 2022

By Judah Kaunfer on his Bar Mitzvah

This week's parashah contains many subjects on which I could focus, for example: The kohanim could not come into contact with the dead unless they were part of their immediate family, which many kohanim still practice today! Another topic is the Jewish holidays. In Emor the text goes through all the biblical holidays; when they are, how you celebrate them, and which are more important than others. In the end of parashat Emor there is a short but interesting tale of a man who gets into a fight, and in anger blasphemes (which means someone who said God's name in vain), and his punishment for blaspheming.

What connects all of these topics is the theme of kedusha: The Kohanim must be kept holy, as it says: וְקִדְשֵׁתוֹ וְקִדְשֵׁתוֹ מִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ you must keep him holy;" The holidays are called מִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ holy occasions, and the blasphemer desecrates God's special Holy Name.

But there is one specific verse related to kedusha that I found particularly interesting. Right before the section on the holidays, it states "וּנְקַדְשֵׁתִי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל." which means "I (God) will be made holy in the midst of the Israelite people." The Rabbis interpreted this to mean that some prayers may not be said when one is alone

כָּל דְּבַר שֶׁבִקְדוּשָׁה לֹא יִהְיֶה פְּחוֹת מֵעֶשְׂרָה. These prayers that declare God's special holiness, can be said only when a Minyan is present, for example the Kedusha of the Amidah, and Kadish.

Kedusha in this context, means to me that to pray these prayers effectively with Kavanah, (meaning) you need to be with other people. I like this idea because I think that praying in a community has many benefits: mostly, being able to see, hear and physically be with other people. This makes all the difference between praying alone and praying in the midst of your community.

Some praying experiences that I have had in which I have found that it is meaningful to pray in a Minyan are: Praying here at Minyan Maor and at Camp Ramah. In both places I think that when everyone's voice melds together it creates an awe inspiring effect that makes it more meaningful to me. Specifically, at Minyan Maor during the Kedusha of the Amidah, which is sung as call and response, you can hear the contrast of one voice to many voices. At Camp Ramah during Or Chadash everyone does the same hand motions and you can see everyone united just by doing simple movements with their hands.

Now, as I become a Bar Mitzvah I will be counted in a Minyan and I might be the one person who could move the line between having the congregation be able to pray prayers of kedushah, or not.

Let me share a story that the Baal Shem Tov told, that I think illustrates what I have been saying:

Once it happened that the residents of a warm land noticed that among the birds that had come to them in the winter there was one bird the likeness of which they had never seen in the entire world, both in its beauty and in its form. However the bird landed on a very tall tree where it was impossible to reach. When the king heard about this unusual bird, he commanded that many people assemble. One would climb on the shoulders of the other, another on him until they would reach the treetop and be able to take the bird. The people did as the king had commanded, one climbing on another until they reached the treetop. But the first people who stood at the bottom became impatient standing and waiting and cast off those who were on their shoulders and left. Then, of course, the others fell to the ground and were unable to seize the beautiful bird in accordance with the will of the king. The key intention of the king was that each one should assist the other so that together they would have the power to ascend to the treetop. But if the first people abandoned their place and each one scattered to go his own way, even those who stood above would be unable to reach the treetop, and the plan of the king would be disrupted.

Minyan and community are about reaching the treetop together. It is about standing together in prayer and the potential that opportunity to reach spiritual heights has for each and every one of us, when we all join together.

I leave you with this quote from Reuven Hammer:

“Some of the most important prayers concerning the holiness of God may be recited only in the presence of a minyan. There is an extra dimension to prayer recited by the community.... We might think the opposite. Cannot the presence of God be felt by one person alone on a mountain peak? Where better? Religion is not what we do with our aloneness, but what we do with our togetherness.”

As I have learned from parashat Emor, the value of standing together is vital to Judaism as a whole. I hope that this story and its main idea is meaningful to you too.

I would like to thank everyone who helped me for my Bar Mitzvah. Thank you Saba and Savta for studying parashat Emor with me and for helping me with this dvar torah. Thank you Grandma and aunt Audrey for making my magnificent tallit and thank you to grandpa for gardening with me. And last but not least thank you to Abba for teaching me torah and Mommy for organizing this whole thing.

And now I hope that we have a spirited and kavvanah-filled musaf together.