

## Haley Gewandter

### *D'var Torah*

### **KEDOSHIM**

My Bubby always used to say, “*Epele falt nit vayt funm boym.*” The apple does not fall far from the tree. It is really very true. I am like my mom Holly, artistically, musically, and perfectionistically. I am like my mom Nancy math-wise, temper-wise and shopping-wise. In my parsha, Kedoshim, G-d tells us, “you shall be holy, for I your G-d am holy.” Is G-d saying “the apple shouldn’t fall far from the tree?” In some translations of my parsha G-d says, “you SHALL be holy” while in others G-d says “you MUST be holy”. Is G-d commanding us to be holy, or telling us that we already are? Some scholars say that this is not a commandment but a promise, a promise that G-d will provide us with the tools to be holy. When thinking about this, I formed the opinion that we are born with the potential to be holy, but that we also have to do our part. G-d gives us the opportunity to embrace our skills, choose to be holy and grow with our abilities.

I have been studying piano since I was 6 years old. My mom is a composer, so I have rhythm and music in my genes. But practicing is sooo annoying! With a lot of persuading from my moms, though, it eventually became a habit, and I found that the more I practiced, the more accomplished I felt. If I hadn’t taken advantage of the opportunity, then I never would have discovered how enjoyable playing piano is, and it would be a hidden talent that never had a chance to shine. There is a really interesting analogy here. You have innate musical ability: parents are the ones who urge you to practice. You have innate holy potential: G-d urges you to fulfill it.

In Kedoshim, G-d gives us a sort of “instruction manual” which takes us step by step through all the things that will help us to be holy. They are known as the Ten Commandments. G-d expands on those Ten Commandments and explains them all down to the very last detail. At first glance, I found the long list of precise explanations extremely overwhelming. I tried to break it down. As I was reading all of the commandments, one in particular sparked my interest.

G-d commands us, “When you reap your land’s harvest, do not completely harvest the ends of your fields. [Also] do not pick up individual stalks [that have fallen]. [Furthermore] do not pick the incompletely formed grape clusters in your vineyards. [Also] do not pick up individual [fallen grapes] in your vineyards. [All the above] must be left for the poor and the stranger.” Phewf! Why doesn’t G-d just tell us to harvest it and then give it away? I think this is because we should learn to do things for ourselves. If the poor and the stranger just relied on other people to give them food and clothes and shelter, they would never learn how to be self-sufficient and would never develop self-esteem.

In this section G-d is teaching us *tzedakah*. Contrary to what many people believe, *tzedakah* does not simply mean charity. Charity is derived from the Latin word *caritas*, meaning love. *Tzedakah* comes from the Hebrew word *tzedik*, meaning justice. When you perform *tzedakah*, you are trying to make the world a fairer place, not just showing pity for the less fortunate. *Tzedakah* is giving people the tools that they need, whether it’s money, food, shelter, education, or just friendship, to gather the strength to do things for themselves. As Jews, we are obligated to perform these acts of *tzedakah*, and in doing them, we get closer to being holy and pleasing G-d.

This commandment raises an interesting question: Is *anything* really ours to give? Think about it. G-d created everything, so in a sense, everything belongs to G-d. So is G-d just loaning things to us, or do we have things that we actually own? When we leave the fallen grapes for the poor and the stranger, whose grapes are they? Let’s say you buy a bag of goldfish. So now they are yours. You take your 4 year-old daughter to the playground, give her the bag of goldfish, and say to her, “share these with the other kids.” She answers, “you can’t make me”. You say, “then next time I won’t buy you any”. You *bought* the goldfish, so you *own* the goldfish. You gave them to your daughter with the intention that she share them. So now they are hers, but they are also yours at the same time.

I personally believe that we do own things, but that G-d owns those things as well. By asking that we perform acts of *tzedakah*, G-d gives us the opportunity to become partners in making the world a more holy place.

Over the course of my bat mitzvah year, my friend, Sam, and I participated in a community service project where we performed an act of *tzedakah*. We volunteered at an afterschool program, tutoring kindergarten children, playing with them, reading them books, and helping them with their homework, so that their parents could work more hours to support their families. I really connected with these kids, and I feel like they truly appreciated our attention. In doing just a small act, I think I fulfilled what G-d wanted of me, because it made me feel good and it made the children feel good. I plan to continue tutoring them, and I hope that by doing what I could I brought a bit of justice to the world.

It is interesting to note that in my parsha, some commandments are written in the singular, while others are plural. Perhaps this means that G-d does not want us to do everything as individuals; rather G-d wants us to work together as a community. Being a part of a community with good values makes it easier to be a good person. As part of the New Shul community, I have been able to work at a homeless shelter, pay shiva calls, work on Chanukah gift drives, and visit Jewish seniors. These are things that might have been very hard to do independently, but when you have all of your friends participating with you, they become not only not uncomfortable, but truly enjoyable.

As most of you probably already know, my mom, Holly Gewandter, and my aunt, Ellen Gould, started The New Shul six years ago. Over that time, they created one of the most meaningful places for me. As a family, we could not find the right synagogue that truly suited us, so we decided to start one ourselves. Now let me tell you, this was NOT as easy as they had anticipated. For years, The New Shul was the center of EVERY CONVERSATION and was the sponge that sucked up all of my parent's time. My mom, Holly, was doing shul stuff 24/7, and my mom, Nancy, came home from work every day and went straight to shul work, too. They even had me folding fliers and stuffing envelopes! But we found a wonderful rabbi, named Niles Goldstein, and we got Amy Eichenwald Golding to be our Hebrew School and Executive Director, and Melanie Sylvan, to take some of the weight off of my family's shoulders. The Shul started to take form, our membership grew, and after a lot of space hopping, from synagogue to church to church, we finally found Village Community School. We have been here for the past two years, and it has been wonderful. Although we don't have services on a strict weekly schedule, we have them as much as possible, and are a real community. I have spent so much time with the same people, and now they are, I can safely say, my extended family. And I just want to say thank you to all of them, for being there and being so nice to me all the time, and really for making The New Shul happen. On that note, I would like to thank, once again, Melanie, Amy, and Niles, for being so amazing throughout these six years, and especially Melanie. I don't know what I would have done without your help with the Hebrew. But most importantly, I would like to thank my parents, for being there for me and being thoughtful enough to start a Shul so that I could be a part of a real community.