

## Pesakh II 5778

“*Lo t'hall'lu et sheim kodshi, v'nikdashti b'tokh b'nei Yisrael, ani Adonai m'kadshe'khem.*”

“You shall not profane My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the Israelite people – I the Lord who sanctify you.” Lev. 22:32

At Pesakh we affirm difference. Asking ‘how is this night different’ at seder acts not merely as an introduction to questions about rituals – bread vs. matzah; dipping or not dipping – but also as way to mark off the holiday, and the people who observe it, as different. The Hebrew term we use to describe distinctive behavior, belief and even identity in Judaism is that of *kedushah*, of holiness. God commands us to make the divine name distinctive, through acts of distinction, in order that God be differentiated and thus sanctified.

There is no hag more different than Pesakh. While we come together for services, as we do every hag, the main experience of Pesakh is at home, both at seder and in our eating habits during the eight days of the festival. And because Pesakh is the most observed of the Jewish holidays at home, it shapes us like no other holiday. Those whose Jewish lives are typically lived only within the walls of the synagogue willingly transform their daily habits for these eight days, creating the kind of all-encompassing Jewish experience that traditional Judaism stands for

every day of the year. It is on Pesakh that many Jews truly embrace our tradition, taking on any number of stringencies that they may consider too difficult the rest of the year. If we were able to expand the seriousness with which so many of us treat these eight days to our daily lives year-round, discovering the benefits of distinctive Jewish living, it would be totally transformative.

To be holy means to be different. Every variant of the word itself, *kedushah*, is an application of the idea of difference to God, people, place or time. Kiddush (the sanctification of Shabbat or Yom Tov over wine), kaddish (the prayer that ends sections of our services, including mourner's kaddish), kiddushin (wedding ceremony): these are all expressions of marking off what we do or say or feel as unique, different. Shabbat is *kadosh*, unlike the other days of the week; God is *kadosh*, totally above and unlike any other being; the Jewish people are *kadosh*, distinctive in belief, behavior and purpose from others.

And so when God commands the Israelites to not profane the holy name, but rather to sanctify it, in order that God can in turn sanctify them, we have to understand what is being demanded of us. The difference between profaning and sanctifying is that between treating something as undifferentiated, routine or prosaic, on the one hand, and as totally unique and therefore of ultimate significance, on the other. At havdalah, we mention the difference between *kodesh*,

what is different, and *hol*, what is typical, in the realm of time; we ritualize the transition back out of Shabbat or holidays into typical time with light and wine, just as we ritualize their start with light and wine. And in the same way that time is homogenous six days a week and then suddenly and radically different on the seventh, and that Pesakh differs from the rest of the year, we are supposed to be different from other people. Just as those times are *kadosh*, because they are different, we are to be *kadosh*, distinctive. When we are, the Torah tells us, God dwells among us, reciprocating our making God different by marking us as different.

Judaism has given the world monotheism, the idea of a demanding yet loving God, a day of rest once a week, the concept of *brit*, a religious covenant in which we and God share in the creation, maintenance and redemption of an often broken world. These are all distinctive and deeply important ways in which Judaism differed and has made a difference. To the extent that each of us sees ourselves as the bearers of a tradition of conscious and deliberate non-conformism, we sanctify ourselves and God, and God sanctifies us. At seder and throughout Pesakh we affirm difference because we are the people who must strive daily to be different.

Hag kasher v'same'akh.