

Shabbat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim 5786
Small Actions Reveal Big Character
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Shabbat Shalom.

I have a favorite comic strip from my childhood. Though Calvin and Hobbes is no longer printed, it's still number one in my book.

A recurring theme is that Calvin's father does his best to instill in his young son the values of hard work and independence. But six-year-old Calvin would rather watch TV all day long. There's one strip where Calvin is shoveling snow outside with a scowl on his face. He kvetches to his father: "Why can't we get a snow blower? We must be the only family in the world that still shovels the driveway by hand! I'm freezing!" His dad opens the door: "It builds character. Keep at it." Calvin returns to his task and mumbles "Pretty convenient how every time *I* build character, *he* saves a couple hundred dollars."

Ah, character. Our second portion, Kedoshim, speaks about a different kind of character. About Middot—values that mold us into mensches. The Mitzvot in Kedoshim are the specific actions we must follow or avoid in order to achieve Kedushah: holiness. *G-d* is holy, so the portion begins, and therefore we must be holy since we are covenantal partners with *G-d*. But this process doesn't happen automatically. We have to *work* toward it. It's like a trainer giving you a 10K race plan. The paper won't make you faster—but if you follow it, you'll be ready.

A recurring theme of Kedoshim is that we must engage in actions that improve our character: to make us kinder and more generous people. To make us a mensch. While the Torah doesn't say this word aloud, it whispers. Today I want us to tune in to this whisper.

Here's one example: The Torah commands farmers: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap all the way to the edge of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest...Leave them for the poor and for the stranger. I am the L-rd your G-d" (Lv. 19:9, 10). This functioned like a built-in system of Tzedakah. Every farmer - that is, every family - had to leave some crops behind in their field for the poor to take. Doing this meant that nobody in society would go hungry. This responsibility fell on *everybody*: Rich and poor, generous and stingy alike. Each farmer chose how much crop to leave their corners — a little or a lot. Furthermore, if they dropped some crops as part of the harvest, they had to leave those for the poor too.

At first glance, this appears to be a wonderful public initiative to lift up the poor in society. After all, now everybody has access to food. But Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, 19th century commentator, says that's not the point. He says: "These obligations are *not* designed to sustain the poor." That's because *poor* farmers also had to participate and give up some of their precious crops. If the goal were to prevent poverty, then poor farmers should be exempt!

Hirsch continues: "During the harvest...the farmer, filled with pride and a sense of accomplishment, declares: this is mine. And in that moment of ownership and accomplishment is born a concomitant responsibility and commitment. All members of society, everyone fortunate enough to own something, anything, must recognize that he is obligated to consider the needs of others as well."

In other words, all farmers are expected to leave some crops in order to internalize that *everyone* has a responsibility toward others. That *everyone* can share something. Even the poor must give. Because everyone must see themselves as a giver, not only a taker.

I doubt anyone in this room is a farmer. But there is still a direct takeaway for us today: the Torah wants us to cultivate characters of kindness, generosity, and responsibility to others. When we share what we have with others, it doesn't just help out the other person. The very act of giving shapes *us* as well. This is true whether we own a little or a lot, whether we are an adult or a child.

The more we give, the more we become givers. Tzedakah is an obvious way to do this, but not the only way. We can also be giving of spirit and of time. We all know people who are ill, recovering from surgery, or who are grieving. The Torah whispers to us: check in on them. Call them, text them, offer to help, let them know you are thinking of them. These check-ins will pick them up, and simultaneously make you more of a mensch.

I remember when I was about six years old spending my summer at day camp. I didn't eat very many foods at the time, so a Breyers yogurt was my lunch every single day. One day I took out my brown bag lunch, and the yogurt container had shattered. Blueberry yogurt oozed all through the bag. I was distraught. My lunch is gone! I'm going to starve! What am I going to do? Just then a counselor came over and said "Here, have my yogurt instead." It was a small thing to him, but it meant everything to me. I know he was a counselor and counselors are supposed to do this, but still. He had a choice to make, and he chose to show he cared. It's fair to say he was a mensch. Someone you might want to be your kids' counselor or babysitter or coach or teacher. Someone you might trust based on this one small moment. That one action was most

likely indicative of who he was, of his character. Small actions reveal big character. An act of caring, of adding holiness, can happen absolutely anywhere, even at a camp lunch.

Part of becoming a mensch is not just *doing* certain behaviors but also *avoiding* other behaviors that lead us in the opposite direction. Here's an example from Kedoshim: "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your G-d: I am the L-rd" (Lv. 19:14). The second instruction is obvious - don't trip someone to injure them. The Rabbis expand that instruction to include giving bad advice to others. To not take advantage of other people's *blind* spots. That's easy to understand.

But really, what is the issue with insulting the deaf? After all, since they can't hear, their feelings cannot be hurt! The Etz Hayyim Humash commentary clarifies: [You may not do this] because the use of coarse language diminishes *you* as a person." Once again, here is an action that involves *another person* but shapes *us* in the process. What we do to *others* determines who *we* are. Even if we can sneak in a side remark about someone - whether they are deaf or just not in the room to hear - the Torah prohibits this because it's cruel. These comments diminish us and lead us *away* from being a mensch, so they are out of bounds. It can be as simple as someone telling you: "So-and-so is just so stupid." That brief moment reveals something larger. Whoever tells you that, I suspect you may not want that person to be your kid's camp counselor. If they say that about someone else, isn't there a chance they would say the same about you or your kid when you're not in the room? Small actions reveal big character.

When I was on staff at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, during Staff Week we read an interview with Rabbi Joel Roth about our role as full-time counselors. Rabbi Roth said: "The most important thing for [counselors] to realize is that their jobs as educators are never completed. They're never off. The higher up in the hierarchy they are, the greater this onus becomes." He's right - being a counselor is demanding.

Kedoshim has a similarly ambitious message for us as Jews. Jewish life has no off switch. It's not On in shul and Off when we step out. It's not On on Shabbat and off tomorrow afternoon. Being a Mensch is a task that never ends. We don't get a day off—but we do get to try again when we fall short. We are always on. The bar is set very high, and it's not an easy path at all. But things that matter are never easy. When we all put in the effort to be kinder and more generous - offer the yogurt; hold your tongue - that's what begins to shape a better society. We are all capable of this.

Every moment when we think “this doesn’t count” - those are exactly the moments that count the most.

Shabbat Shalom.