

SHARING CROWNS OF HOLINESS

Rabbi Steven Exler, Hebrew Institute of Riverdale - The Bayit

What does holiness look like in a pandemic?

We are bereft of gathering in our holy spaces, our synagogues, bereft of gathering together for holy moments, sharing lifecycle events. Bereft of opportunities for *chesed* and raising voices for justice in person together.

God commands the Jewish nation in the desert: “Be holy.” **But what remains to create holiness in our lives during this time?** Rabbi Abin, a figure from the period of the Talmud, offered a parable: The citizens of a province provided three crowns for their king. What did the king do with the three crowns, having only one head? He didn’t place two away for later, rotate their wearing, or try to wear them all at once. Rather, the king wore one and bequeathed the other two crowns to his children.

“Holiness is understanding that if I have three of something, I keep one and find two other worthy recipients.”

Every day the angels crown God with three sanctities: “*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, Holy, Holy, Holy* is the God of hosts.” Receiving those gifts of holiness, what does God do? God keeps one measure and crowns us — God’s people, and perhaps all people — with holiness. That’s why the Torah mentions we are “a holy nation,” “...Because I the Lord, your God, am holy,” and then gives us the commandment to “Be holy.” **With all of God’s holiness, God keeps one portion and gives us two.**

I think the most basic message of this midrash is that **holiness is not just something which is shared; holiness is sharing.** Holiness is understanding that if I have three of something, I keep one and I find two other worthy recipients. Reaching out to each other and making sure that if we have some of something, we give just as much, if not more, to others who may need it. This is holiness, and we all give and receive.

Holiness is sharing, but what is shared? What are the crowns? “*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, Holy, Holy, Holy.*” The crowns are words. Pieces of speech that come forth from the mouths of the angels and take shape and begin to glitter, becoming gifts to God and gifts to human beings. **Holiness comes through words, and this is a time of words.**

In the absence of being physically together, in the absence of shared physical, communal spaces, we resort to words. And those words are crowns. After a long day when my phone beeps and I see “Thinking of you, how are you managing?” Or I get a text in the middle of the day that says, “I’m putting in an online shopping order, do you need anything?” I can feel those crowns being placed on my head and I try to keep one and distribute two more, reaching out to others with words to crown each other with strength, and connection, and holiness.

