



The Parasha with Rabbi Dweck

Highlights for

Ahare Mot–Kedoshim: The Higher Self

SUMMARY

These twin parashiyot sit at the heart of Sefer Vayikra, presenting *kedusha* and *tahara* not as ritual states but as the programme for achieving our highest human selves. Every person contains both a generic, biologically driven ego and a unique, God-intended self—and the commandments exist to strengthen the latter. Yom Kippur and Shabbat anchor us in that higher identity, while Kedoshim unfolds a moral code whose summit is loving one's neighbour as oneself.

Two Kinds of Self

Parashat Ahare Mot opens after Nadav and Avihu's death—a warning about entering sacred space on one's own terms. God instructs Aharon on the *Kohen Gadol's* entry into the *Kodesh Hakodashim* once a year on Yom Kippur, the day of *metaher etchem*—purification from transgression, not from ritual impurity.

Rambam identifies in Moreh Nebukhim III:33 the core theme of both parashiyot as *kedusha* and *tahara*. *Kedusha* means separated, sacrosanct—to be irreducibly and specifically oneself. *Tahara* is purity from the *tuma* of transgression: the biologically driven impulses that erase our unique identity.

The Selfish Gene and the Torah

Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* argues that every organism is at root a machine for propagating its genes. The drives that result—sexual appetite, selfishness, exploitation of vulnerability—are imperatives of genetic survival, not the contents of personal identity.

Human beings alone can become aware of this machinery and resist it. The Torah calls surrender to biological drives *tuma*, and the cultivation of one's unique integrated self, *kedusha*.

The more energy we invest in the ego-driven self, the more we strengthen it at the expense of the higher self God intended.

'The genetically driven self is generic—it could care less about you. Kedusha is the commitment to the self that is irreducibly, uniquely yours.'

Yom Kippur: Returning to the Self

Yom Kippur enacts this vision once a year. The *Kohen Gadol* enters the *Kodesh Hakodashim* in white linen—stripped of adornment, purely himself—to represent the entire people. The nation withdraws from food, work, and biological imperatives for one day, standing before God as predominantly souls rather than bodies.

לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם—*to purify you from all your transgressions*. Transgression is surrender to the generic drives. *Teshuva* is the recommitment to integrity.

Kedoshim: A Moral Manual

Parashat Kedoshim is a practical guide to living as a higher self. Its commandments dismantle the biological ego systematically: keep Shabbat—practise simply *being*; revere your parents—accept a check on impulsive behaviour; do not worship idols—do not worship your own drives; do not steal or swindle—resist short-term exploitation.

Do not curse the deaf; do not place a stumbling block before the blind. These behaviours may serve the selfish gene in the moment, but they destroy integrity and rupture the relationship with God. Make your standard the sacred rather than the profane.

Love Your Neighbour as Yourself

The climax is *Ve'ahavta lere'akha kamokha*. Rambam explains it concretely: speak of others as you would have them speak of you; tend to their honour as you tend to your own. The obstacle is jealousy—the zero-sum logic of genetic competition. Those impulses, the Torah warns, will destroy you as a person and lock you away from God.

Honour the wise and the elders. Where Western culture venerates youth and novelty, Torah venerates the hard-won wisdom of those who have spent a lifetime climbing toward integrity. That is *kedusha*—the irreducibly unique self, living in covenant with God.

Questions for the Table

1. **The Higher Self:** Rabbi Dweck distinguishes between the “ego”—generic biological drives—and the unique God-intended self. In your experience, what does it feel like when you are acting from each? What conditions help you access the higher self?
2. **Kedusha in Practice:** The *parasha* treats Shabbat, honouring parents, honest business conduct, and sexual ethics all as aspects of the same project. What is the common thread, and which commandment do you find most challenging to connect to the theme of *kedusha*?
3. **Loving Your Neighbour:** Rambam says the obligation to love every member of Yisrael as oneself means speaking in their praise as you would want to be spoken of. How would this single practice, if taken seriously, change your relationships—and your relationship with God?

About Rabbi Joseph Dweck: Rabbi Dweck has held rabbinic leadership roles in the US and the UK. He is the Rosh Bet Midrash of TheHabura.com and the Rabbi Levy Chair of Jewish Wisdom at the London School of Jewish Studies. For more, visit the Office of Rabbi Dweck (rabbijosephdweck.com).

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