Expansive Freedom: Thoughts for Parashat Kedoshim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Kedoshim

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

We recently celebrated Passover commemorating the liberation of ancient Israelites from servitude in Egypt. The symbolism of the holiday has resonance for us today.

The Hebrew name for Egypt is *Mitsrayim*, rooted in the word *tsar*, meaning narrow and confined. The Israelites were not only subjected to physical slavery but they suffered the psychological pains of being in bondage. Their world was constricted. They lacked freedom to go where they wanted when they wanted. They had few options.

Freedom offered the Israelites the framework to expand their horizons. They could now take on responsibilities, make choices, think beyond the limitations placed upon them by task masters.

But freedom is a delicate privilege. When we enjoy expansiveness, we feel alive and well. But when our freedom is threatened, our world grows narrower and more confined. We live with a sense of growing insecurity.

Unfortunately, the Jewish world these days is feeling serious threats to our wellbeing. Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are undermining our sense of security and wellness. The pressures of *Mitsrayim*, of constriction, are palpable.

But we seek and demand our freedom. We will not let our world contract on us. To maintain our freedom and security, we need determination. But we also need action that strengthens us and our communities.

This week's Torah portion begins with God's command: Be holy, for I God am holy. Our sages pondered: How can we emulate an infinite and eternal God?

The Talmud reports the teaching of Rabbi Hama ben Hanina (Sotah 14a) that the challenge is for us to follow the attributes of the Almighty: "Just as He clothes the naked…you clothe the naked. Just as the Holy One blessed be He visits the sick…so too you should visit the sick. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He consoles mourners…so you should console mourners. Just as the Holy One blessed be He buried the dead…so too you should bury the dead."

Walking in God's ways of holiness entails living as caring human beings. By interacting with others with compassion, we enlarge our own lives. God is expansive beyond our capacity to grasp; but the concept of expanding our lives is something we can achieve.

The Parasha calls on us to be holy. It then goes on to list many commandments relating to business, agriculture, interpersonal relationships and more. It does not confine "holiness" to the ethereal spheres above but to the very practical and worldly concerns of human life. It underscores the need for us to reach beyond ourselves, to live with great ideals that are matched by significant actions.

Many forces today are pressuring us to constrict our lives. Our challenge is to expand our lives! When Israel and the Jewish People are under fire, we gain strength and demonstrate strength every time we do a mitzvah, attend synagogue, a Torah class, a community rally. We push back against those who seek to constrict us: we are visible in our support for Israel, we contribute to charities and institutions in Israel, we purchase State of Israel bonds, we buy Israeli products, we support those institutions (including our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals!!) that strengthen Jewish life.

On Passover, we discussed the transition from the narrow confines of our lives in *Mitsrayim* to the sense of expansiveness gained through our liberation from Egypt. Today we must continue to struggle against all forces that attempt to constrict our lives; and we must continue—with faith and with courage—to expand our lives, to grow, to succeed in freedom.