

## **Sermon for Parashat Kedoshim 5765**

May 7, 2005

Rabbi Jay M. Stein

China began a new round of panda diplomacy this past Tuesday, offering a pair of pandas, lower fruit import tariffs and a lifting of restrictions on Chinese tourists visiting Taiwan in an attempt to open the door to better relations with Taiwan and to entice Taiwanese President Chen to take a seat at the negotiating table. Mr. Chen responded in turn by extending an invitation to Hu Jintao, the Chinese President and Communist Party leader, knowing full well that he could never accept. China regards Taiwan as a renegade province with no right to such state-level recognition.

At the heart of the row is China's drive to recover the island that broke away when Mao Zedong's armies chased off Chiang Kai-shek at the end of the civil war in 1949, and Mr. Chen's campaign to establish formal independence for his 23 million people. China has offered a pair of giant pandas and economic concessions to Taiwan at the end of a landmark visit by Taiwan's main opposition leader. China's goodwill gestures include lifting a ban on Chinese tourists visiting Taiwan and increasing fruit imports from the island. Beijing made the offers Tuesday, as Taiwan opposition leader Lien Chan ended a historic trip to China, the first by a Nationalist party chief since the Nationalists fled to Taiwan at the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949.

Professor Lee Si-kuen, at the National Taiwan University, says goodwill gestures will not bridge differences. It is sad. It is painful and it is real life. Governments cannot agree and nations are caught in the struggle. People with shared history, intertwined economies and interests and cultures that certainly complement each other can't find a meeting place. Individuals make extraordinary efforts to talk and the results are incremental. Both sides want a resolution, both countries want a deal, both people want an agreement that is

substantial and sustainable. The pandas have opened the door, but they are unable to walk through.

The same is true of our relationship with God. We are so similar, yet we somehow can't connect. This morning's reading gives us the steps towards reconciliation, connection and relationship with God. This morning's reading begins with the phrase *k'doshim tih'yu, ki kadosh ani Adonai eloheikhem*, you are to be holy, for I, God am holy. (Leviticus 19:2) We are so similar. Extending the idea from Genesis, *b'tzelem Elohim nivra adam*, in the image of God we are created, this week's reading says we have lost our way back towards each other. So much has happened since our days in the Garden of Eden. So God says, let me remind you how close we are. We are made of the same stuff, cut from the same cloth, and that is the garment of holiness. It is who we are; it is where we are from. We share history and we share life. I cannot live without you and you cannot live without me, and this is how we are going to establish a lasting bond.

In every relationship, be it with parents and children, between spouses or among siblings, there are rules, and those rules reflect the values inherent in that connection. For some people, relationships are based on playing games and pretending events of the past never occurred. But for some people there is absolute honesty and sincerity. The relationship we have with God is based on the sacred values and ethics and principles outlined not just in this week's reading but throughout our sacred literature. But this week's reading is a starting point. It shows us the variety of ways behavior affects us as individuals and our link to HaKadosh Barukh Hu, the Holy One Praised be He.

The parashah opens with lessons about how we interact with each other as human beings: how we treat our parents, and how we treat those less fortunate, and those who have unique challenges. It tells us *lifnei iver lo titen mikshol*, don't place stumbling blocks before those who are blind, and then

the refrain *ani Adonai*, I am God, comes as a reminder that the way you treat each other has ramifications on Us. *Ish imo v'aviv tira-u*, respect your parents. And then the refrain *ani Adonai*, I am God. *Mipnei seiva takoom*, rise before the elderly, get up and give them your seat; *v'hadarta pnei zaken*, show kindness to the more mature in years. And then the refrain *ani Adonai*, I am God. Show them love and you show Me love. The Torah is instructing us. Care for each other and that is a reflection on how you feel about Me. Care for one another and you will taking care of Me. And I will reciprocate tenfold. And then the text turns inwards. *V'sheret la-nefesh lo titnu bivsarkhem*, don't hurt yourself. Again the refrain *ani Adonai*, I am God. God reminds us that we embody the Divine. Take care of yourself and you are taking care of Me.

And then at the end of the parasha we have an interesting phrase, a statement that seems to sum up the entire portion, suggesting that if we follow these instructions, we will realize the results in very concrete ways. It is a difficult theological moment for us as moderns, for we have seen those who are righteous, those who follow God's commands and seek to connect to God's will, yet they suffer. We live in a post Holocaust age and we know of the destruction wrought by humanity on itself. To which I respond, that has no bearing on the connection we have with God. God sits in the waiting room with us while our loved one is in surgery and is with the patient on the table. God wept at the gas chambers of Auschwitz and weeps in the suffering in Darfur. God is with us and by our side, and you will know it when you have created, maintained and sustained that union. The manifestation is far more significant than a parcel of land or a material acquisition.

Hizkuni tells us just that. When the Torah says *Va-ani etnena lakhem lareshet otah*, you will possess their land, for I will give it to you, Hizkuni says it is not about land. What we get when we take hold of the mitzvot, when we take hold of our lives through premeditated action that is line with the will of God, is that

God will meet us. Hizkuni says, *sheh-atem ba'im v'yorshim otam, sheh-atem p'tachtam t'hilah*, when you come to inherit them, you must open the door yourself. Essentially Hizkuni says, open the door and God will walk in. If we want lives that are holy, then we must invite God in, and if we are going to invite God in, we are going to have to open the door. Subtly, our sage says *v'yorshim **otam***, we must inherit **them**, not the land but the mitzvot, the commandments and the guidelines and the rules. Inherit them and God will be a part of your life, and then you too will be holy.

The Torah – our access point for the will of God. – says, “open the door and God will walk in.” Open the door to a relationship with God, and you will find God is waiting to walk in. Wake in the morning, open your prayer book, and God will be waiting to hear your words. Go to work and treat those with whom you come into contact with respect and care, open your door to kindness in your daily interactions, and God will walk in. Give someone who is tired a seat, and God will support you. As the prophet Isaiah teaches, *yorutzu v'lo yiga-u*, those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.

If you – an ordinary person – want to achieve an extraordinary measure of holiness in your life, just open the door. God will walk in. The laws, protocols, determinations are not just empty rules; they are our shared vocabulary. We share so much with God. We share history and connection and we share values and ideals. And God like us wants to come together, yet we have placed so many stumbling blocks in our path. We have resentments and mistrust. So much challenges faith and action. Know God can handle it, God's shoulders are broad. So let's put all of that aside. Our misconceptions and our desire to be like every one else in our society have favored the god of self-determination over the God of Israel. Today let's make the commitment to live a life in accordance with God's will, and then all is possible. But it can't just be a

gesture. We can't just open the book once and expect the relationship to bloom. We must not open the door just as a gesture because *Hashem yode'a mahshavot adam*, God knows our intentions and our desires. Empty gestures carry no weight. Two pandas do not bring an end to an entanglement that has lasted for over half a century.

The world is filled with conflict. And I feel for all those people embroiled in those quarrels. None will be resolved by empty gestures. I feel for the people of China whose very own government denies them their basic human rights, and therefore I think Taiwan will just have to wait until the Mainland Chinese learn to how to treat their own before they can learn how to enter relationship with others. And that is what this week's reading is saying. Learn how to treat each other, and then a relationship with God is waiting just on the other side of the door. *D'tiftah libi b'oraita*, open our hearts with Torah and God will walk in. *Hu yiftah libeinu b'torah*, open our hearts with Torah and God will walk in. Open the door with commitment, sincerity, honest self-reflection and evaluation and God will walk in. Open the door and God will walk in