

For Gabriel, on Holiness
(a Passover letter to my 7-year-old son)

Richard Oxenberg

Dear Gabriel,

I was listening this morning to what you said to Kai and it seemed to me so true and so wise that it really got me thinking. And then I thought I'd write you a letter to tell you what it made me think about.

Kai was saying that she had just come back from visiting Israel, "the holy land." But you said that you didn't think Israel was really a holy land because of all the wars that go on there all the time. Kai said that having enemies doesn't stop you from being holy, and that as long as Israel is made up of good people it is still holy, even if they have to fight to defend themselves.

Then you looked very thoughtful for a moment. Finally you said, "I think holiness is different from goodness. Holiness is really like a kind of peacefulness. As long as the land is not at peace it's not really holy."

Now I thought this was such a true and such a wise thing to say that it made me start thinking about goodness and holiness and how they are connected. Can a person be holy and not good? Can a person be good and not holy? And it occurred to me that for people to be really good they have to be sincerely working toward holiness, toward peacefulness. Good people work toward holiness, people who are not so good do things that undermine or disrupt holiness. I suppose most people are good sometimes and not so good other times. But a person who is really committed to God and to holiness struggles to work toward peace as much as possible.

But what does it mean, exactly, to work toward peace? Why are people not at peace with each other? Why is peace such a difficult thing to achieve?

Well, that's a hard question, Gabriel. It's a question I've spent a lot of my life thinking about. I know I don't have the whole answer, but here's some of what I've thought.

It sometimes seems to me there are three major reasons people are not at peace with one another, and these reasons get all tangled up with each other so that it's not always so easy to tell them apart.

But I would name them this way:

We can call the first, *Misunderstanding*. People often misunderstand and mistrust one another in ways that keep them from being at peace.

We can call the second, *Conflict*. People have different wants and needs that conflict with one another, and they fight over these.

The third reason is a little harder to give a name to, but sometimes I think it's the most important of all. Maybe we can call it *Inner Upset*. People are often not at peace within themselves, and this lack of peace with themselves gets thrown at others, and it makes it hard for them to be at peace with others.

Maybe we can think about each one of these a little.

Do you remember how, last week, I came to pick you up late from your rehearsal and you were upset? Well, Gabriel, I felt really terrible about that, because the last thing in the world I would ever want to do is make you feel bad. But I just made a mistake. I thought the rehearsal ended at 7:00 when it really ended at 6:30. People make mistakes that hurt each other all the time. When I realized that I made this mistake I apologized to you and asked you to forgive me. And you said that you did forgive me, which made me feel better. I think you understood that I didn't do it on purpose. And so, because I apologized and you forgave, we were able to be at peace with each other. You were able and willing to understand that I really cared about you and that this was just a mistake.

But what if you couldn't understand? Then you might have thought that I really didn't care about you. And you might have gotten very upset about that. And your upset might have gotten me upset. And now we wouldn't be at peace with each other. And the terrible thing is that the reason we wouldn't be at peace is not because we didn't love each other, but because we weren't able to understand each other. This happens between people all the time. That's why, I think, if we want to move toward holiness we need to try to understand each other, to apologize when we hurt each other, to forgive when someone has hurt us. That's one important thing we need to do in order to have holiness in our lives, and in the world.

But sometimes the problems between people aren't a matter of misunderstanding. Sometimes we just want different things, or we both want the same thing for ourselves and we fight over it. Let's say there's a blueberry pie. Let's say you want the whole blueberry pie and I want the whole blueberry pie. Well, what are we going to do? We can fight over the blueberry pie and you can try to get as much of it as you can for yourself and I can try to do the same thing. Whoever is stronger or trickier will get the most. So, if you're good at being strong and tricky you might end up with a lot of blueberry pie, but no holiness. And so, I suppose, you have to think about what's more important: blueberry pie or holiness? If you want a world of holiness sometimes you have to be willing to give up some blueberry pie. Now, if you really, really love blueberry pie that may be hard to do.

But, you know, Gabriel, that's why the Torah says: "You should love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." It means that, although there are a lot of important things in the world, nothing is more important than holiness. You need to love holiness more than blueberry pie. Only if people can learn to do this can there be a holy world.

So what does a holy person do when he has a conflict with someone over blueberry pie (or anything else)? Well, this is where the idea of 'justice' comes in. Instead of fighting over the

blueberry pie to get as much as possible for yourself, you can agree to share the blueberry pie in a way that seems fair to everyone. Sometimes you may have to do a lot of talking to figure out what's fair. And you have to be fair in your talking too. You have to listen, you have to try to understand the other person's needs and wants and point of view. But if everyone will do this honestly then they can come to an agreement about how to share the blueberry pie in a fair way. Maybe you won't get as much blueberry pie as you'd like that way, but you'll get a lot closer to holiness.

And now let's talk about the last thing that gets in the way of holiness. This is a little harder to understand, but I think it's very important. A lot of people, maybe most people, are not at peace with themselves. Why not? Well, that's a very deep question. A lot of people feel like they're not loved enough. A lot of people feel frightened. A lot of people feel lonely. There are a lot of reasons why people are not at peace with themselves, and a lot of times people don't understand it themselves. They just feel bad and don't really know why.

And then what happens is they get upset with other people because they are upset with themselves. It's like they have to do something with their upset feelings and so they throw them onto someone else. Now, they usually won't say, "You know, I'm upset with you because I'm upset with myself." No, they'll try to find a reason to be upset with the other person. When the other person makes a mistake they'll refuse to understand it or forgive it. When there's a conflict over blueberry pie they'll refuse to try for justice. And they'll do this, not because they can't understand the other person, or because they want blueberry pie so much, but because it makes them feel better to be upset with the other person. It takes their attention away from their upset with themselves.

When people are not at peace with themselves, this can be the most difficult problem to solve. It's so difficult because the problem is hidden and, often, no matter what you do for a person who is not at peace with himself he will still not be at peace.

And this is one of the very important things religion can do, when it is working the way it should. It can help people learn to be at peace with themselves so that they can learn to be at peace with others. But even this can get complicated. Sometimes people pretend to be at peace with themselves when they're really not. But here's the test, Gabriel. When people are really at peace with themselves they want to be at peace with others as well. People who don't try to be at peace with others are probably not at peace with themselves either. That's what I think.

So, for all these reasons, it turns out that holiness is not such an easy thing to achieve! Still, Gabriel, I think it's one of the most important things to struggle for. You know, the Bible says that the name 'Israel' really means "He who struggles with God and prevails." What does it mean to struggle with God? I think it means to struggle for holiness.

So maybe Israel is called the holy land, not because it's already holy, but because it's a place where people are supposed to struggle for holiness. In that sense, Gabriel, maybe each one of us is also a little 'holy land' in ourselves. Maybe each one of us is supposed to struggle for holiness as best we can.

That's what I believe, Gabriel.

And today is the beginning of Passover, and this is a good day to think about what holiness means. You really helped me to do that by what you said this morning. So thank you so much, Gabriel, for your wisdom, your goodness, and just for being you!

I love you so much! (And, for me, that's a little bit of holiness right there),

Love,
Your Dad