1. This week we have one of the most mysterious commands in all of torah.
   And your teaching, Mona, helped me to finally begin to understand it.

   We have a mysterious command
   Kedoshim tihiyu ki kadosh Adonai
   Be holy because I am holy

   Which is great if we know what it means, irrefutably, to be holy.
   I mean if you are sure what it means to be holy.
   Maybe you can get a pass at the last part of services today.
   If you know what it means to be holy, without a doubt, you might give yourself a pass on a lot of things.

   In fact, and this might surprise you,
   Personally, as a person who seeks holiness.
   When people indicate they know, without a doubt, how to be holy, I get nervous.

   Which is why I am comforted that after spending a few days with the rabbis on this verse
   Kedoshim tihiyu ki kadosh Adonai
   I can tell you there is not a consensus on what it means to be holy because God is holy.
Rambam: Maybe it is a general idea, a headline for the laws that follow
Rashi: Maybe it is about separating ourselves in ways, boundaries that offer the possibilities of decency and dignity
Mei Hashiloah: Preparedness, intentionality

What I am saying is that the answers are all over the map
And I realize the rabbis don’t know what it means either to be holy in general
They have ideas but they are not sure
And that gives me comfort
Not only because the people who are so sure about holiness make me nervous

But because I realized, after reading this verse many times Mona
That while we can and we are supposed to know why we do things that are “good” “ethical” “moral”
We’re not always supposed to know exactly why the things that make us holy make us holy, there is a mystery there
And that unknowing, that mystery is precisely the point

Let me make it a little bit sharper
And I realized this after thinking about your teaching and your great question, Mona

Maybe the prohibition of not putting a stumbling block before a blind person
God forbid!
If we are thinking from an ethical, “being good” point of view this is the most obvious, unnecessary law in the world
Maybe the prohibition of not cursing a deaf person
God forbid!
If we thinking from an ethical, “being good” point of view is, again, is equally the most obvious, unnecessary law in the world Almost an insulting law What kind of people does God think we are?!

But maybe these commands are actually there to teach us, precisely, that there are some things we don’t know That is: why have a command for something so painfully, really embarrassingly obvious? To teach us that being holy doesn’t always make sense

We may start to understand that while we can often know what to do to be good Even if doing it is hard, we can know We may start to understand that being holy requires more than being good, it requires something else, it is not just our own knowledge, It is not just our own assessment Sometimes it requires emunah / faith

But this mysterious verse Kedoshim tihiyu ki kadosh Adonai Be holy because I am holy Which to me is kind of reads like God saying, “Because I said so”

Kedoshim tihiyu ki kadosh Adonai Be holy because I am holy Do the right thing even when you cannot make a case for the outcome The opposite of effective altruism In fact, holiness is perhaps what I like to call, “Ineffective altruism” —
This mysterious command
*Kedoshim tihiyu ki kadosh Adonai*
Be holy because I am holy
Is teaching us a new mode of decision making, one where our perspective is not the beginning, middle and end

So even if it seems like the law seems like most obvious, extraneous thing in the world to me
Something as obvious or useless as a law for not cursing someone who will never, ever hear.
Or, even though I am not sure what will come of doing this I will

2.
I heard a story last night
There was a man who was a Hazzan his whole life in the same community
He was beloved by his people, he led them
And he sat in the same chair every shabbat
And at the end of his long life he died
And sadly he died, he died before his grandson’s bar mitzvah
He died but he was able to teach his grandson many of his melodies
When his grandson sang these melodies, the congregation would cry
So beloved was this grandfather Hazzan

Then, on the shabbat morning of the grandson’s bar mitzvah
The grandfather had died, he was no longer there
But the little sister of the bar mitzvah boy
She was about three
She came into the synagogue, not really having been there on her own before — she had been a baby, carried But on this shabbat she came in and out of hundreds of chairs She went and sat in her grandfather’s chair — She did not know it was her grandfather’s chair She just sat there and proclaimed, in the way very little children do, “This is my chair” and she refused to move

Maybe holiness is being a part of something larger we don’t understand Something that only makes sense if we consider that it spans generations

Maybe holiness is something that holds parts of the world we will never see because we are too young or too old

Maybe holiness is occupying a chair, even if we don’t know why, even if it looks like every other chair in the room.

3.
You probably remember what happened at the burning bush God calls to Moses from a bush that was on fire but not destroyed saying,

“Moses, I have heard the cries of Israel, and you will help me free Israel from slavery.” It is a big speech and I imagine God practicing it many times in front of the mirror.

Moses, as you might remember, is not at all interested He does not trust himself, he turns god down several times You could say he doesn’t think he is good enough, and he can’t see the point of trying
Now in this moment God has a difficult challenge. See God cannot free Israel without Moses -- God needs to teach Moses that who Moses is enough right now to be a key part of making what needs to happen, happen, and God must show Moses the promise of who he might eventually grow to be. Both.

How does God do it? Well, when Moses asks God for some kind of proof, Asks God for God to give God’s name, You know, so that Moses has something to show Israel The equivalent of a divine calling card, in response, God gives Moses the best name ever:

_Ehyeh asher ehyeh_.

_Ehyeh asher ehyeh_ can be understood as, “I am what I am” — but equally can mean, “I will be what I will be.” Both.

What a crazy name! What kind of a name is this? It cannot be just a name, it must be a teaching.

See, remember God needs to _model_ for Moshe how to be whole and ready now God needs, Israel needs Moses now without giving up on the possibility of what might be in the future. God needs to show Moses that what he sees now is not the whole story
Right? Because, if God were just to say, “I am who I am,” as in, “everything you need to know is right here, you can understand the situation from where you stand right now” things are actually looking fairly bleak.

That is, there is little to no indication at the burning bush that God, who, let’s face it, has been completely out of the picture for generations and generations of slavery, is ready for a come back. As I like to say, God has been playing in mainly local theaters at this point.

Not to mention, there is zero indication that Moshe, who is basically a fugitive shepherd has any interpersonal skills, let alone any leadership capacity.

However, if God only talks about the future, if God were only to say, “I will be what I will be,” Moshe might not be able to find the blessing, yes the holiness in the person he is right now at this fiery, confusing moment.

You see, Moshe doesn’t just need to know he’ll be great one day, he also actually needs to know he already is someone who turns aside and hears the voice of God when no one else will dare to listen or even acknowledge the value of doing such a thing.

Moses needs to know that just as God is holy now

Moses, too is, yes — HOLY, just as he is right now
Even if he can’t see it
Even if it doesn’t make sense

_Ehyeh asher ehyeh_ is not only “I will be what I will be”
_Ehyeh asher ehyeh_ is “I am what I am”

No matter what happens or does not happen in the future.

What I am saying, see, is that if we rely on what we understand
If we rely on what we see around us alone
We may miss the great opportunities of this moment and of our lives

Perhaps admitting to holiness, the mystery of it
Perhaps following commands in the name of holiness
Allows for mysterious outcomes we ourselves would never predict
But that we might indeed have a hand in shaping

4.
_Ehyeh asher ehyeh_ “I will be what I will be”
“I am what I am”

_Kedoshim tihiyu ki kadosh Adonai._ / You will be holy because I am holy.
Hear it? (eheyeh, tihiyu, it is the same verb, “to be”)

Both verses ask us to refrain from thinking we can know everything from where we are now
And both phrases remind us that just as God is undeniably holy now and has the potential for holiness both
So are we, so it is and can be for us
God says to us in the midrash (rabbah)
I have a garden (the world) and you have a garden (your soul)
How about you take care of my garden and I’ll take care of yours?

How about you take care of my garden?
Not just in the ways clear to you, in the mysterious ones too
Do me a favor, don’t curse people even if they can’t ever hear
Do me a favor, pray, say shema instead
Do this for me and I’ll take care of your garden
I’ll tend to the garden of your souls.
And you will flower in ways that from here, from today you cannot even see