



The 51st Chimpanzee (a.k.a. How a Shared Story Helped Human Beings Take Over the World)

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In the book, Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind by Yuval Noah Harari, we learn that chimpanzees work well in groups up to 50. For chimps, cooperation is based on intimate knowledge of one another. So, as they look to build a group, they check one another out... *What kind of chimpanzee are you? Are you a nice chimpanzee? Are you an evil chimpanzee? Are you trustworthy? If I don't know you, how can I cooperate with you?*¹

Based on answers to these questions the chimps begin to build a group with whom they can act and be purposeful. It turns out, they can do that intimacy check and function powerfully as a group until they reach 50 chimps. Add the 51st chimp and it all breaks down! Chimpanzees can't create and maintain intimacy with more than 50.

So, how did a group as large as homo sapiens (human beings) take over the world? Harari suggests it was because they could work in large groups *without intimacy*. How did they do this? They used **story** as a tool to connect and bind themselves together.

When human beings were looking to build a group with whom to act and be purposeful, they talked to one another. What they discovered is that if they believe in the same story, it creates enough of a connection to build cities, create cultures, and, when needed, to go to war.

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/yuval_noah_harari_what_explains_the_rise_of_humans/transcript?language=en#t-138377

Now, consider for a moment that Jewish people have continued to thrive despite being spread over continents and practicing different streams of Judaism. What binds us together and helps us feel a part of something bigger than being just a small tribe called “my family” or “my Temple”? What story do we tell that inspires our sense of responsibility for one another? What story motivates us to act with kindness, generosity, compassion and support for one another...even when we don’t know the other person’s name?

Think for a moment about the stories you were told as a child. Think about the stories you hear reinforced every Shabbat at Temple Isaiah. What are some of those stories that have the power to connect us and help us act together to build a world filled with justice, lovingkindness, and peace?

“We were slaves in Egypt.”

“We are the Chosen People, and our task is to bring light unto the nations.”

“We are committed to Tikkun Olam, to healing the brokenness that surrounds us.”

We’re fortunate to have many stories that can connect us.

Here’s one more to consider: **We are a people destined to discover holiness.** In this week’s Torah portion, *Kedoshim*, we read about pathways that lead to holiness: love your neighbor as yourself, leave the corners of your field for the poor and vulnerable, deal honestly in your business, and, don’t place a stumbling block before the blind. If we do all these things, holiness will emerge.

While each of us might be capable of discovering holiness on our own, the power of a story is that it can unite a group of people. A tribe. A nation. Maybe even all of humanity – and, that story can help us act powerfully together.

Kedoshim tihiyu – You (**plural**) shall be holy, for I am holy, says God.

Yes, individually you are magnificent. The image of God rests upon your face. Any pathway you choose has the power and potential to allow holiness to emerge. But, listen to me, says God, I am making you into a kingdom of priests (not a kingdom run by a singular king/queen). I am making you into a holy nation (not a holy monk on top of a remote mountain). God says to our ancestors, and to us today, I am asking you to see yourselves as a **people** capable of discovering, uncovering and making manifest the holiness that is possible. *Kedoshim tihiyu* – You (**plural**) shall be holy This, too, is our shared story and worthy of being taught and repeated.

This Shabbat is our opportunity as Jews, as Isaian, as parents, and as children to practice holiness together – and, just as importantly, to practice telling a holy story.

“All other animals use their communication system to describe reality. A chimpanzee may say, "Look! There's a lion, let's run away!" Or, "Look! There's a banana tree over there! Let's go and get bananas!" Humans, in contrast, use their language not merely to describe reality, **but also to create new realities...**”² Imagine the world we can create when we tell a story that draws from our collective power to bring holiness into our lives and into this world. Imagine the world we can build together, even when we don't know everyone's name.

Kedoshim tihiyu – Each one of you was born holy, the image of God rests upon your face. We know this from the early chapters of Genesis. But here's what we learn from Exodus, and now Leviticus: When we choose to act powerfully together as a holy people, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation ... then God's presence dwells not only upon each one of us, but amongst us and around us, throughout the world, filling every space with holiness.

² https://www.ted.com/talks/yuval_noah_harari_what_explains_the_rise_of_humans/transcript?language=en#t-138377