Sitting With Torah – Parsha Shemini

When I started rabbinical school, I signed up to have a spiritual director. I like to call her my God therapist. She is a space for me to explore my connection to the divine and how holiness manifests in my life, or maybe not. I remember during our first session she asked me to close my eyes and think of a time in my life when I felt God or a moment when I felt the divine within me. My brain scanned my past searching for what she was asking. Of course, my brain seemingly failed me and I was drawing a blank. Anxious thoughts arose within me – how can I be a rabbi and not be able to pinpoint moments of God? I took a deep breath in and told myself to find a moment of peace.

My brain stopped searching and I was transported. Not a revelatory moment at the time it happened but my heart was telling me to revisit it. I was taken back to a time when I lived in Baltimore, just a few blocks from the waterfront. I set out from my house, starting a walk that had become very familiar to me. I made my way to the water with no intention or plan but on this particular day, I decided to stop. I sat down on the wooden dock and let the quiet of being alone envelope me. My feet dangled off the edge almost as if I could feel the water's closeness to me but it was just out of reach. I looked up to the horizon seeing where the calm water met the clear sky, as if a pen had made a line right through it ­– connecting and separating them. I closed my eyes and felt many things – calmness, nothingness, and stillness. This was a divine moment.

In this week's Torah portion, Shemini, we are offered commandments that direct us to distinguish the pure from the impure, the mundane from the holy (Leviticus 10:10). Within this Parsha we get a list of animals, something that is a part of our everyday life, and we are asked to separate certain ones that make us pure and impure. There is an incredible power of distinguishing something holy when we are submerged in a world of the mundane. We allow moments of the divine to pass us by and fail to recognize the holiness that can be present. Sitting by the edge of the water that day I unknowingly was enacting a verse from Leviticus. I was making a distinction between the holy and the earthly. There’s a reason this moment came to me when thinking about God because surrounded by my daily routines in life, such as walking by the water, I was encapsulated in a moment of holiness. A brief pause in life where I separated myself allowed the nothingness of the experience to become the existence of everything. God commands us to make a separation because we must be reminded that we can access sparks of holiness throughout our daily routines if only we allow ourselves to be open to it.