

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...)

we don't need the Torah to spell out the weights and measures by name when it tells us not to fiddle with them [Vayikra 19:36]? But yes, we do. The historian in me knows: Laws like these are only written down because they have already been broken. They lay bare the extent of our potential to do wrong. They anticipate the worst.

Yet even in their embarrassing detail, these prohibitions contain a redemptive message. They remind us that we aren't expected to be perfect; we are expected to mess up, sometimes badly. In light of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, the reminder that some mistakes are inevitable must have been a welcome relief. And so the Torah also lays out ways to redress our various sins. It teaches us that while mistakes will happen, in seeking to become holy, it is the atonement that matters most.

Atonement rituals remind us, above all, that we are bound up with our community. Many of them separate and then reintegrate us with our peers, or impose public performances of reconciliation. Some prohibitions exist only because they characterize other nations and muddy our communal affiliations. The worst punishment that the Torah can imagine is *karet* – complete and permanent exclusion. I won't suggest that our current social distancing resembles *karet*, but I do think we can understand its gravity better than before, now that our social connections have become so tenuous. And even *karet* has a redemptive reading. It tells us that community, our support for each other, is the most important thing we have. Loving our neighbor as ourselves, and doing justly with them, is the only way we can approach holiness – even if we keep messing it up.

Yet the holy community described in these *parshiot* was unfinished when these laws were given. Alone in their desert tents, the Israelites could not practice sowing their field crops separately, leaving the single grapes in their vineyards, or waiting five years to eat the fruit of their trees. They had never even done their own farming. Yet the Torah anticipated the settled life that the Israelites were planning for, and taught them to be ready for it even as they were isolated in Sinai.

We too are in a period of isolation, and we are watching our communities fray. Without our regular boundaries, we will make all kinds of new mistakes. Like the Israelites, we will need reminding that most of these, too, can be forgiven. Alone in our quarantined homes, we must find new ways to love our newly-distant neighbors and treat them justly (and also the people in our own homes, who might be driving us mad). We must do this because, like the Israelites, we are looking towards a more settled future. The lives we have been planning, though on hold now, will come, someday, in some form. This parasha suggests that our individual actions now, in an imperfect and isolated present, will determine how holy are the communities we will build then.

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## **TORAH SPARKS**

# **Parshat Achrei Mot-Kedoshim**

**May 2, 2020 | 8 Iyar 5780**

Annual | (Lev. 16:1-20:27): Etz Hayim p. 679; Hertz p. 480  
Triennial | (Lev. 16:1--17:7): Etz Hayim p. 679; Hertz p. 480  
Haftarah | (Amos 9:7-15): Etz Hayim p. 706; Hertz p. 509

**Dr. Emily (Michal) Michelson**

Conservative Yeshiva alumna (1997-1999) and historian at the University of St Andrews, in Scotland

Last week's double parsha, Tazria-Metzora, deals with pernicious diseases; it seems like nothing could beat it for immediate applicability. But Acharei Mot-Kedoshim remains equally relevant. What might appear to be a hodgepodge of prohibitions and injunctions coheres into a set of enduring themes that resonate particularly with our daily lives at the moment: community and exclusion; self-scrutiny and atonement; structure and stricture; planning ahead. Taken all together, the laws in this week's parsha send one message: that we must seek holiness as individuals in order to become a community, and that only as a community will we find that holiness.

The pursuit of individual holiness begins on a pessimistic note. Perhaps we are struck by how low the bar seems to be for us. Surely we don't need to be told not to sleep with our aunties [Vayikra 18: 12-13]? Surely

(Dvar Torah continued on the back page...)

## D'var Haftarah: The Uniqueness of the Jews

*Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, From the Archives*

Is the choice of this week's Haftarah a counterpoint or a complement to the Torah reading? Parshat Kedoshim opens with the famous verse: "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). This verse seems to imply that the Jewish people occupy a unique status in the eyes of God. They are "ha'am hanevhar" – "the chosen people". Moreover, there are those who argue that this status is intrinsic to every individual Jew, not only to the people as a whole.

The Haftarah opens with a verse which challenges the very basis of this idea: "To me, Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians, declares the Lord. True, I brought you up from Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir" (Amos 9:7).

Rashi understands this verse to be a rebuke. If we accept Rashi's interpretation of this difficult verse, its message is that there is nothing quintessentially different about the Jewish people. God treats them the same as He treats other people. God redeemed the Israelites from Egypt, but He also brought the Philistines out of Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir! Even a people geographically distant from Israel like the Ethiopians benefit from God's concern. Consequently the Israelites should not assume that they will go unpunished for any wrongs they might do. Amos teaches that "chosenness" is not a gift but a responsibility.

How then are we to reconcile the Torah's message which emphasizes Jewish uniqueness with the message of Amos that Jews are no different than any other people? Jewish uniqueness is not simply a matter of ethnic identity or bloodline. Rather, it results from the unique relationship between Jews and God, based on Torah and mitzvot. Amos' message emphasizes responsibility for one's own actions. This message is clearly implied by Parshat Kedoshim with more than 50 mitzvot detailed in it. Jewish uniqueness is not a matter of shared fate. It is, rather, a potential destiny in which we all play a part. If our lives are not shaped by mitzvot, we undermine Jewish uniqueness. If our lives are shaped by mitzvot, we enhance it.

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## Fear Your God! – Why Here?

*Vered Hollander-Goldbfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

These Parashot contain a great deal of legal material. We will study just one verse.

**Text: Vayikra 19:14**

*You shall not vilify the deaf, and before the blind you shall not put a stumbling block; and you shall fear your God, I am the LORD.*

- The verse mentions two situations in which a person with a disability is targeted. How (if at all) are the cases different?
- The warning at the end of the verse "fear your God" is unusual. Why do you think that it was included in this verse?

**Commentary: Rashi Vayikra 19:14**

*Before the blind you shall not put a stumbling block – [This teaches]: before a person who is "blind" in a matter you shall not give advice which is improper for him. Do not say to him: "Sell your field and buy from the proceeds an ass", while you are endeavoring to circumvent him and to take it (the field) from him.*

***You shall fear your God** – Because in this case it is not given to human beings to know whether the intention of this man (the offender) was for the advantage or the disadvantage of the person whom he advised, and he thus might be able to evade the responsibility by saying: "I meant it for the best", Scripture therefore states with reference to him: "you shall fear your God" Who is cognizant of thy secret thoughts. Similarly, in all actions where it is given only to the heart of him who does it, and other people have no insight into it (his motive), Scripture states, "you shall fear your God!"*

- Rashi expanded the definition of "blind" – what is included in the warning according to his definition? Try to give a modern example of such blindness and stumbling blocks.
- Why do you think that he did not leave the verse in its most literal and physical meaning? The second part ("fear your God") might help you.
- Rashi seems to classify the law(s) of this verse under 'morality'. What does fear of God have to do with that?

**Commentary: Ibn Ezra Vayikra 19:14**

*You shall not vilify the deaf although you have the power to do so with impunity. Similarly, before the blind.*

***You shall fear your God** Who is able to punish you and make you deaf and blind.*

- How is Ibn Ezra's comment like Rashi's? How does he differ from him?