

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

being set apart. (The word “*perushim*” is also the Hebrew word for the ancient Pharisees who saw themselves as separate and holy). The Sifra explains that God is essentially saying, “Just like I am holy, you should be holy; just like I am separate, you should be separate.”

But how are we to understand the Sifra? From what are we to keep separate, and how do we do that? Rashi, in his interpretation of VaYikra 19:2, says that it is the Torah’s code of sexual ethics that makes us holy, separating ourselves from the sexual immorality of other nations.

The Ramban, not unlike contemporary critics of Freudian theories that similarly essentialize the human spirit to issues of sexuality, found Rashi’s interpretation - that holiness is entirely about sexual ethics - to be too limited and limiting. Instead the Ramban contended that holiness derives from the self control that involves “separating ourselves” from our natural desire for self-indulgence in all realms, and not just the sexual. Holiness is thus also to be found in all of the imperatives found in this week’s double parsha, which scholars have dubbed “the Holiness Code,” and which includes some of the most inspiring interpersonal ethical commandments of the Torah. We find here: “[Y]ou shall not place a stumbling block before the blind (VaYikra 19:14), “[W]ith righteousness shall you judge your fellow” (VaYikra 19:15); [Y]ou shall not be a gossipmonger” (VaYikra 19:16), “[Y]ou shall not hate your brother in your heart” (VaYikra 19:17), and “[I]n the presence of an old person shall you rise and you shall honor the presence of a sage.” (VaYikra 19:32)

But it was VaYikra 19:18 that Rabbi Akiva famously declared to be the fundamental principle of all of Torah - “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Thus, to be a holy nation is to be a nation of people who have so elevated themselves above self-indulgence that they can truly love their neighbors as they love themselves. In this way, holiness is manifest in our relationship to the other.

In VaYikra 20:7, God says: “You shall sanctify yourselves and you will be holy.” In other words, the Children of Israel are not inherently holy, nor were we made holy by God. It is up to us, the Children of Israel, to make ourselves holy through how we treat others. The quest for holiness may often be elusive, at times may appear illusory, and may offend others for whom even the aspiration to holiness may appear to be pretentious, but it is at the very center of the Torah’s call to the Children of Israel.

For Discussion: Who are your personal models of holiness? How do they conduct themselves? When have you felt that you were engaged in holy action?



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Aharei Mot – Kedoshim

April 28, 2018 | 13 Iyyar 5778

Annual | Leviticus 16:1-17:7 (Etz Hayim p. 679-704; Hertz p. 480-508)

Triennial | Leviticus 17:8-19:14 (Etz Hayim p. 687-695; Hertz p. 486-493, 497-500)

Haftarah | Amos 9:7-15 (Etz Hayim p. 705-708; Hertz p. 509-510)

D'var Torah: You Shall Be Holy

Rabbi Jeff Cymet, Rabbi of The New Kehila of Ramat Aviv, Israel

When Moses is instructed at the beginning of Parashat Kedoshim, the second of this week’s double parasha, to “Speak to the entire assembly of the Children of Israel and say to them: ‘You shall be holy, for holy am I, the Lord your God’” (VaYikra 19:2), Moses is ostensibly bestowing upon us one of the highest accolades possible: A status of holiness that, in its very self-description, equates the entire assembly of the Children of Israel with God.

The concept of holiness, in general, and the holiness of the Children of Israel, in particular, is so important to Judaism that Rashi notes (in his comment to VaYikra 19:1) that “most of the fundamental teachings of the Torah are dependent on it.” In fact, it has been noted by those who study the literary structure of the Torah that this verse comes in the middle of the section of Torah that comes in the middle of Sefer VaYikra, which itself is the middle book of the Torah (book 3 of 5). In other words, the Torah emphasizes the centrality of this idea by literally putting it in the center of the Torah itself.

But what does it actually mean to be a holy nation, and what does it take? On the one hand, no single attribute in Judaism is more emphasized, idealized, and celebrated than holiness. But on the other hand, it is a concept that is ill-defined, potentially illusory and often offensive to others. Can we really be holier than other nations? And do we really want to?

The midrashic work, the Sifra, interprets the phrase “you shall be holy” to mean “you shall be *perushim*”, meaning “separated.” Holiness, in this view, means

D'var Haftarah: The Pain of Exile

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

For a people who adapted so well to living outside our homeland (so much so that we stopped calling it “*galut/exile*” and call it “*tefutzah/ diaspora*” instead), it is sometimes hard to understand the pain of exile and deep existential fear it entailed. But the prophets, whose people experienced exile firsthand, knew and understood its inimical forces. And their spiritual sensitivity caused them to feel exile’s full force as a divine punishment - not only removal from one’s land, and a neutering of one’s identity, but also a loss of intimacy with God.

Whether God was pleased or angry, while we were in our land we knew that God was still our God, and we God’s people. But who are we in exile? Is God with us there? Will we survive? It is this last question that the prophet Amos is responding to when he relays this message from God: “For I (God) will give the order and shake the House of Israel through all the nations as one shakes [sand] through a sieve, and not a pebble falls to the ground.” (9:9) We will indeed be scattered and dispersed among the nations, but we will not be lost.

The following midrash, however, amplifies the consoling message of this verse, and adds to it an affirmation that God still cares about us even as God punishes us: “Happy are Israel, for wherever they have been tarried in the four corners of the world, to the north, to the south, to the south and the north; to the east and to the west, to the west and to the east, they are still at the center [of God’s concern]: ‘For I (God) will give the order and shake the House of Israel through all the nations as one shakes [sand] through a sieve, and not a pebble falls to the ground.’ If the verse would have said: ‘and the pebble shall fall to the ground’, ‘my heart would have been broken within me and all my bones would grow weak’ (see Jeremiah 23:9) since it is the nature of things that when they fall to the ground they are lost. But instead it reads: ‘and not a pebble falls to the ground’. As a grain which a person shakes back and forth in a sieve ends up in the center of the sieve, so, too, Israel remains at the center of God’s concerns.” (Midrash Eliyahu Rabbah 5, Ish Shalom edition p. 25)

This midrash provides a critical message for all Jews. Wherever we may live, we and our lives as Jews are precious to God, and it is incumbent upon us to live with this inspiration in our hearts. Whether in the Jewish homeland, a thriving Jewish community, or somewhere far from both, we must not let our ourselves get lost as Jews. We must live our Jewish lives vibrantly, inspired that wherever we are, we are the “center of God’s concerns,” always.

For Discussion: How does it affect the experience of being Jewish when one lives in a Jewish community that is anxious or pessimistic about its future vs. one that feels confident and optimistic?

Aharei Mot - Kedoshim Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This is another week with a double parasha (our goal is to reach the book of Bamidbar on the Shabbat before Shavuot). It contains the description of Yom Kippur ceremony, laws of forbidden sexual relations, and many laws told in brief form in chapter 19.

- 1) As part of the work of the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur (told in chapter 16 and read on Yom Kippur as well), he brings *k'toret* (incense) with coals into the Holy of Holies and a cloud forms (16:12-13). Why is the cloud needed?
- 2) The Torah (chapter 18) takes a very harsh stance on the issue of forbidden sexual relations (mostly ones that we would term incest). Why do you think that penalty for this seemingly private issue has the potential to bring a communal punishment (exile)?
- 3) 19:5-8 puts time limits on eating from a sacrifice. What might be the reason for setting time limits on eating the sacrificial meat?
- 4) As one harvests the grain in the field and the grapes in the vineyard, the *pe'ah* (corner) has to be left uncut for the poor and sojourner (19:9-10). Why do you think that we should leave this part uncut rather than cut it for them?
- 5) We are warned not to do iniquity in sentencing and in measurements (19:35). Why do you think that Torah put these things in one sentence? What is the connection between them?

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We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org

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