

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Kedoshim

As its name indicates, our parsha is all about holiness. Unfortunately, "holiness" is a vague word that suffers from popular misconceptions. As the devout strive to "be holy," it would help if they knew what it meant. The danger of misunderstanding holiness is clear and present, so we would do well to set the record straight.

The Torah bookmarks our parsha with calls for holiness (Leviticus 19:2; 20:26) and the eclectic collection of mitzvot found within provides the Jewish definition of the concept. The study of these mitzvot is therefore the logical starting point for the study of holiness. As we make our way through the parsha, reading mitzvah after mitzvah, things start coming into focus in an unexpected way.

"Ritualistic" and "service" oriented mitzvot are to be expected and indeed, our parsha includes several such mitzvot (cf. 19:5-8,19,30). We also find prohibitions against pagan practices (19:4,26-28; 20:2,6), drinking blood (19:26), adultery (20:10), incest (20:17), sexual deviance (20:13,15) and family purity (20:18). These mitzvot would fit well into anyone's perception of holiness.

But there are other ingredients. We are told to respect parents and the elderly (19:3,32), save a portion of the harvest for the poor (19:9-10) and pursue justice (19:15). We find prohibitions against theft (19:11), dishonesty (19:11,12,35,36), gossip (19:16) and revenge (19:18). At first glance, these basic laws of morality might not appear to have anything to do with holiness, but the fact is, crimes against man undermine our potential for holiness no less than crimes against G-d.

However, it does not end there. The most famous mitzvah of all is also an essential element of holiness: "You must love your neighbor as [you love] yourself" (19:18). This comes as a surprise. What's love got to do with it? How does love make you holy?

It seems that there is more to holiness than mere "holiness." People tend to think of holiness as a higher form of spirituality in which man focuses exclusively on G-d. But our parsha informs us that striving to connect to G-d will fail to sanctify man as long as love for fellow Jews is lacking. In the end, our relationship with G-d is contingent on our relationship with our fellow Jew.

The Torah's presentation of this fundamental mitzvah provides practical lessons for human relationships. Let's take a closer look:

"Do not hate your brother in your heart. You must admonish your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him.

"Do not take revenge nor bear a grudge against the children of your people. You must love your neighbor as [you love] yourself. I am G-d" (19:17-18).



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The mitzvah here is to love an enemy! The Torah is saying don't hate him, don't take revenge, love him instead.

Easier said than done. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto describes how intensely one who has been wronged desires revenge:

"...Revenge is sweeter than honey, for it is the only thing that will calm him down. If he has the strength to abstain from that which human nature demands... he is indeed strong and powerful. It is only easy for the angels who lack these human characteristics... But it is the decree of the King: ... "Do not take revenge nor bear a grudge against the children of your people." (Path of the Just, chap. 11) Although the Torah forbids revenge, don't think that the Torah expects us to "turn the other cheek". Not at all. Being "righteous" and ignoring a personal attack is not holy; it is a dangerous approach that can lead to your own undoing. The Torah tells us how to properly deal with resentment, fix our relationships and rebuild love:

"Do not hate your brother in your heart. You must admonish your neighbor..." (Ibid). Rabbi David Fohrman explains that in place of revenge the Torah is prescribing rebuke. If you tell your brother why you are angry with him, if you work it through together, then you won't be left carrying a grudge. It may be uncomfortable to discuss the issue, but if you do not heed the Torah's advice and choose instead to bottle up your feelings inside, don't expect the resentment to go away. It will fester in your heart until it boils over one day in a fit of rage or an act of revenge.

The Torah demands nothing less than the complete repair of damaged relationships. G-d is not satisfied with half measures. In the words of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto:

"The negative traits [in man] disturb the heart and strive to preserve some impression or memory of the incident... Even if you agree to lend him that which he refused to lend you, you won't give it with a smile. Or if you won't do him harm, you won't do him favors or help him out either. Or if you agree to help him out, you won't do it together with him. Or if you forgave him and he is no longer your enemy, you are satisfied with that, but you won't get back together and be friends again. Or even if you'll be friends again, you won't have the same degree of closeness as you once did... Therefore the Torah came out and stated plainly: "Love your neighbor as [you love] yourself." As yourself without any differences, distinctions, games or tricks. Exactly as yourself." (Path of the Just, chap. 11)

How can we accomplish such an incredible thing? Through honest communication. Admonish your neighbor and then you will love him. Communicating being upset will not ruin a relationship; it's the only way to save it. This is the Torah's formula for maintaining love – a critical ingredient in the holiness recipe.

Shabbat Shalom

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