



Around the Shabbat Table

Acharei Mot / Kedoshim

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Shalom!



Introduction

Kedoshim, part of this week's double portion, is the heart of Leviticus as well as the heart of Judaism. The command for us to emulate God's holiness and to be set apart as a Holy People, a "light unto the nations", because of the way we conduct our lives is, in many ways, the essence of Judaism. Kedoshim, also called the Holiness Code, provides specific mitzvot which if followed will enable us to live lives of holiness. These verses are considered to be so meaningful that they are read in most Reform congregations on Yom Kippur afternoon instead of the traditional verses from Acharei Mot which concerning the ancient rite of sending a scapegoat to Azazel on Yom Kippur.

Modern scholars make a distinction between ritual and ethical mitzvot and the majority of laws in this portion concern ethical behavior. The few ritual mitzvot in Kedoshim deal with subjects such as the prohibition against eating the blood of an animal, when animal sacrifices should be consumed, as well as a male cutting the hair on the sides of his face or beard. There are verses condemning idolatry, particularly the worship of Moloch, witchcraft and divination.

The ethical commandments in Kedoshim, which far outnumber those concerned with ritual, cover every aspect of human behavior. There are mitzvot prohibiting unfair judicial decisions by favoring either the rich or the poor; against withholding a laborer's wages until the next day; and against fraud, deceit, and unfair business practices such as falsifying weights or measures; and against taking advantage of another's physical or emotional weakness. The poor are protected by giving them all the produce grown in the corners of a field, and all the grapes dropped or left on the vine. We are reminded that we were strangers in Egypt therefore it is incumbent upon us to befriend the stranger and make him or her feel they are a welcome member of the community.

There are laws concerning forbidden sexual relations such as adultery, incest, and homosexuality. Unlike religions which esteem celibacy, and view sex and marriage as the alternative for those who cannot or choose not to attain it, Judaism has always viewed marital sex positively. It is considered to be a natural part of God's world to be enjoyed within the framework of Jewish law.

Kedoshim repeatedly commands us to be Holy and provides Judaism's path to holiness which is not found in a life consisting *only* of study, prayer, and meditation, but in daily life as we interact fairly, justly, and kindly with one another. The best-known mitzvah in this parasha contains its key idea and summary in one sentence, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Rabbi Hillel claimed that the negative rendition of this mitzvah was the most important principal in the Torah: "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Now go and learn it." (Shabbat 31a)



For Your Family's Discussion

1. There are some mitzvot in Kedoshim which seem to defy rational explanations such as: "You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; you shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two kinds of material." (Lev. 19:19) The rabbis tell us that laws such as these are to be obeyed out of faith despite the fact that we do not understand the rationale behind them. Some believe that to follow a precept which you **do not** understand is even a greater mitzvah than to obey one whose reason is clear.
 - a. Why do you think the rabbis might feel that unquestioning obedience to a law in the Torah whose meaning is unclear is a greater mitzvah than obeying a mitzvah whose meaning is clear?
 - b. Do you agree or disagree with the rabbis concerning this point? Why?
 - c. Is it easier for you to obey a law or a parental limit whose meaning is understandable? Why?
2. Kedoshim says that homosexuality is an "abhorrent thing," and in the story of Creation we are told that we were created "*B'Tzelem Elohim*", in the image of God. Unlike our ancestors, today we have mounting scientific evidence that homosexuality is genetic rather than a matter of choice. If the geneticists are correct then God created homosexual individuals.
 - a. How do you understand the verse in Kedoshim in today's world?
 - b. How do you understand the idea of being created in God's image? How does this verse apply to gays?
3. How do you understand the mitzvah to "love your neighbor as yourself"?

- a. Can you love another if you do not love yourself? How can we learn to “love ourselves?”
- b. What do you think the Torah means by the word “neighbor?”
- c. In practical terms what behaviors do you feel would illustrate the love of one’s neighbor?

Texts to Wrestle With

The words below express some of the implications of holiness:

The idea of holiness implies that what we do and what we make of our lives matters not only to us as individuals, not only to society, but also to the entire cosmos. A divine purpose runs through all existence. We can ally ourselves to it or oppose it-or, perhaps worse, we can ignore it. (Bernard Bamberger, The Torah a Modern Commentary, pp.809)

1. How do you think the way in which we live our lives does or does not affect the world?
2. Do you feel there is a divine purpose to our lives?

Rabbi Chaim Sofer discusses the meaning of holiness as follows:

Rabbi Sofer believes that “to be holy”...means “not merely in the privacy of your home and ashamed of your faith in public. Be not, as the assimilationists put it, ‘A Jew at home and a man outside.’ Be holy ‘in the community,’ in public, out in the open, in society. Among your own people or in the midst of strangers, wherever you may find yourself, never be ashamed of your character and sanctity as a Jew.”
(Divre Sha’are Chaim)

1. Has there ever been a time when you were ashamed or afraid to acknowledge your Judaism? What were the circumstances and how did you handle the situation? Would you handle it the same way today?
2. Has there ever been a time when you were especially proud to be Jewish? What was the situation and how did you handle it? Would you handle it the same way today?



Towards an Action Agenda

1. The Ten Commandments appear in Kedoshim but not in the same order as in Exodus 20. Compare the arrangement and wording of the Ten Commandments in Exodus to those in Kedoshim.
 - a. Create a list of Ten Commandments for your family.
2. Every Erev Shabbat ask each family member tell of something “holy” they did or was done for them during the week.
3. There are many serious problems in today’s world which make it difficult to believe that people can be “holy.” Cut out newspaper or magazine articles or make notes about news reports which feature acts of holiness. Discuss the holiness you find during Shabbat dinners.



Shabbat Shalom

Please join in sharing your thoughts and ideas with other families and subscribers by sending your responses to RavADS@bjeny.org . We'll post them to the list and to our website.

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