

D'var Kedoshim

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By Rabbi Carol Caine

Shabbat Shalom. It's so wonderful to be back at TBI, in your beautiful new building – you weren't here yet when I last came three years ago. Thanks to Rabbis Yitz and Maurice and the whole TBI team for making it possible for me to be here. It's my privilege to speak some words of Torah tonight. I would like to start by asking: What is at our core? What values do we put at the center of our existence? I wanted to talk about some core human values reflected in this week's Torah portion and see how we might apply them to animate our lives.

This week we're studying parshat Kedoshim, which is quite literally the center of Torah—it comes in the middle of Leviticus, which is the third, the middle, of the five books of the Torah. Our portion is also central on the level of meaning, containing some of the core ethical principles of our tradition. The earlier part of Leviticus is mostly concerned with the sacrificial system, officiated by the priests. In parshat Kedoshim, the focus changes to a set of rules for living that apply to the entire community, not just to the priests.

The portion begins with the instruction Kedoshim t'hi'yu—be holy! The rules that follow are sometimes called in Jewish tradition “the holiness code.” These rules are primarily about how we treat each other, involving how we act in the privacy of our homes, in the public realm, how we worship, how we conduct our personal relationships, what we do in business, even how we think and feel. Scholars believe that this holiness code may have been a response of reform-minded priests to a focus on ritual alone, in the spirit of Isaiah's words that we read on Yom Kippur—saying, it's not enough to do the ritual, we have to act justly.

Let's look a bit more closely at some of these rules for holy living and see if we can discern the core ethical values underlying them. To begin, parshat Kedoshim instructs us not to reap the corners of our fields or pick up any gleanings that may have fallen, but rather to leave them for the poor and foreign-born workers. We're also told to treat our workers fairly by giving them what they have earned immediately: a laborer's wages cannot stay with us until morning. To me, the underlying value here is that economic justice is an obligation, regardless of whether I'm feeling generous or not. The Torah does not say I should give a worker his wages immediately if I like him or if he's done a great job—the wages belong to him and I cannot delay. Similarly, the text does not say we should give to the poor because it's a nice idea. Rather, the field owner isn't giving the corners and the gleanings to the poor—they actually don't belong to him, the poor have the right to this produce. The value of doing the right thing because it's an inner obligation, not because we feel like it, is very inspiring to me, because there are going to be times I don't feel like it. It also reminds me that ultimately, what I have does not belong to me. This reflection helps me see what I've been given as a gift, rather than feeling envious of those who may have more.

Our portion tells us “don’t curse the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind.” This makes sense on a literal level—it’s clearly wrong to curse a deaf person who cannot hear to defend themselves or to place an obstacle in the path of a blind person who cannot see it. I see the core value here as—don’t take advantage of another’s vulnerabilities. The great Torah commentator Rashi said this rule means you cannot give someone advice you know to be unsuitable for them. If I know a loved one, for example, overreacts, perhaps irrationally, to a particular subject, to deliberately bring up that subject would be, in essence, placing a stumbling block before the blind.

Another rule in Kedoshim is “stand up before a grey head and honor the elders.” We cannot take advantage of an older person, who perhaps might be more vulnerable, but are called to honor them. To state the value more positively we have to treat everyone with respect, regardless of where they are in their lives. Keeping this value in mind can inform my life in simple but profound ways. The other day a very elderly person was walking extremely slowly ahead of me on the sidewalk. Though I was feeling impatient, I slowed down and stayed well behind them, so they would not feel pressured—it was my way of respecting them in that moment.

Our portion tells us to treat someone who comes from another place to live with us the same as a citizen, and to love that visitor—the *ger* or the “stranger” in the language of Torah—because we were strangers in Egypt. I again see the value here of treating everyone with respect and not taking advantage of their vulnerabilities. In my life, I see this value as encouraging me to reach out to someone who seems out of place in a social situation, and, to support public policies that treat the strangers in our world fairly.

We’re told we cannot stand idly by on our neighbor’s blood. We have an affirmative obligation to help them if we can. The principle I see here is—we are responsible for each other. This sense of responsibility does not appear based on our feelings—we have to help regardless of how we’re feeling about our neighbor.

Of course, because we’re human, our feelings are going to affect our willingness to meet our obligations. Therefore, our portion tells us not to hate each other in our hearts, not to bear a grudge or to plan vengeance. I suggest the value here is that: we are responsible for the state of our own hearts. And, because our tradition tells us we are not given a commandment unless it’s possible to fulfill it, it must be possible to actually change the state of our hearts. I have found many spiritual practices that help me maintain the inner state I’m seeking—though cultivating the willingness do them isn’t always easy. The spiritual practices we employ to keep our hearts pure may change. And, I believe that the Torah is telling us, however we do it, we are responsible for our inner states.

We’re also told *hochayach tocheeach et ameeecha*, you must surely rebuke your fellow, that is, tell them when we think they’ve done wrong. I see the underlying value here as both responsibility for the other person and for the state of my own heart—speaking up when I feel hurt or feel someone is on the wrong track helps free me from holding onto resentment, but I

have to approach the other person with love and respect, keeping their ultimate good in mind. The Talmud and later Jewish law codes make clear we have to do this rebuke in a loving way that doesn't embarrass the person. And, if we know the person cannot hear our words because of their emotional condition, that our speaking could even make the situation worse, we must refrain. Love for our friend must underlie our actions.

This value of loving each other reaches its ultimate expression in these words in the very center of our parsha—*v'ahavta l'reyecha kamocha*, love your neighbor, love your fellow, as yourself. The great Talmudic sage, Rabbi Akiva, said these words were the most important principle in Torah. Care for the self is part of this phrase—loving our neighbor as ourselves implies we love ourselves, too. How we live out this value, this dance between love of self and love of others, is a life-long adventure of discovery. In my own life, I have come to see the healthiest perspective, where I have the deepest happiness, is to transcend self-centeredness and move into a place of love and concern for others. Self-care is necessary, but must be transcended as my exclusive perspective if I'm going to reach my highest potential. The seeming paradox is that, when I am in that refined perspective of loving others, I also feel the most free, loving and strong in myself.

Thinking about selfless love brings to mind the work of the great French-Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, who set a very high and inspiring standard of altruistic love. Levinas' thought is very complicated and I'm indebted to my teacher of his thought, Rabbi Ira Stone, for the limited understanding I have. Levinas championed an ethical philosophy that put at its center a sense of infinite responsibility to other people. Levinas said that ethics is the first philosophy—we don't first answer metaphysical questions and then see what ethics flow from that. Rather, ethics comes first. Ethics is foundational to our existence. Levinas said that we come into existence beholden and responsible to others. We're here because someone took care of us. No matter what kind of parenting we had, we were all helpless as infants, and if someone didn't take care of us, we wouldn't be here. As a result, we're infinitely responsible for other people. It's not reciprocal. It's not about getting something back. It's our responsibility. We're so responsible we must even be willing to die for each other. I don't know that I'll ever reach this level of love on an ongoing basis, what my teacher Rabbi Stone calls Levinas's "hyperbolic and messianic" teaching about love for others, but it is something I can experience in certain moments. I understand why Rabbi Stone calls this perspective "messianic", because in those moments of pure self-transcendence, I taste *olam haba*, the world to come.

May we all find the right balance in our lives between healthy love of self and transcendent love and care for others. May we live our love so fully, may we so make "love your neighbor as yourself" the center of our lives, that we bring the messianic age closer. May we taste moments of that messianic age, of the world to come, right now, that place expressed so beautifully in an old Grateful Dead song, where "strangers stopping strangers just to shake their hand/Everybody's playing in the heart of gold band."

Shabbat Shalom!