

Our parashah this week is another double portion, *Acharei Mot - Kedoshim*.

You are probably all familiar with at least part of Acharei-Mot. Chapter 16 describes the ancient Yom Kippur service, with the sacrificial goat and the “live” goat, the scapegoat sent off into the wilderness. We read it every year.

Acharei Mot continues in chapter 17 with the prohibitions and instructions on eating animals: which ones are permitted, which forbidden, which parts of them, where and how to slaughter and eat them, and then segues into a list of forbidden sexual relationships, mostly incest.

Chapter 19 begins Parashat Kedoshim, so called because of its opening commandment, said to all of the Israelite people: “קְדוּשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה” אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: “You (plural) shall be holy, for I, Hashem your God, am holy.”

There are several things that to my mind are curious about this verse. One is what it means to be holy, a notoriously slippery word whose root means, “set aside,” “separate”. Does it mean to be “special,” above, or better than something? Does it mean to be extra spiritual? Extra righteous? It’s particularly confusing, because the verses that follow all deal with ethical commandments, mostly about how we should treat other people: sharing our harvest with the poor, honest business ethics, do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, not gossiping, not holding grudges but giving honest feedback, culminating in Lev. 19:18, וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ – you shall love your fellow as yourself. Ambitious, righteous behavior, to be sure. But also potentially universal. A definition of holiness?

Another question is how, “for I, Hashem your God, am holy,” makes sense as a reason. We humans are not God, so how does God’s holiness act as a motivator for our holiness?

And finally, a question of grammar, with larger implications. “You shall be holy,” is framed in the future tense, but in Hebrew that’s sometimes interchangeable with the imperative, with the command form. So is this a predication of something that will happen, or is it a commandment of something we should strive to become? This came up in Torah study yesterday, and it matters. Because if it is a description, then as one of our participants, Karel noted, perhaps it is a status that is a reward for righteous behavior. But if it is a prescription, then we enact it through our righteous behavior.

Another wonderful question was raised in Torah study: if “holy,” “kadosh,” means separate, what are we separating from? Is this a “Chosen people,” separated from others, kind of thing? Are we separating from the people who don’t follow the mitzvot that come before and after those verses?

And this is why I love the weekly Torah study group; they ask such good questions and bring such great insights. Gordon Lafer noted yesterday that holiness is the very process of submitting to a system of obligation that makes ethical demands on us. It’s one thing to act ethically in business, for example, because we feel like it. But it’s holy to *commit* to acting ethically, whether or not we feel personally motivated in a given moment. HE suggested that we are separating from the inclination to do whatever we want and treat others however we want.

Tom Broeker expanded on this comment, noting that what most of the mitzvot preceding and following the verse about holiness have in common is that they seek to reign in our impulses and appetites. He suggested that when we strive for holiness, the “separation” is the distinction between our *yetzer hatov*, our better inclinations, and our *yetzer hara*, our evil inclination, that which just pursues or impulses without a thought for others.

Of course, it is not easy to do this. These ethical commandments are deceptively simple. While the details of say, kashrut, might be more complicated than “do not go as a tale bearer,” or “do not hold a grudge in your heart, rather rebuke your neighbor and love your neighbor as yourself,” I imagine that for almost all of us find it difficult to let go of grudges, or to refrain from gossip. If this is the definition of holiness, it may be universal, but it’s *quite a high bar!*

So I really love how Or HaChaim, an 18th century Moroccan commentator, interprets the future tense of these verses. He writes: . . .this is a commandment which is an **ongoing** process. The Torah asks us to eat מצה on Passover, to sit in huts on סוכות, to abstain from certain kinds of activities on the Sabbath, etc. The common denominator of all those commandments is that they apply on certain days or on certain dates only. Not so the commandment of "be holy." This commandment applies day in day out throughout our lifetime. The imperative to strive for sanctity is one that we cannot take a vacation from. Even while we are busy performing this commandment it is one that we never have mastered **completely**. Whatever sanctity we attain is superior to what we had achieved previously but inferior to what we still hope to achieve. . .

“The Torah writes תהיו in order to remind us that the ultimate realization of the ideal of holiness will forever remain "in the future." (14) The Torah supplies the reason for this with the words "for I the Lord your G'd am holy." G'd implies that just as there is no limit to God's holiness, so our striving for holiness must remain something that has no upper limit.

We should not, in other words, think of holiness as something we succeed or fail at, but rather as an ongoing spiritual practice – if you want to follow the gleanings from yesterday's Torah study, a practice that involves seeking to examine our impulses and choose the good whenever possible. And if we slip up, well, we never were supposed to imagine that we were holy already. We should try to do better, tomorrow and in the ever-expanding future.

The commandment to be holy at some future time is thus a commandment to continue to fight a battle with ourselves, one that we can and should never win. As Rebecca Solnit wrote in *Hope in the Dark* – a book that I have just decided to reread! – “Paradise is not the place in which you arrive but the journey toward it. Sometimes I think victories must be temporary or incomplete; what kind of humanity would survive paradise?”

I would say the same thing of holiness, that it is found in the striving rather than in the achievement. So you gossiped yesterday? Today you can try to think before you speak. So you held a grudge today? You'll try to forgive tomorrow. May we keep striving to living holy lives, responding as best we can to what each moment presents. And may we never make the mistake of thinking we have arrived.