

A Life of Holiness

A D'var Torah on *Parashat K'doshim* (Leviticus 19:1 – 20:27)

By Sarah B. Schweitz

*"K'doshim tih'yu ki kadosh ani Adonai Eloheichem."
"You shall be holy for I, Adonai, your God, am holy."*

Greek translators named the third book of the Torah "Leuitikon," and the Latin name "Leviticus" was adopted.¹ Called *Vayikra* ("and He called") in Hebrew, Leviticus is the core of the five Books of Moses and contains some of the most important passages of the Bible. Much of Leviticus is devoted to matters such as instructions for sacrifice and rules of ritual defilement and purification. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the laws of sacrifice no longer functioned;² sacrifices were abandoned and later replaced by prayer.

At the center of Leviticus is *Parashat K'doshim*. The first 19 verses of *Parashat K'doshim* are known as the Holiness Code (*K'doshim*), a tower of spirit and morality among religious writings of any generation. *K'doshim* is equal in importance to the Ten Commandments and worthy of being read aloud on Shabbat and Yom Kippur afternoon in order to teach us how to behave.

The Hebrew root of *K'doshim* is *Kadosh*, which we translate as "holy," but which embodies the idea of a spiritual separation between divine perfection and human imperfection.³ Some derivatives of *Kadosh* are⁴:

Kodesh – "holiness"

Kiddush – "sanctification," applied to hallowing the Sabbath and Festivals over a cup of wine

K'dushah – "holiness," "sanctity," or "sanctification," as used for a series of liturgical responses

Kadosh – "holy"

K'doshim – "holy beings"

Kiddushin – "betrothal" or formal engagement

Mikdash – a place of worship

Kodesh Kodashim – the innermost shrine of the Temple; the Holy of Holies

¹ "Introducing Leviticus," a commentary by Rabbi Bernard J. Bamberger; *The Torah – A Modern Commentary*; Edited by W. Gunther Plaut; Union of American Hebrew Congregations; 1981; p. 735.

² *Ibid.*, p. 733.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 889-91.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The parashah begins, “Adonai spoke to Moses saying, speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them, ‘You shall be Holy because I, Adonai your God, am Holy.’”⁵

What does it mean to be holy? Is this commandment possible and practical? Is it realistic for a human being to be holy in the same way that God is holy?

Being holy means to be different, unique, and separate from the ways of others — distinct in a moral and ritualistic way. Does this moral and ritualistic distinction mean that Jews have to withdraw from society in order to be holy? Martin Buber, a great Jewish thinker and philosopher, said, “No! Being Holy–Kadosh means to achieve an ethical and spiritual excellence that can enrich and influence other people. The way to Holiness for an individual is to emulate God’s attributes, such as being kind, just, merciful and wise.”⁶

The Holiness Code contains one of the most quoted commandments: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” I have been the recipient of this love when a righteous gentile by the name of George Kalogerometrou helped my family to survive during the Holocaust in Greece. In the opinion of Rabbi Tanhum, “If a person can protest the wrong-doing of another he is considered holy.” I am alive today because my father Abraham Barouh practiced the commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

During the Second World War, my father saved the life of his Greek friend George Kalogerometrou, and this act of kindness was returned at a critical time when George risked his life and the lives of his family by hiding my family in his home when the Nazis were capturing all the Jews of our town in Greece.

In the immortal words of Rabbi Hillel, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I care only for myself, what am I? And if not now when?”

The commentator Pinchas Peli wrote, “Loving is also forgiving. It is easy to love good people. The test is to love those who are not as good or lovable in our eyes. Love your fellow human being and accept his faults and shortcomings as you accept them in yourself.”

The Psychologist Erich Fromm, in his book, *The Art of Loving*, stresses the importance of self-love. Dr. Fromm writes, “First the person has to accept his own uniqueness before he can love his neighbor.” Jewish tradition teaches us to love, respect, and understand ourselves first, and then transfer this love to others.

⁵ Leviticus 19:1.

⁶ From a Torah Commentary on Leviticus by Rabbi Harvey Fields.

The Law of Holiness-Kadosh is addressed to the entire community of Israel. The objective is not to produce a few saints withdrawn from the world, but to create a Holy People who display love and kindness to all human beings.

The notion of the Holy Land is present here also. Even though God rules the whole world, he is attached to and present in the Land of Canaan, which has now become the Land of Israel. The idea that sanctity should be attached to a geographic area may seem strange to some people. Many feel that a Jewish community should be different from other communities and a Jewish State different from other states.⁷

What is Holiness? Sidney Greenberg writes:

“There is Holiness when we strive to be true to ourselves.
There is Holiness when we bring friendship to lonely lives.
There is Holiness when we reach out to help those in need.
There is Holiness when we care for our world and make it a better place.
There is Holiness when we praise the Lord who gave us the power to pray.
Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord, all life can be filled with God’s glory!”⁸

The ethical injunctions of the Holiness Code are combined with ritual commandments. The modern Jew recognizes that worship and ceremony undertaken thoughtfully can elevate personal and family life.

The tenets of the Holiness Code speak to everyone. They allow us to live peacefully and interdependently in organized society. They may help us achieve inner peace and well being and bring us closer to God. These are the components of a way of life called Kadosh-Holy.

⁷ Plaut, *op. cit.*

⁸ “Where Can Holiness Be Found?” Bechol Levavcha, by Rabbi Harvey Fields, p. 81.