

Parshat Kedoshim / Aaron Leeper

(Leviticus 19:1-20:27)

What is it to be Holy (**Kadosh**)?

Rabbinic sources have two thoughts about this question. One thought deals with separation. Holy is the People who are Chosen to be different from the other Nations, a People elevated in the eyes of God. More is expected from a Holy People. The second thought deals with understanding what this “more that is expected of us” truly entails.

To be Holy is to be pure of heart, to behave in a way that is considerate of one’s fellow man, to be fair, as it is written in this Parsha/weekly Torah reading, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Why must proper behavior be spelled out in Parshat **Kedoshim**, since everyone has a conscience, right? Isn’t what Rabbi Hillel said while standing on one leg, “That which is hateful to you do not do unto others”, implicitly clear to everyone?

To be Holy one must listen to the small voice inside one’s head and heart – one’s conscience.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve received permission to eat from all the trees except from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. But the temptation was too great and they ate from this tree, nonetheless. Had they been deceived? Where is this promised knowledge of good and evil today, following their partaking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge? Why are evil deeds still performed? And why did this Parsha need to go into such detail about what is evil – or more correctly, what is unholy – about specific deeds?

Some contend that residing deep within us are a “good inclination” and an “evil inclination,” and that the impulse to do good deeds and bad deeds stems from these. Some contend that babies acquire their understanding of what is good – what is acceptable behavior – originally from their parents, while the inclination to do evil is already intrinsic in their urge to receive instant gratification. The inclination to do good deeds only comes after children

learn to defer gratification and to associate their actions with the effects these have on the feelings of others. Without this critical education from their mother and father at the very beginning of their lives, they will not develop a conscience, and the comprehension and understanding of what is acceptable, what is fair, what is just and how to put oneself in another’s place and understand how they feel, will not come. Furthermore, without continuous moral education (from parents, from society, from religion) development of a conscience may be deficient.

Knowledge of what constitutes “good” must be in place before there can be a conscience. In English the word “conscience” is comprised of two parts: con = with, and science = knowledge. Thus, for someone to have a conscience it is important that they first have awareness. Without a conscience there are no evil deeds and no good deeds – only deeds.

To apply the inclination to do good deeds one must listen to one’s conscience. And yet, those who have a conscience have the choice to obey it or to ignore it (to act according to the good impulse or to the evil impulse).

Parents tell us to behave well, but they don’t always punish disappointing behavior.

Teachers ask us to achieve good grades, and yet they offer makeup exams.

Judges give verdicts, but they also set law violators free on probation.

So what if we have a conscience? What prevents us from ignoring it and choosing to follow the evil impulse, as it would seem that everyone else in the world does? And what motivates us to aspire to separate ourselves from them and be closer to God?

In this Parsha we are commanded to be Holy because God Himself is Holy – “You shall be Holy because I the Lord your God am Holy.”

We must not steal, we must not deny knowledge of nor fabricate the truth – and we most certainly should never involve God in a lie through a false oath in His name – we must not curse the deaf, we must not place a stumbling block before the blind, we must not be tale-bearers among the people, we must not stand idly by while others bleed, and we must not hate our brothers in our hearts.

There are other “Don’ts” – “thou shall not” commands/negative mitzvahs – and “Does” – “thou shall” commands/positive mitzvahs here, including the core of all rules of behavior: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

What motivates us to obey our consciences if others don’t obey theirs? If we violate the “thou shall not” commands/negative mitzvahs, who will see it, who will know it, who will prove it, who will complain, who will seek justice? Time after time in this Parsha, after a certain passage, the recurring words “I am the Lord” appear. Why? Because even if other people don’t see the evil deed, or they do see it but they couldn’t be bothered to testify or to seek justice, the words “I am the Lord” are there to remind us that high above us, in heaven, God sees – and He knows. Awareness of this is what motivates us to obey our consciences, and to be Holy.

Therefore, the source of our conscience comes from on high. Our parents, who lovingly dedicate (**makdish**) themselves to imbuing us with a conscience, serve as the bridge between God and us, their children.

The Parsha begins with the words, “You shall be Holy because I the Lord your God am Holy,” and immediately continues with the words, “Your must honor/respect your mother and your father.”

Clearly, if we don’t respect our mothers and our fathers, we will not learn what it is to be Holy.

This coming Monday I will be flying to the United States to keep the “thou shall” command/positive mitzvah I have just mentioned – that of honoring my mother. My mother has reached a physical condition that requires her to move from her private home to an assisted-care

facility. I and all my siblings will be gathering from great distances to help her because our mother deserves this respect. She and my father, while under the chupah/wedding canopy said one to the other “Harei at **mekudeshet li**”/“harei ata **mekudash li**” (“I devote myself to you according to the Religion of Moses”) before they brought us into this world and before they cultivated our consciences. Based on my own conscience, I feel compelled to honor her and the memory of my father with this journey. Therefore, on the day that Parshat Kedoshim is read my thoughts naturally drift to this Holy matter.

To conclude, a summarizing story:

On the wall in a particular office, a wall clock was hung at eye level. Every employee who entered this office would look at this wall clock and then at their personal wristwatch, and would set the wall clock to match the time on their wristwatches. The manager of the office decided that this situation was entirely unacceptable and, with the help of a tall ladder, he hung the wall clock at ceiling level. Afterwards, every employee, upon entering the office, would look way up above at the wall clock and then at their wristwatch and would adjust their personal wristwatch according to the wall clock high above.

What is it to be Holy? To be Holy means to set our consciences very high to emulate the Lord our God.