

**Parashat Acharei Mot - Kedoshim:
You're Not, You Simply Aren't**
Rabbi Elisha Wolfin



Dear Friends,

Here they are, the two loftiest Parashot of the entire Torah - Acharei Mot and Kedoshim!

In this parasha Moshe is commanded: "Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them: You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy." (Leviticus 19:2)

Three huge questions arise from this statement:

What does "holy" mean?

What does "You shall be holy" mean? – Do we have a choice in the matter?

Were we chosen to be holy? Are we already holy and just didn't know about it until now, or do we have to do something to become holy?

What does "You shall be holy for I am holy" mean? – Should we be like you, God? And if so, we have never seen you, what is your holiness like?

What does a Jew do when he doesn't understand something in the parasha? He turns to Rashi.

In answer to the first question – What does holy mean? – Rashi explains: Separate yourselves from sexual immorality and from sin, for wherever one finds a barrier against sexual immorality, one finds holiness. Holiness, according to Rashi, is a state of separation, primarily to avoid sexual immorality.

Nachmanides - the Ramban - who lived about 200 years after Rashi, had a delightful Havruta with him. He would quote Rashi and then argue with his point of view. Nachmanides expands the prohibitions that guarantee holiness to a somewhat extreme degree:

"In Torat HaCohanim (the Sifra) I saw, "you shall be holy" simply as "You shall be removed"... Just as I am holy, so you shall be holy, just as I am removed, so shall you be removed, and in my opinion this removal is not simply from **forbidden** sexual relationships, as the Rabbi (Rashi) would have it... But rather that we should limit ourselves in regards to **permitted** pleasures too: engage less in sexuality... limit it to the Mitzvah itself and no more, and limit ourselves to very little wine... and remove ourselves from other forms of impurity, even the ones that the Torah did not warn against... and guard our tongues and mouths from excessive eating... and remain clean and pure, distancing ourselves from the masses, who dirty themselves with excess and disgust..."

Wow, this sounds so “Christian”, doesn't it? Sexuality and eating are perceived by Nachmanides as negative, lustful, dirty, and ugly. But this isn't the Jewish tradition that I know and love. There is endless mention of sexuality, food and wine in the Talmud, in the Halachic codes, and in Jewish folklore through the ages. For instance, Shabbat and festival meals ought to be delicious and delightful. They should bring us Oneg - pleasure! The Ketubah signed at a wedding includes the husband's obligation to meet his wife's sexual needs beyond those of procreation. Even Nachmanides himself states elsewhere that this is the prime mitzvah of a man in his marriage.

So how, then, can holiness be equated with limiting the pleasures of life? Are we really meant to abstain from God's bodily gifts in order to be holy? Does holiness mean asceticism?

I will not dare quote two of the greatest Jewish rabbis of all time – Rashi and Nachmanides – and then contradict them. I will therefore stick with their interpretations, but offer an interpretation of their interpretation, as Jews have done for 3,330 years, since the Torah was given. By doing so, I hope to explain not only the verse on holiness, but also all subsequent mitzvot that appear in these two wonderful parashot - mitzvot which describe a way of life which is holy.

I would like to suggest that separation is not abstention. Rather, it is more like a lack of identification. In other words, to separate from something means not to identify with it.

Humans solidify their personal identity by identifying with something outside of themselves. Who am I? Who am I in the world? Who am I in relation to others? If we do not anchor ourselves to external identities we are likely to drift, as a driven leaf, rootless and lost.

However, identification with anything at all is fictitious! A human being cannot be something specific; he cannot be an object; his body cannot be a "productive unit in service of his country" nor is he really the landscape of his youth, because a person is not a unit or a landscape.

In his book "Guide for the Perplexed" the Rambam tells us to know God by process of elimination: God is not X and is not Y. Every identity we can ascribe to Him will inevitably turn Him into an idol. Because we only have language at our disposal, we use words to describe God and think about Him. However, these words are not God. We may say that He is merciful, but that is not His identity. We may say that He frees slaves from Egypt, but that is not His identity either. These are just significant qualities that are associated with Him.

God IS holy. How so? Because He isn't this and he isn't that; He is holy, therefore He is separate from all identities, and in this parasha He asks us to be separate from all identities too: "You are not this, and you are not that".

But then what are we?

To this question there can be no one answer. Any attempt to provide one brings us back to the narrow trap of identity, to Egypt, to idolatry.

Our society is very preoccupied with issues of identity: Jewish identity, sexual identity, political identity. But this week we are asked to think differently about ourselves. We are asked to understand that God, who doesn't have a religious, sexual or psychological identity, is holy, and if we are to emulate Him, we don't have a religious, sexual or psychological identity either. Just as God is an infinite and holy entity, so, too is man or woman. The Parasha explicitly says that any attempt to put God in a box is idol worship, and so too is any attempt to force a human being into a convenient shape. It diminishes holiness, and it is considered a sin.

It is extremely difficult to live without a clear and defined identity. The human mind cannot fathom such a thing. Therefore, it is legitimate to do what we have to do – to play games of identity and definition – so as to give our minds some satisfaction. But at the same time we have to remember that it is only a game, a naming game that we play, just as Adam and Eve, in their first attempt to be human, gave names to all the animals. The names they gave became the animals' identities to this very day. But remember - the lion does not know it is a lion. It is a lion only in our human game of life.

The Divine, that which we call Holy, is called "Roach Hakodesh" - the Spirit (or wind) of Holiness - in Hebrew. This spirit seeks to shatter all narrow definitions. It seeks to free us from our limited identities. God is One, all encompassing. And so are we called upon to be as well.

So indeed, sexuality, food, wine - the good life - is to be enjoyed. Some would say the more the merrier. However, it should not be identified with!

When Rashi tells us that holiness is prohibition and Nachmanides tells us that holiness is limiting bodily pleasure as much as possible, what they are really telling us, in my opinion, is that radical holiness, or divine holiness is letting go of identification with anything at all - prohibited or permitted.

These ideas appear post-Modern, yet they precede post-Modernism, Modernism and every other ism, because – like God – they are timeless and eternal.

May you be holy,
Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha