

Kedoshim, you shall be holy for I am holy
Leviticus 19:1-20:27

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Temple Sinai
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Parshat Kedoshim sets out Jewish legal norms and standards for the establishment of a society worthy of being deemed holy.” Some of its instructions are ritual, but there are many ethical ones as well. Core Jewish values regarding equity, fairness, right behavior and social accountability are found in this portion, from paying workers on time to venerating the elderly. Even market behavior is legislated as the Torah teaches us to have fair measurements of length, weight and capacity so we do not ever cheat anyone in our buying and selling.

Introduction

Sitting here together, each of us are held by our communal silence, letting these words of Torah enter your ears, your mind and your heart, and find their way to move you, to move us, in our journey toward Holiness.

From the Zohar, on Kedoshim, on the cultivation of holiness:

“...we should rise up to do good deeds before old ages comes upon us; for there is not much credit to a man in doing this when he is old and can not do evil any more; but an honour to him if he is good while he is still in his prime.” (p, 104)

In this portion, Kedoshim, we are called to always remember the ethical component in all actions, and raise it up still further. We are called to the unending striving for and refinement of holiness on the levels of actions, thoughts and intentions.

Some of the laws are obvious. We need to cultivate fair and kind actions.

You shall not oppress your fellow. You shall not rob. The hired worker's wage shall not remain with you overnight until morning. (Lev 19:13)

You shall not curse a deaf person. You shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person... (Lev. 19:14)

Some are more obscure, like:

You shall not round off the corner of your head, and you shall not destroy the edge of your beard. (Lev. 19:27)

Some laws we can not know how they will lead to Holiness unless we take them on.

Whether we take them on because they are obvious or we take them on to practice the discipline of remembering Holiness, let's explore this relationship between Holiness and the practice of self-discipline, and obedience to rules. It gets increasingly subtle as a spiritual path.

We are attached to God only by attaining holiness.

And we attain holiness by attaching our self to God.

And even our holiness must be for the sake of all beings, for the sake of the whole, the One.

And it is a never ending process of refinement.

Niggun

(Section one--God's presence, knowledge of unity, need for discipline, and receptivity to loving-kindness)

The Lord spoke to Moses saying: speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God am Holy. [Lev. 19:1]

From the Isbitza Rebbe:

“The congregation of the children of Israel means’ means any place where Israel gathers together for the sake of Heaven...” (p. 217)

From the Sefat Emet:

“[God’s words to Moses are] spoken in a public assembly.” Every individual is part of the whole. “No one can attain holiness except by negating his own self before the whole of Israel. ‘The whole community, all of them are Holy.’ [Num. 16-3} This means when they are all one, they are Holy.”
(p. 185)

“This ‘assembly’ applies to each individual as well. We have to gather together all of our 248 limbs and all our desires into one...It is by means of the commandments that the limbs are joined together and come to oneness. Then there is holiness.” (p. 186)

“But the holiness of all Israel remains higher. This is the ‘assemblage for the sake of heaven’ whose ‘end is to persist’ since the name of heaven is called upon it and holiness dwells in it...holiness can be present only where there is oneness...” (p. 186)

And...

The stranger who sojourns with you shall be as a native from among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Lev. 19:35)

All aspects of self, of Israel, of all humanity, of all air breathers, are included without differentiation. All are subsumed in the whole, in holiness, in their relationship to the Divine.

(Silence)

So what is the relationship between our thoughts and actions, in our momentary desires and the whole of eternity, between the smallness of our wants and needs and the movement toward holiness, and its existence within the collective?

From the Isbitza

“...it is not good to eat too much honey.’ Even though at the time when one is eating it is pleasing to the taste, he needs to make sure that actions will not harm the rest of the organs and limbs of his body, for if damage is done to the rest of his body, then eventually the damage will reach his palate.... We find that the man who has a greater intellect will not only look at what is pleasing to his tongue, but will look after the good of his entire body all the days of his life. Even though this level is more honorable...for one must look toward....the blessed God... [who] endures from eternity until eternity.... the most complete mind will take all matters and consider whether they will benefit him for all eternity.

Thus is it also with the entire community of Israel, for they are, as it were, the limbs and organs of the Holy One....” (p. 219)

It is, as it were, all our limbs and organs and desires are part of the whole body of Israel, and it is, as it were, that the limbs and organs of Israel are the embodiment of the Holy One in this world.

(Silence)

“Every place where Israel gathers together for the sake of Heaven, there the Shechina dwell with them necessarily....You shall be holy for I am holy...the word for holiness, Kedusha, is a term denoting preparedness....always ready, expecting at all times...the illumination...”(p. 217)

“...let not loving-kindness and truth forsake you”...This [is to] say that a man must always stand before the blessed God, and expect him to illuminate his eyes. Then, at the time when the Holy One, blessed be he, effuses the loving-kindness of truth, which is loving-kindness that endures forever, then the love-kindness (itself) will apprehend the man who waits expectantly for it...wait[ing] for the words of Torah to enter his heart. Man must be careful not to turn his back, but rather should stand before God face to face.” (p. 218)

Chant: kedoshim ti-h'yu ki kadosh ani
You shall be holy for I am holy
(Shefa Gold melody)

Silence

Section 2

(Section two--developing discipline for the sake of Holiness, the obstacle, the task are one)

“You shall be holy”

From the Sefat Emet:

“‘You shall be holy’ is one of those commandments that has no fixed limit. The more you abstain, [adhere to the commandments], the greater the holiness you attain, and there is no end to this...” That is why ‘you shall be’ points to the future, “for a person should always add holiness to holiness...showing that there is no end point at which you can say, ‘I am already holy!’”...[and] since the verse indicates that there is no limit to holiness... right here in this world, a person can become more holy than the Seraphim. (p. 187)

What is this continuous process of refinement?

“Do not turn to idols or make molten gods for yourselves.” [Lev. 19:4]

From the Isbitza Rebbe:

“‘Idol’ means fear [awe] that is founded on nonsense. This is because the word for idol comes from the word for tail, aliah, which is the limb of the body that is furthest away from the head, and thus it contains greatly constricted consciousness.” (p. 221)

From what part of our self do we take counsel? Where should we go for counsel?

“do not make molten gods for yourselves...”

The Isbitza Rebbe gives us this teaching.

“A molten god’ is a composite of melted metals that cannot move. So too do we find in man that he becomes used to receiving benefit from this world, until he cannot even do without a small enjoyment. This is called a ‘molten god.’ Therefore the blessed God commanded us not to say that we are so used to something that we cannot be separated from it.” (p. 221)

All those things we take for granted,

all the stubborn compulsions we must act upon,

all those fixed, unyielding entitlements,

even our favorite ways of self-loathing,
these are our molten gods.

If we remove our small, personal motivations, our fear and greed which become our idols, and put these molten gods into the biggest context, within the context of the whole of eternity, does the burning need for them remain the same?

If we include all our limbs and organs, the community and our relationship to the most Holy, is the desire or the demand still there?

What are our idols, our molten gods? How do we find that bigger context for them?

Chant:

Ozi v’Zimrat Yah, vay’hi li li’yshua

לִישׁוּעָה לִי-יִהְיֶה הַזְמֶרֶת עִזִּי

My strength balanced with the Song of God will be my salvation

(Exodus 15:2)(Melody by Rabbi Shefa Gold)

Silence

Section 3

(Section three--in interrelationship (here and now) with self, others and God, on the level of thought and loving-kindness)

“Love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. [Lev. 19:18]

When we practice the refinement of Holiness, the love of our selves and of our neighbor and God are all the same. We are practicing living within the One. What I do that is hateful to you is hateful to me and to God. The practice of remembering "we are one" moves me, moves us toward holiness, for the sake of holiness.

The Isbitza gives an instruction on the level of contemplation, of thought.

Citing one of those seemingly obtuse commandments:

“Do not round off the corners of your head, or the corners of your beard.”
[Lev, 19:27]

“Corners’ teaches the fear of God. At the very place where peyote extend out, there is the birth of thought, and then the thought descends down to the heart. Thus this verse teaches that whenever one experiences an evil thought, he is immediately to enter into a state of the [awe] of God, and not let the thought rest in his heart. For ‘heart’ refers to thought with greater strength....

Listen to my words, Hashem, understand my contemplation.

‘My words relates to our thoughts, that God listen to them so they will be pure.

‘Understand contemplation’ means to ask the blessed God to bring an effluence [a flowing forth] of understanding to all my thought, and that I may purify them all so they will not turn from God’s will.”
(p. 228-9)

I pray for the out flowing of wisdom.
I pray to be apprehended by loving-kindness.
We pray as one.

Chant:

Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh

Silence

Niggun

Source material:

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The Language of Truth, commentary of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Alter of Ger, translated and interpreted by Arthur Green, Jewish Publication Society, 1998 (lived 1847- 1905)

Zohar, Vol. 5, Soncino edition