

Of Forests and Trees

Acharei Mot Kedoshim 5781

It has been observed, with much justice, that there are those individuals who possess an instinctive grasp for details, without much vision for the ‘big picture’, and, on the other hand, individuals who may be described in precisely the opposite manner.

The latter category is occupied by individuals who are possessed of broad, sweeping vision, with deeply held convictions regarding matters of philosophy and ideology, but who often cannot be bothered to take out the garbage or change a lightbulb.

If this dichotomy may be applied to life, more generally, it may also be applied to the world of observance. There are some individuals who gravitate towards the broader, profound themes of Judaism—chessed, fairness (tzedek), the centrality of family, to name but a few— but for whom details are often secondary, at best, or, sadly, languish in a state of benign neglect.

Conversely, there are some individuals who are, much to their credit, fastidious in observance of highly technical halakhot, but seem oblivious to the broader themes of religious experience. Indeed, they might react with a measure of skepticism, if not outright dismissal, if someone asked them to articulate a religious experience which they had, or a value for which Judaism stood.

Parshat Kedoshim, enables us to cultivate a healthy balance between appreciating both the big picture, and every detail, or, as the metaphor goes, to see every tree, but also the forest. Commenting on the verse from Kedoshim, R. Akiva, as is well known, boldly asserted, ¹וְאֵהֱבֵת לְרֵעֵךְ כְּמוֹךָ זֶה כָּלֵל גְּדוֹל בְּתוֹרָה, the essential principle of the Torah is to love one’s neighbor as one does oneself. To a great extent, R. Akiva was following in the footsteps of Hillel², who famously told the prospective convert that refraining from doing to another that which is displeasing to oneself is itself the Torah on one foot. Rambam³, in his own right, identified cultivating peaceful and harmonious social fabric as the teleological principle of all of Torah.

Apparently, despite the clear importance of every mitzvah in the Torah, these three Torah luminaries did feel that they had license to assign priorities. For those whose daily life is shaped by R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi’s charge to be equally fastidious in mitzvot, both large and small⁴, one cannot help but be struck by the audacity of these formulations.

Interspersed, however, with the broader themes of קְדוּשִׁים, such as וְאֵהֱבֵת לְרֵעֵךְ כְּמוֹךָ, and קְדוּשִׁים תְּהִיּוּ, and demonstrating respect for Torah leaders, are numerous technical halakhot. These areas range from intent during sacrificial slaughter, to forbidden mixtures, to laws governing half-emancipated slaves, to the forbidden fruits during the first three years.

¹ Sifra, Parshat Kedoshim.

² R. Akiva was taught by R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua, who themselves were students of R. Yochanan b. Zakkai, who was a student of Hillel (Sukkah 28a).

³ See Hilkhot Shabbat, Chapter 2, and Hilkhot Chanukah, Chapter 4.

⁴ Avot 2:1

The essential point of this textual interweaving between broad themes and technical *halakhot* illustrates the halakhic emphasis upon actualizing, to the smallest detail, the broader values for which the Torah stands.

To be sure, intensive study of each of these technical halakhot hopefully yields a fair bounty in terms of perspective on how a particular law reflects a broader value. Still, while the rationale for each of these technical halakhot may, at times, elude us, the persistent effort to translate broad themes into the most concrete, tangible lifestyle remains the central project of Torah life.

He who best succeeds in synthesizing an unwavering commitment to the broader, moral-ethical themes of Jewish life, and their concrete implementation across the range of halakhic corpus, can be said to have it all. He has seen every tree in the wood, but his eye continues to behold the entire forest, in its wholesome glory.