

Shabbat Shalom.

Every few years, our 29th annual Torah parsha, Acharet Mot, and 30th, Kedoshim (from the book of Leviticus) are both read on one Shabbat. This is one of those years. The themes of these Torah portions are overlapping and so are the messages we can derive from them.

Acharet Mot means “after the death”; it occurs after the previous deaths of two of Aaron’s sons. In this parsha we learn about the Laws of Holiness (basically additional sacrificial and dietary laws), specific prohibitions regarding certain forms of sexual behavior, and the origin of Yom Kippur. God emphatically and in no uncertain terms, instructs Moses regarding the laws and regulations that the priests and the people must follow... to the letter T. The consequences of not following God’s instructions are severe, ranging from being cut off from the community to death. G-d means business, and Moses and the Israelites are repeatedly told...We will do this My way because I am the Lord your G-d, and I said so.

The name of today’s second Torah portion, Kedoshim, means “holy ones”. This parsha is also filled with G-d’s instructions and commandments to our ancestors regarding how to live holy lives. The parsha begins: “And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak to the entire congregation of Israel and say to them *“You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your G-d, am holy. “* Similar to Acharet Mot, this parsha also goes on to very specifically discuss a plethora of commandments, both positive and negative: Giving to the poor, honesty in business dealings, sexual morality, revering parents, observing Shabbat, *a prohibition against sorcery*, the commandment not to lie, cheat, swear falsely, curse or mislead one another, and much, much more. The law of “Orlah” is revealed, a prohibition

against eating the fruit of a new sapling for the first three years, and the obligation to sanctify the fruit in the fourth year. The Israelites are commanded to eat only food which is kosher. The practice of Molech, a form of idolatry which required human sacrifice is thankfully prohibited. In the last verses of this parsha, we return to G-d's opening message about holiness. While in the first reading our people are commanded to follow G-d's laws because that is God's will, in Kedoshim we learn of the underlying reason for G-d's commandments. "And you shall be holy to Me, for I, the Lord, am holy, and *I have distinguished you from the peoples to be Mine.*" So in both of today's parshiot, G-d is commanding the people He has chosen not to follow the abhorrent customs and traditions of the heathen nations. Through explicit laws regarding sacrificial and dietary do's and don'ts and sexual morality, G-d makes it clear *why* the Israelites must refrain from the unacceptable actions he has forbidden. Much like a good parent who tries to protect a child from interacting with badly behaving peers, G-d is forbidding the Israelites to mimic the practices of those living in the lands He is about to give to the Jewish people. Other nations have defiled these places through immorality and a lack of discipline, and God is commanding the Israelites *to be better than that*. The land of Israel is literally the Holy Land, and its sacredness is not to be spoiled. G-d commands our newly freed ancestors to keep the statutes and ordinances of holiness *because He has chosen us as His people; to inherit the Promised Land, they must set themselves apart*.

A profoundly important phrase in both parshas this morning is "*for all time*". We are told that G-d's commandments are an order and a blueprint for future generations, and although modern, reform Judaism have reinterpreted some of the obligations for our times, I am quite sure the command to lead a moral and

holy life is as relevant today as it was a several thousand years ago....that we too are expected to lead the lives with which we have been blessed, in ways that incorporate self-disciplined, purpose, respect for the world we share, and compassion and support for those who need our help- be they neighbors, community members, or those devastated by earthquake halfway around the globe. We have a job which has been passed down to us, and that job is the holy endeavor of making this world a better place, a mandate "*for all time.*"

In an article written in 2009, Sam Berrin Shonkoff, a student of Religious Studies and then coordinator of the Stanford Hillel, wrote about the connection between today's two readings. He states "Together, they reveal a tension between two dimensions of the human experience: our potential for failure and distance from G-d, and our potential for virtue and closeness to G-d.

Shonkoff explains that the opening passages of today's two parshiot accentuate this. In *Acharei Mot* we read: The Lord spoke to Moses saying: *Tell your brother Aaron he is not to come at will into the Shrine behind the curtain, in front of the cover that is upon the ark, lest he die; for I appear in the cloud over the cover.* This warning would suggest that we are very separate from God, mere mortals taking instructions. In contrast, in parsha *Kedoshim* we read: *The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, G-d, am holy.* These words seem to say that we are holy, that there is a spark of the Divine within each of us. Stringing the parsha titles together, Acharet Mot/ Kedoshim means: After Death/ Holy. Shonkoff states this sequence of words is a meaningful pathway to personal growth. An honest look at the mortality, suffering and failure, in ourselves and in our world (such as occurs after death) can help us elevate ourselves to higher planes (meaning

holiness). Although holiness is difficult for us to conceptualize, *Parsha Kedoshim* suggests it has everything to do with righteousness, justice and generosity. These are not just high ideals. Judaism instructs in great detail how we are meant to show our love and respect for a fellow human being. It is spelled out in the 613 commandments. For Jews, being holy means *not* separating ourselves from the world, but fully living in it as we involve ourselves in making it a better place. We bring peace, freedom and justice into the world when we provide for those who need us. It has been said we bring forth holiness when “the words of Torah become the works of our hands.” It is no coincidence that doing so also brings meaning and purpose to our own lives.

I shared earlier that a focus of *Acharei Mot* is our Holiest of Days, Yom Kippur, a day which, more than any other, calls on us to face the truth of our mortality and to question how we have missed the mark and moved away from G-d. In this parsha we are given the fullest description of Yom Kippur that appears in all of the Torah. While Yom Kippur is not mentioned by name, G-d imparts to Moses the rules for making atonement. The people are commanded to set aside the *tenth day of the seventh month*. It is stated “On this day, Atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you of your sins. It shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall practice self-denial.” Again, G-d, ever forward-thinking and future-oriented, proclaims “*It is a law for all time.*” The Holy Days and festivals have changed since the ancient days when it was a ritual performed only by the priests, with the community more as spectators evolving when the prophets later insisted that merely observing the sacrificial rites cannot reconcile a human being to God. Sins are forgiven not by watching the priest (or the Rabbi) do all the

work, but through *self-reflection and repentance*. Participating in soulful prayer helps us to know our hearts and alter our ways. In reality, shouldn't everyday be a Yom Kippur? ...a day of introspection and atonement, a chance to right wrongs, resolve issues, and move forward.

A few weeks ago Canter Allen asked us to rethink Passover. What did we each see as greatest present-day plagues? What are the most relevant four questions to be asked and answered in our modern world? In this vein, I began to think about what commandments we would choose for ourselves to create a more satisfying purposeful life and a more compassionate world. While I probably should have just called Aimee Pelletier or Debra Kaplan, who brilliantly responded at Passover, I'm not as organized as our Cantor so I just rolled it around in my own head and you could do the same. I asked myself, what would make G-d proud of me and glad that I was also chosen when my ancestors heeded the call. (FYI, this is important to me because I have an abundance of seemingly one-sided conversations with G-d. I ask G-d for a lot of things and take up a good bit of His time, so I feel I need to be worthy.) Luckily, I work in an elementary school which could aptly be named "Inspiration Central". We have posters and bulletin boards everywhere with many quotes and messages and I began to see words that, taken to heart, were capable of transforming one's life. Any one of them would be make darn good commandment. In fact, there are great suggestions for living a holy life all around us. The difference between these bits of wisdom and "commandments" is that we normally think of them as inspirational but *optional* because no one besides ourselves is holding us accountable. We might listen with more urgency if we thought they came from

G-d. But we forget the G-d we know speaks to us through our own hearts and conscience.

Here is a thought which I think is a wonderful “would-be” commandment: *Do what you can, with what you have, where you are*, words by Theodore Roosevelt. *Do what you can, with what you have, where you are*. In just a few words this says so much. It is like G-d telling us, “Okay, I gave you a life...now I command you to maximize it by being the best person you can be, regardless of the circumstances” ...the same G-d who in today’s parshas commands our people...*I chose you to be better than the rest, now set yourselves apart from the others around you*. G-d may not be as outspoken to us as to our ancestors, but He has given us some very useful substitutes: Children are given parents and teachers to guide them, parents are given children to humble them, most of us end up with spouses and bosses to keep us in line, we have therapists galore to help us realize our potential, and there is MGM or Dreamworks to inspire us with the stories of true heroes in real life events. We have also each been endowed with a rather irrepressible conscience, a plethora of useful adages and my favorite tool for displaying what we are striving to remember.....sticky notes.

Closely aligned with Teddy Roosevelt’s saying is Hillel’s message which could easily be reworded as a commandment: *“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? When I am for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”*. Hillel has added the directive to take care of *yourself* as well as others and to do it now before it’s too late to matter. Speaking of now, how about this one?: “Make peace with the moment”This is the commandment to cultivate a centered,

loving attitude, to be happy with what we have, let go of the past, stop worrying about the future and tend to the present. And just one more, short and sweet. This one has earned the premier spot in the teacher workroom by the beloved copy machine: It's a really good one: *Don't forget to be awesome!* That's even better than the ever popular "*Make good choices*". It's hard *not* to choose well and make a powerful difference when you're *being totally awesome!*

So while Moses may not be here telling us what G-d requires, there is a very important little voice that knows just how we should behave so that we can hold our heads high, live life more fully, and do more than take up space on the planet--the one in our own heads. While no one will ever make peace with every moment or be awesome all of the time, we can each establish our own code of integrity and behavioral priorities and adhere to them as best we can. This week I asked a few people what modern day commandments they think are most needed in today's world. I heard: *Keep your promises. Eat less and exercise. Take a chance. Leave every person a little better than you found him. Be honest in your communication with others and with yourself.* Disney also weighed in. Last year's Frozen gave us Let It Go! This year's Cinderella: *Be kind and have courage* (Courage not being the absence of fear but the willingness to move forward despite that fear.) One could question are these commandments or clichés? Human or Divine? But if they make us better people why not take them to heart as directives and view them as possible reminders from the Divine?

Last fall, all employees in my school district were asked to select *one word* which would inspire and elevate us this year, one word to remind us of a way in

which we wanted to be more. Then we were asked to paint that word on a canvas and hang it outside our door for all to see, each small declarative canvas a type of commandment we were making of ourselves. Words like patience, balance, respire, grow, respect, perseverance, motivation, and trust started to hang in the hallways. The teacher next door to me, not Jewish, chose the word Shalom. My word was *happy, a declaration for me to be happy and to help others be happy too*. Everyday when I see that sometimes annoying “happy” sign on my door, I do hear it as a commandment. *Thou Shalt Be Happy!* On some days I ask myself “Why”? And then I realize my answer is the same one G-d gave us in today’s parshiot: Because I said so, *only now the “I” is me*. Maybe in our day, G-d’s voice sounds a lot like our own. We have many “yourself” directives- Be yourself, express yourself, respect yourself, stifle yourself... Why not obey yourself?

What are your *demands* of yourself? What are *your* self-commandments?

We cannot all be Mother Teresa or Derrick Shepherd, but we can work toward it. In parsha Acharet Mot and parsha Kedoshim, G-d looked around at the behavior of other peoples and concluded that to fulfill their purpose the Israelites had to do better. Not doing so would result in severe consequences. For us, not striving to be our best selves also has steep consequences.... Suffering unalleviated, opportunities wasted, health squandered, self-actualization unrealized. As Richard Norton, the author of *Living Without Regret* has said, “Opportunities will come and go, but if we do nothing about them, *so will we*.” Let’s face it. We’re Jewish and Mitzvah’s R Us. We donate school supplies, bring food to shelters and run camps for needy kids. We write checks to end

hunger and cure disease. We support victims of man-made and natural disasters. We volunteer, we learn, we grow. What G-d commanded *once upon a time*, He commanded "*for all time*"- that we be a light in the darkness. And that is something we can each *in our own way* achieve. To paraphrase the words of the unfortunately anti-semitic but quite gifted writer George Bernard Shaw, "let our light be *not a brief candle, but a sort of splendid torch which we make burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations*".

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