

Kedoshim

5779:

When we use words like 'holy' and 'sacred,' we tend to imagine such things as prayer, a wedding ceremony, or a day like Yom Kippur. But Torah does not limit its conception of the sacred to those subjects, though it certainly includes them. For Torah, concern for the sacred extends into every sphere of human activity, including the most personal and the most existential. Since sex and death are central to how we experience life, it would be surprising if the Torah did not treat those topics from the point of view of the sacred, and in fact it does so in this week's parshah.

Parshat Kedoshim, continuing the theme of holiness of the rest of the book of Leviticus, wants us to know that sex and death are not evil, profane or unnatural; they are part and parcel of who we are and can be sanctified just as all other parts of our lives. The Torah is concerned about the degradation of sex and death, on the potential use of them as pagan rites, and about creation of sexual boundaries that will protect us from degrading ourselves.

In particular, parshat Kedoshim warns us not to sacrifice our children, and to avoid incestuous relationships. These things seem self-evident, but in the world to which the Torah originally addressed itself they were not. Even today they are not: In some countries in our own time, children are forced to join the armed forces, and the news headlines are rarely bereft of tales of sexual slavery, child marriage or abuse. These acts twist human life and death into forms that defile what God intends for us. We don't need the Torah to tell us so, but we do need it to remind us that such things are abhorrent not only to us but to God as well. By creating a world in which those acts cannot occur, we create holiness. By safeguarding our sexual lives and limiting death to the sick and the aged, we confer sanctity to two defining aspects of life.