

Drasha on Parashat Kedoshim (24 April 2021)

Holiness and separation or setting apart are key themes in this parasha.

The themes are linguistically linked, the root *kaf/dalet/shin* signifying a distinction made between two different categories and the idea that being holy/pure or sacred involves a separation from that which is desecrated/impure/ or profane.

The parashat begins with God commanding the Children of Israel to emulate his holiness:
You shall be holy, for holy am I.

It ends with God twice asserting that He has set the Children of Israel apart from other peoples in order that they shall be holy:

You shall be holy for Me, for I Hashem am holy; I have separated you from the peoples to be Mine.

For the Children of Israel, the reward for observing God's decrees (*hukim*) and statutes (*mishpatim*) will be to be able to live in a Land *flowing with milk and honey*.

The punishment for failing to observe these commandments will be to be expelled from the Land, like the Canaanites before them.

But what are the laws and statutes that we are commanded to *observe and perform*? And what does being holy entail?

The parashat presents us with some fundamental commandments of Judaism, both negative and positive, but mainly negative, and names the punishments for not adhering to these commandments.

There is a reprise of the **supreme commandments between man and God**: above all, obedience to Hashem as the only God.

I am Hashem your God is repeated 15 times through the passage.

Commitment to Hashem is **distinguished from** idol worship, or indulgence in sorcery or superstition, the punishment being *kareit*, a spiritual death (being cut off or set apart from the Jewish people) and a physical one (by stoning).

There are positive commandments to *fear your God* and to *observe MY Sabbaths*, (the Sabbath being **set apart from** all other days), again with the punishments of spiritual and physical death for non-observance.

There are commandments

around the now obsolete practice of animal sacrifice (distinctions between what to do and what can't be done – on pain of punishment by *kareit*)

and commandments around the practices of an agrarian society: distinctions between

what can and can't be harvested and must be given to the poor and the proselytes, to emulate God's charity and mercy

and distinctions between when crops can be reaped for sacrifice to Hashem and when for personal use (not until the fifth year after planting).

And commandments

to **maintain** distinctions between species of animals and crops and types of fibres.

There are commandments that could be rationalised as **serving to protect the body**: for example, the laws of *kashrut* which command us to distinguish between clean and unclean animals; or the prohibition against the shaving of forelocks or beards.

Then there is a reprise of the universal statutes that concern **human relationships** and that are **necessary for the maintenance and well-being of society**: for instance, we are commanded to revere our parents, both honouring and fearing them, as we do God.

And we are told of prohibitions against

stealing
making false denials
lying
falsely invoking God's name
cheating or robbing others
withholding a worker's earnings
taking advantage of those who are disabled or disadvantaged.

Within this category, there are also prohibitions against perversion of justice: by Judges, who are commanded to judge people according to their righteousness and not by favouring the poor or the great; and by people who in their business dealings are forbidden to falsify weights and measures.

And lastly, there are statutes that could be categorised as **essential for the welfare the soul**. Within this category there is above all the overarching positive commandment to love your fellow as yourself, that is, to **not** make a distinction between ourselves and others.

So there are prohibitions against

standing aside when someone's life is in danger
gossiping
having a heart filled with hatred
criticising others in a way that lessens ourselves
bearing a grudge.

And prohibitions against different categories of adultery and incest, with details of ensuing punishments or in one case, a means to forgiveness.

In keeping with the theme **of making distinctions**, it seems to me that some of the statutes within this last category are the hardest commandments to observe and live by.

And that perhaps the greatest test and measure of holiness – and of emotional intelligence – involves how we treat the OTHER, particularly those whose personalities, behaviours, values and cultures are very different from our own; and whether we are able to act and react towards those people in ways that we would ourselves hope to be treated. How we learn to negotiate these differences can equally be a primary source of spiritual and emotional growth for us as individuals and as a society.

A commentary (by Bartenura) on a passage from the Mishna (*Chaggiah* 1:8:2) that we looked at in Rabbi Miller's 'Being a Jew' class this week compares the 39 *melachot* ('tasks') we should refrain from carrying out in order to observe Shabbat to 'mountains suspended by a hair, as they have little written about them in the Torah, and yet the details of their *melachot* are numerous'.

The rabbinical laws in the Talmud that were derived from the traditions communicated in the Mishna are even more numerous and often difficult to rationalise. For example, the prohibition on riding a bicycle on sand on Shabbat is derived from the commandment to not use a plough.

Observing such *hukim* can undoubtedly be a measure of our commitment to our religion and a mark of respect to those who are committed to follow them. Observing them can hone our mindfulness and so be a goal that we can strive to reach. But whether observance to the letter of the law is a pathway to holiness is another question.

Things become complex, because we are all endowed with freedom of choice and with a unique life history and physical, emotional and cognitive sensors that shape and inform what is most meaningful to each of us.

Perhaps the words of Ronit, the protagonist of *Disobedience*, a novel by Naomi Alderman, provide further food for thought on these questions. Ronit, the daughter of a Rav, has continued to identify as a Jew, but now finds it difficult to obey many commandments about which she has such a rich, lived understanding. The novel is an account of a crucial stage in her life journey, in which she makes amends with loved ones who have hurt her and have equally been hurt by her, and this frees her to achieve a better understanding of herself and of her relationship with Judaism.

At the end of the book, Ronit describes the inner truce she has reached in the following way:

It is not for a divine voice to decide the law, for in the Torah, it is written that the majority opinion shall prevail. And from this we learn that ... there is value in making our own choices, even if God Himself communicates clearly that the choices we make are wrong. We learn that we may argue with God, that we may disobey His direct commandments and yet delight Him with our actions. We learn of God's compassion for us; in the end broader than we can understand.

And she concludes by saying,

I can't be an Orthodox Jew. But I can't not be one either. There's something fierce and old and tender about that life that keeps on calling me back, and I suppose it always will. I guess that doesn't sound like much of a conclusion, but it's the only one I've got. Dr Feingold [her psychiatrist] calls it 'learning to forgive myself'. I call it learning that you don't always have to answer every request. Sometimes it's enough to note it and say, 'Maybe I'll get to this...'.

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