

Weekly Message of Torah from Rabbi Rick Rheins

The First Step for a Better World

In the light of the violence that continues to shock and shake our world, perhaps a message about holiness may ring a bit out of touch. How can we speak of holiness when children shoot children in our schools? How can we speak of holiness when the purveyors of hate attack worshippers in synagogues, churches and mosques? How can we speak of holiness when we seem to be surrounded by so much anger and intolerance and mocking and inflated emotions of outrage? Then again, in such an environment, we most certainly need to be reminded that holiness is at the core of every person.

Of all the passages in the Torah, one could easily argue that Leviticus chapter 19 of this week's *parashah*, *Kidoshim*, is the most significant. It is the heart of what is known as the "Holiness Code," the chapters of Torah that directly address the highest of Jewish values and ethics. These verses inspire us, intrigue us and challenge us with the understanding that holiness is not strictly a spiritual state. Rather, it is a call to action and appropriate behavior.

Chapter 19 begins:

¹Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: ² Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy.

What follows is a litany of actions. Treat your parents with respect. Observe the Sabbath. Be generous and sensitive to the poor and the stranger. Do not steal or be deceitful. Be truthful. Don't be cruel. Treat those with

physical challenges with kindness and care. Be fair. Do not stand idly by injustice. Do not hate.

Far from some philosophical concept of higher consciousness, the ideals of Holiness in the Torah give us a guide for living our lives and building a society in ways that reflect simple decency. Kindness, sensitivity, respect, and fairness are well within every person's control. We all are capable of these fundamental actions of decency. Therefore, every person is not only capable of being holy, it is most probable that every person has exhibited these actions and values of holiness.

But then, there are our other emotions. Some people have provoked us to anger. Perhaps they intended to insult or offend us. Perhaps they did so inadvertently. Regardless, good people, people quite capable of holiness can find themselves angry and judgmental and dismissive of others. This is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, this chapter of holiness directly addresses this challenge:

¹⁷ You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your neighbor but incur no guilt because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your neighbor. Love your neighbor as yourself: I am Adonai.

There are two keys to overcoming anger and hatred. The first is a sense of responsibility to our fellow humans. Most specifically, when you see a person doing something inappropriate, rebuke him or her. What does that mean? It means speaking to that person in a gentle and sensitive way that you are concerned that his/her actions will lead to unfortunate consequences. The rebuke should never be in a public forum so that it

risks embarrassing the person. Rather, a truly effective effort to help convince a person to change his/her ways needs to employ a demeanor and a message that expresses genuine concern and care for the person's well-being. Note that the famous adage "Love your neighbor as yourself" comes directly after the instruction of how to control our anger and how to help a person overcome temptations that could lead to pain and suffering. To love your neighbor is to know that everyone of us is capable of both holiness and baseness.

To love our neighbor as ourselves is to know that we are all in need of forgiveness, forbearance, tolerance, and a second chance.

There is far too much cruelty in the world. We are too quick to judge, too fierce in our disagreements, too determined to divide and categorize, too stubborn to listen intently, too proud to admit that we may be wrong. This week's Torah portion reminds us that we are better than that.

Holiness is not merely a concept. Holiness reflects our noblest qualities and actions. Holiness reflects common decency and simply being humane. May it be that we see the holiness in every person, regardless of faith, race, gender, political affiliation, and sexual orientation. This will be the first and most important step to the peaceful world we seek to create.

Shabbat Shalom,

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