

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

The Timeless Rav Hirsch

“You shall not place a cut for the dead in your flesh, and a tattoo you shall not place upon yourselves. I am Hashem.”

Cutting the flesh and tattooing are not forbidden by the Torah. Despite what our pesukim seem to say, the preceding sentence is perfectly defensible.

Were it the act of cutting the flesh as a sign of mourning for a loved one, the Torah would have expressed itself differently. If making a permanent mark or tattoo on the body were an objectionable act, if this were considered an affront to some assumed sanctity of the human body, the Torah would have used a different verb to describe the prohibition. In both cases mentioned in our pasuk, verb forms exist that could better pinpoint the activity that is objectionable and forbidden.

In both cases, though, the Torah expresses the prohibition as a forbidden nesinah, or "placing." You shall not place a cut... you shall not place a tattoo. The Torah does not prohibit the cutting and tattooing per se, so much as having that cut or tattoo remain in place as a statement to the rest of the world.

In the case of the flesh-cutting for the dead, we are looking here at something similar to the tearing of a garment as a sign of mourning, which not only is not objectionable, but is a commanded part of our mourning procedure. Our clothes are physically the closest things to our own bodies. When we lose a dear relative, we acknowledge that our personal world has sustained a breach. Its material has been torn. Its wholeness has been disturbed; where it all came together, there is now a jagged edge and a gap filled with emptiness.

Such a statement of loss is both poetic and appropriate. The Torah teaches, however, that it becomes excessive when we apply it to our bodies, to our very selves. Placing that cut on our persons conveys the idea that it is not just our personal worlds that have become darkened and insufficient, but our very lives. Wearing that cut upon ourselves expresses the thought that the passing of someone dear to us leaves us forever lacking and incomplete.

This is almost sacrilegious. We should never doubt the value of our own existence. First of all, our existence is not ours to savor as we please. All that we have belongs to Him, and we are to employ it all in His

service. We cannot excuse any part of it from that service, by declaring it non-functional, by insisting that its vital force has been so drawn out of it, that it is for all intents and purpose a ghost of its previous self.

Secondly, He is not arbitrary. Each person has his place, his function. Each has his unique value to Him. The death of one individual should not lead to despair and lethargy in a survivor. To the contrary, belief in a G-d Who is purposeful and deliberate demands that we understand the loss of any human being as a loss to the world-and therefore demands that we who live on must work harder to compensate for the loss, rather than retire to brooding and moroseness.

The gemara (Makos 21A) sees an organic relationship between lacerating oneself as a sign of mourning, and doing so as an idolatrous devotion, such as the priests of Baal did. ("They gashed themselves as was their practice with swords and spears." (Melachim I 18:28)) This opens us up to the possibility that one of the Torah's objectives in prohibiting the mourning-cut is to firmly oppose the pagan world's attitude towards death. Ancient idolaters saw Death as an independent power that delighted in draining life from the living. Human beings were essentially powerless in all their interactions with the gods. Human success or failure in dealing with them was contingent on winning their favor by appeasing them. You won their approval or at least their benign tolerance by paying homage to them. When a survivor contemplated the death of someone close to him, his best form of protection was to acknowledge the terrible power of Death by paying tribute to it. The self-mutilation was that tribute; through it, a person hoped to avoid the same fate.

The Torah, of course, knows of no independent power of death that seeks to quash life. The Torah knows of no independent power outside of G-d, period. Both life and death owe equally to Hashem and to nothing else. As hard as it may be for creatures of flesh and blood to emotionally comprehend, life and its opposite both flow from the goodness of the One G-d who celebrates life and love. It follows that sacrificing a life-or even a small fraction of one-in recognition of the death of another can never pay homage to Hashem. To the contrary, any statement of profound, irrevocable loss borders on blasphemy. The same G-d who decreed the death of one person decreed that the survivors remain alive. Life means that He has expectation invested in us. To deny that we remain

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capable of living fully is nothing less than a repudiation of Him and His plans for us!

The tattooing prohibition also highlights the difference between idolatrous belief and the true faith. The gemara's discussion (Makos, ibid.) makes it clear that the starting point of the prohibition is etching into one's skin the name of another deity. Here, too, the Torah speaks in terms of placing the mark on oneself, rather than the act of tattooing. Placing such a name on one's flesh is a sign of subservience and devotion. This part of the prohibition is intuitive.

The majority opinion in the gemara, however, holds that the prohibition applies equally to all inscriptions. The Torah extends the basic prohibition to include much more than the names of foreign gods (See Ritva s.v. Rabbi Shimon). It follows that tattooing Hashem's Name on one's flesh is equally prohibited! What could be objectionable about a person displaying his devotion to his Creator by proudly dedicating his very body to His service?

Here is where the Torah point of view once again stands all other assumptions on their head. In other faiths, people make a decision to join the faith-group and devote their energies to its goals. Until you make that decision, you are an outsider. Torah Judaism does not see our service of Hakadosh Baruch Hu as a matter of preference or choice. Human beings are obligated in His service because they are created in His image. They need no other reminder of their obligation. Any external sign etched on to the body created in His image gives the false impression that entering into His service is a matter of choice, rather than inherent in the human condition.

(Rav Hirsch does not pause here to consider bris milah, which midrashim understand as indeed providing a reminder of a Jew's subservience to Hashem. Rav Hirsch's commentary to Bereishis, however, makes it clear that he believes that bris milah says much more than that, and therefore does not conflict with the thesis he develops here.)

Both of the prohibitions we have considered-cutting the flesh and tattooing-are similar. Each begins with a rejection of the mistaken notions of paganism, but ultimately go well beyond that. They lead to recognition of the proper relationship we maintain with HKBH, far away from the debased subservience to dark forces that remains part of contemporary life, centuries

after the old gods disappeared from Western consciousness. (Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Vayikra 19:28) © 2011 Rabbi Y., Adlerstein & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“You shall be holy because I, the Lord your G-d, am holy” (Leviticus 19:1). Often the Hebrew words relating to fundamental theological concepts are the most difficult to define and translate, and therefore to understand and apply. The Hebrew words tefila (usually translated as prayer), teshuva (return, repentance) and kadosh (holy) are good examples. Kedoshim opens with the general commandment “You shall be holy” - linking the quality of holiness to G-d who, according to Leviticus 19:1 is “ontologically” holy.

Rudolf Otto, in his ground-breaking study “The Idea of the Holy,” links holiness to the mystical, the transcendental, the “numinous.” The sages of the Midrash, taking their cue from the first time the word appears in the Bible - “And the Lord blessed the seventh day and made it holy” (Genesis 2:3) - contrast holiness with blessing: Blessing is expressed in material gifts, whereas holiness is expressed in our ability to rise above the physical and cleave to divine eternity.

Shabbat contains an amalgam of both, consisting of the blessings brought by the wine and special foods with the sanctity wrought by Shabbat songs of praise and Torah study.

Thus, we can understand why Rashi defines the positive command “to be holy” as referring to separating oneself from sexual immorality and why the Ramban (Nahmanides) defines our commandment as meaning even permitted activities should not be taken to excess, such as eating and drinking inebriating beverages.

I would like to go one step farther. In next week's reading, G-d commands us; “...I shall be sanctified (nikdashti, made holy) in the midst of the children of Israel...” (Leviticus 22:32). Rashi cites the Midrash Torat Kohanim (22, 137): “Give yourself over and sanctify My Name... even to the extent of giving up your life.” Through its dual use of the word kadosh the Torah is associating the requirement to control one's physical desires and the need to be willing to give up one's very life for the sake of religious values. What is the connection?

When the Torah describes the creation of the human being in the image of G-d (Gen. 1:26), it is explaining that the human being will be a composite, part-beast, part-divine. The material aspect of the human being is legitimate, blessed, and capable of sanctification. It is the spiritual element, however, which can help us connect ourselves to the divine and achieve eternity. Divinely given mitzvot, commandments, help us refine and ennoble the physical aspects of our being.

Ultimately, however, the physical body decomposes and merges with the eternal soil. According to Maimonides, it is the soul - the divine within each of us - which enables us to cleave to G-d and live beyond our physical lives. Hence if an individual lives a holy life, spending his sojourn on this earth developing his soul-link to G-d, his passing from the physical body to the eternal world of souls will be seamless - a movement from life to life.

This is the connection between the commandment to be holy in this world and the requirement to give up our physical life for an eternal ideal where necessary. From the backdrop of this idea, a most difficult story (Tractate Semahot, chapter 8) recorded about Rabbi Akiva will become clear.

"When Rabbi Shimon, Rabbi Akiva's son, became ill, Rabbi Akiva continued to teach Torah in his academy. He kept sending messengers to check on his son's condition. The first returned, and reported that R. Shimon's condition was grave. Rabbi Akiva told his students to continue asking him Talmudic questions.

"The second messenger said the condition was critical. Rabbi Akiva continued the Torah dialogue.

"The third messenger said the youth was in his death throes. Rabbi Akiva told his students to keep asking.

"When the fourth messenger said, 'Rabbi Shimon is at peace, he has passed from this world,' Rabbi Akiva removed his phylacteries, tore his clothing, and told his disciples: 'Come. We are now obligated to leave the House of Study and tend to the dead.'"

Rabbi Akiva was a very feeling, sensitive husband and father; he was hardly callous to the condition of his son. He knew his child was going to the eternal world of G-d; and he felt the best way to establish real and eternal contact with him and for him would be by intensifying his relationship to G-d's words and G-d's will. Rabbi Akiva was trying to be his son's bridge between worlds. © 2011 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“Do not take revenge and do not bear a grudge” (Vayikra 19:18). Toras Kohanim (4:10) describes the Torah's prohibition against taking revenge: "How far does taking revenge extend? [One] said to [the other] lend me your sickle, [but] he did not lend it to him; the next day [the other] said lend me your axe [and] he said I won't lend it to you just like you didn't lend me your sickle." Even though the first one did nothing wrong by refusing to lend his sickle (since he may have been concerned that it would become damaged, see Ra'avad), and the second one didn't do anything different than the first one had done (merely refusing to lend his item, see Korban Aharon), since the second one's refusal was because of the first one's

refusal (and not out of a similar concern that his item might be damaged), the second one is guilty of taking revenge. The scenario described for bearing a grudge (4:11) is similar: "How far does bearing a grudge extend? [One] said to [the other] lend me your axe [but] he did not lend it; the next day [the other] said lend me your sickle [and] he said here it is-I am not like you, as you didn't lend me your axe." Even though the second one lent his item despite the first one refusing to lend his, only the second one did something wrong-he bore a grudge.

When Rashi explains what the Torah means by "taking revenge" and "bearing a grudge," he quotes this Toras Kohanim, adding these words: "for he bears animosity in his heart even though he didn't take revenge." Although Toras Kohanim could be understood to mean that the problem was what was said ("I am not like you") not with what was felt (see Rambam, Negative Prohibition 305), Rashi is telling us that even if we don't let the other person know we are holding something against him, merely feeling that way is problematic. This is echoed by many others, including Sefer Hachinuch (Mitzvah 242), Rashbam and Ramban. (Based on Hilchos Dayos 7:7, most understand the Rambam this way as well.) However, the Talmud (Yoma 23a) seems to say otherwise.

"Any Torah scholar that does not exact revenge and bear a grudge like a snake is not a Torah scholar." Putting aside (for now) why it's "like a snake," there is a more obvious issue that must be addressed, which is what the Talmud immediately asks: "[How is taking revenge and bearing a grudge allowed, let alone recommended, if] the verse says 'do not take revenge and do not bear a grudge'?" The Talmud then quotes Toras Kohanim, suggesting that the examples used were chosen specifically because they were with belongings ("money"), as opposed to saying (or doing) hurtful things. (It should be pointed out that pursuing compensation for damages is certainly permitted, and does not qualify as "taking revenge" or "holding a grudge.") If the prohibitions don't apply to personal insults, there is no problem with insisting that Torah scholars avenge such insults. (The prohibitions wouldn't apply to non-scholars who avenge personal insults either. The implication is that real Torah scholars know how to avenge personal insults; non-scholars could too, if they knew how. At this point, it would seem that the reference to a snake would be that snakes are cunning, see Beraishis 3:1.) The Talmud then asks how avenging personal attacks could be considered a positive thing if elsewhere (in the Talmud) high praise is given to those who are insulted and don't return the insult. The Talmud therefore retracts its previous assertion (although it is unclear if it's retracting its distinction between personal attacks and not helping others; many assume this distinction remains, but the Rambam's wording fits much better if it doesn't) and says that the Torah scholar doesn't actively avenge

what was done to him, merely "keeping it in his heart." The Talmud then qualifies this, limiting "keeping it in his heart" to situations where forgiveness wasn't genuinely requested; if regret was expressed and amends attempted, the Torah scholar is supposed to consider it as if the insult never happened (as should everybody else).

If, as Rashi says, "bearing a grudge" means maintaining animosity even without saying or doing anything based on that animosity, how could the Torah scholar be allowed to "keep it in his heart"? Even if the Torah scholar is different because insulting him is, by extension, insulting the Torah, that wouldn't override the prohibition against "bearing a grudge." Just as the Talmud initially questioned the original premise because taking revenge/bearing a grudge is prohibited, "keeping it in his heart" shouldn't be acceptable either if it is prohibited. Besides, the original statement was that a Torah scholar should both "take revenge" and "bear a grudge." If all that is allowed is to "keep it in his heart," what kind of revenge is being exacted? Isn't that only "bearing a grudge"?

Rambam (Hilchos Talmud Torah 7:13) differentiates between when the Torah scholar is insulted privately and when he is insulted in public (only if done publicly should he "take revenge and bear a grudge like a snake"). The commentators question where Rambam gets this from, and why the Talmud didn't use this distinction. In order to answer these questions, I would like to suggest the following approach to understanding the Talmud's discussion.

When someone insults a Torah scholar, it's both an attack on the person and an attack on the Torah he represents. Like everyone else, the Torah scholar should disregard the personal insult. In this situation, though, it would be inappropriate to totally ignore it and not defend the Torah's honor. How can both things be accomplished? How can the Torah be defended without creating the perception that it is being used as an excuse to protect personal honor?

"Any Torah scholar that does not take revenge and bear a grudge like a snake is not really a Torah scholar." It's not just that a Torah scholar is cunning enough to know how to defend the Torah's honor without letting it seem as if he's really defending his own honor. It's not just that the same way a snake gets no personal enjoyment out of biting a person (see Taanis 8a) a Torah scholar gets no personal enjoyment from avenging the disrespect given to the Torah. It's (also) that a Torah scholar doesn't feel the need to respond right away to the insult, but can wait for the appropriate time to respond. How is waiting being "like a snake"? When the snake was cursed, he was told "he (man) will pound your head, and you (the snake) will pound his heel" (Beraishis 3:15). Unkoles explains these words as "he (man) will remember what you did to him early on, and you (the snake) will wait ('natir,' the same word, 'notair,' as 'bear a grudge') for him in the end." (What

this means is unclear; perhaps it's a reference to man dying and "returning to dust," which is what the snake eats.) If the Torah scholar exacts revenge right away, it may be seen as defending his own honor. Waiting not only indicates that it's not an instinctive, human, reaction to being insulted, but it allows for things to be in a context where it becomes apparent that it is the Torah's honor that is really being defended.

If the comparison to a snake was based on the Torah scholar being cunning or not benefiting personally, the revenge couldn't be exacted (or the grudge borne) if doing so was prohibited. The personal grudge has to be eradicated by the Torah scholar just as it must be eradicated by everyone else. If the insult was really hurled at the Torah, it is likely that (eventually) more insults will be directed at the Torah, including insults that will not be confused with personal insults. By "keeping it in his heart," the Torah scholar remembers that the Torah was insulted, and waits for the appropriate time to defend its honor and avenge the insult.

Since the reason to avenge the insult is not to defend any personal honor but to defend the honor of the Torah, it is only when the insult was made publicly that this needs to be done. Therefore, when codifying it into law, Rambam differentiated between situations where there was no need to defend the Torah's honor (when others are not aware of it), and where there was.

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

How does one attain the status of kedusha (holiness), commanded in one of this week's Torah portions? (Leviticus 19:2) Some maintain that the pathway to holiness is to separate from the real world. Suppressing the body is the only way the soul can soar.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik points out that this is the predominant approach of most faith communities. The ish ha-da'at, the universal religious person, as Rav Soloveitchik terms it, is the religious figure who sees the escape from the body as a prerequisite for spiritual striving.

There is a more mainstream Jewish approach to kedusha. It suggests that the body is neither to be vilified nor glorified. Every aspect of human physical activity is to be sanctified. This, writes Rav Soloveitchik is the goal of the ish halakha (halakhic man). To apply Jewish law to every aspect of life, ennobling and yes, "kedushifying" our every endeavor.

This analysis sheds light on our approach to the concepts of kodesh and hol (commonly translated, the holy and the profane). Some Orthodox Jews feel that disciplines that are not pure Torah are simply hol (profane). Hol is only useful when it helps us to better understand kodesh. For example, through chemistry

one can better evaluate the kashrut of food products. One may study language in order to be viewed as a cultured Westerner so that Torah will be more respected. Or, one studies medicine to provide for one's family or one's charity. In each of these examples, hol is intrinsically not kodesh and can never transform into kodesh.

The ish halakha sees it differently. Every discipline, whether it be chemistry, language or medicine, are all potentially aspects of Torah. As Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook has pointed out, "There is nothing unholy, there is only the holy and the not yet holy." If one studies Torah in an intense fashion, it will give new meaning, new direction, new purpose and in the end, sanctify hol. Hol is not a permanent status; it can transform into kodesh.

For the ish halakha there is nothing in the world devoid of G-d's imprint. The way one loves, the way one conducts oneself in business, the way one eats, are all no less holy than praying, learning and fasting.

For the ish ha-da'at, the movement is from this world, the world of the body and soul to the next world, the world of pure soul. Death is a release from the imprisonment of the body. This philosophy is espoused by many fundamentalist Christians and Muslims. For them, redemption comes through death. This approach to life has been used in some parts of the Arab world to induce young men and even women to become suicide bombers - terrorist, homicidal bombers. "Kill yourself," these youngsters are taught, "and murder countless numbers of innocent people and you will receive true reward in the afterlife."

For Torah, the movement is in the reverse - from the other world to this world. To take the teachings of the Torah - from the world beyond - and to apply it to this world sanctifying every aspect of human life. For Torah, ultimate sanctification comes through living every moment a life of Torah ethics. This in fact is the challenge of this week's portion-kedoshim tihyu, you shall be holy. © 2011 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah's definition of holiness and sanctity, of dignity of self and others, of respect to one's body and that of others, is in the ability to channel and control one's physical desires. The Torah explicitly does not condone celibacy nor does it demand from human beings any degree of self-mortification or masochism. It does most certainly demand from us responsible and balanced human behavior.

It outlines a necessary and omnipresent nuance in our lives - in our mental and physical behavior. The rabbis have taught us that humans willingly sin only

because a manner of distorted thinking -a type of insanity if you will - enters one's mind and being.

Judaism has always fought the lonely and mainly unpopular battle against sexual immorality and flagrantly wanton behavior. From the Canaanites through the Greeks and the Romans, the debauchery of much of the Medieval Age and the current unchecked and unrestrained attitudes of modern society, traditional Judaism has decried lewdness and wanton self-gratification in sexual matters.

It has demanded that people be kdoshim - separated from immoral behavior and forbidden liaisons. It demands self-control, the avoidance of compromising and dangerous situations and a realization that ultimate good sense should triumph over momentary gratification.

Judaism imposes on us an unpopular stance, especially so in our current modern society. And yet over the long history of human society, it has proven to be the only correct guide for a healthy, happy family life and a more harmonious social compact between people.

Many people, Jews included, mock the protective measures enjoined by Jewish tradition to insure a society that aspires to be one of kdoshim. The mingling of the sexes in synagogue worship in the non-Orthodox world has not brought any great degree of comfort to those people who sit together. It has rather led to a drastic decline in synagogue attendance and participation in those groups.

The whole concept of modesty in dress, speech and behavior is unfortunately completely absent and alien in most of modern society. Not a day passes when we are not made aware of the presence of sexual misconduct among those that seemingly should know better.

Judaism preaches defensive behavior and the avoidance of situations that could lead to problematic circumstances. Such defensive measures are mocked and scorned by the progressive wise of the current world. Yet we are witness to the tragic personal and national consequences that results in life when such defensive measures are absent or ignored.

Mental health experts have told me that pornography, especially on the internet, is the newest serious addiction in our schools, making drugs old hat and no longer cool. Protected by the noble ideal of free speech, it ravages our society and creates a dangerously dysfunctional generation and society.

The entertainment industry in all of its facets has been polluted beyond recognition by its pandering to the basest animalistic desires of humans. Nevertheless, the Torah does not waver in its demand to us to be kdoshim, to swim against the tide and persevere in our age-long quest to be a holy and dedicated people. © 2011 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books

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RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This week we read the parsha of Kedoshim. "And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to the entire congregation of Bnei Yisroel and say to them: Kedoshim tih'yu {You shall be holy} because I, Hashem your G-d, am holy. [19:1]" Our parsha then enumerates thirteen positive and thirty-eight negative commandments through which one obtains this kedusha {holiness}. "Do not pervert justice, do not favor the poor nor shall you honor the mighty; judge your neighbor righteously. [9:15]"

Rashi explains that the passuk is addressing two very real obstacles to a rigorously honest judicial system. A judge, understanding that the rich have an obligation to support those less fortunate than themselves, might decide to judge in the poor man's favor. This would allow the poor man to be supported in an honorable fashion. Similarly, a judge might be cowed by the rich and powerful and feel unable to humiliate such a person by judging against him.

The last command of the pasuk-judge your neighbor righteously-is explained by the Sages as going far beyond the established judicial system. Throughout our days and our lives we are constantly 'judging' all that goes on around us. We judge other's actions, words and even what we're sure they are thinking. As such, we are in the 'judging business' far more extensively than any professional judge. The Torah thus commands us to judge others favorably.

We very often find this to be a most difficult task. Many times we are presented with situations which appear to be very clear. It seems almost impossible to view it in any other way. This person was obviously wrong, malicious, dishonest, insensitive or any of the many other terms we use to describe someone who we feel acted inappropriately. How can we be expected to search and research for an explanation which might seem farfetched?

I heard an interesting thought on this. Let's examine ourselves and our actions and see if we don't do just that when something important to us is at stake. Imagine that as you're getting ready to leave to the airport you realize that you have misplaced your passport. When you realize that it's not in the envelope where you usually keep it you check the entire drawer. If it's not in that drawer, you check all of the drawers in that entire cabinet-even though you know that you only keep it in that one drawer. When that search still leaves you without your passport, you begin to search the entire house. Gradually moving from places which might reasonably contain your passport to those places which make no sense whatsoever that your passport would be there. Interspersed between every new area searched

are return trips and searches in the places where it really should be. You checked there already but you check again and again. Although the chances of it having somehow returned t here while you were searching elsewhere are next to nil, you nevertheless check and recheck that drawer where you usually keep it.

What becomes apparent is that when something important to us is at stake, we are willing to pursue farfetched avenues which don't seem to make the most sense. We're willing to act on very small possibilities. The honor of another person must be as important to us as that missing passport. In order to preserve another person's honor we must be willing to pursue small, farfetched possibilities which might not seem to make the most sense. We must be willing to judge favorably.

The Talmud [Shabbos 127B] relates the story of a man from the Upper Galilee who worked for a man in the south for three years. On the eve of Yom Kippur the worker approached his employer in order to receive his wages but was told that he had no money with which to pay him. "Then pay me with fruits," he requested, but he was again refused. His pleas for payment in the forms of land, animals and finally bedding were all turned down. Empty-handed, he slung his belongings over his back and began the long trek home.

After the holidays, the employer made the trip up north bringing the wages along with three donkeys laden with food, drinks and delicacies. He paid the worker and they then sat down to eat a festive meal together. Afterwards, the employer curiously asked his worker "When you asked for your hard-earned wages and I told you that I had no money, what were your thoughts?"

"I assumed that an opportunity had arisen to buy wares at a very cheap price and you were left without any available cash," the worker responded.

"And when I refused your request for animals, what were you thinking?"

"Perhaps all of your animals had been rented out," he replied.

"And land?"

"Perhaps it all had been given over to sharecroppers."

"And fruits?"

"Perhaps you hadn't yet had the opportunity to properly tithe them."

"And when I refused to pay you in bedding?"

"I assumed that you had pledged all of your property to be given for holy purposes."

The employer turned incredulously to the worker and swore that was exactly what had happened?

Commentators write that the worker was none other than Akiva before he began studying Torah at the age of forty. Only much later did he become the renowned sage, Rabbi Akiva.

We are now in the midst of S'firas Ha'Omer, counting the days from Exodus to Sinai. A certain degree of mourning is observed because during these days the students of Rabbi Akiva had died for not according one another proper honor and respect. Though we would never have noticed any disrespect whatsoever in their interpersonal dealings, on the exalted level demanded from them they fell short.

Having gotten a glimpse of Rabbi Akiva's respect for the honor of others before he began learning Torah, we can only imagine the dizzying height it must have reached once he became one of the greatest sages of all time. Once again, we can only imagine the level demanded from those students who had merited to witness that respect first-hand.

May we learn to search out ways to accord others honor. © 2011 Rabbi Y. Ciner & Project Genesis, Inc.

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The nineteenth chapter of Vayikra, with which our parsha begins, is one of the supreme statements of the ethics of the Torah. It's about the right, the good and the holy, and it contains some of Judaism's greatest moral commands: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," and "Let the stranger who lives among you be like your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt."

But the chapter is also surprisingly strange. It contains what looks like a random jumble of commands, many of which have nothing whatever to do with ethics and only the most tenuous connection with holiness: "Do not mate different kinds of animals.

"Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed.

"Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.

"Do not eat any meat with the blood still in it.

"Do not practise divination or sorcery.

"Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard." (26-28)

And so on. What have these to do with the right, the good and the holy?

To understand this we have to engage in an enormous leap of insight into the unique moral/social/spiritual vision of the Torah, so unlike anything we find elsewhere.

The West has had many attempts at defining a moral system. Some focused on rationality, others on emotions like sympathy and empathy. For some the central principle was service to the state, for others moral duty, for yet others the greatest happiness of the greatest number. These are all forms of moral simplicity.

Judaism insists on the opposite: moral complexity. The moral life isn't easy. Sometimes duties or loyalties clash. Sometimes reason says one thing, emotion another. More fundamentally, Judaism

identified three distinct moral sensibilities each of which has its own voice and vocabulary. They are [1] the ethics of the king, [2] the ethics of the priest and [3] the ethics of the prophet.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel talk about their distinctive sensibilities: "For the teaching of the law [Torah] by the priest will not cease, / nor will counsel [etzah] from the wise [chakham], / nor the word [davar] from the prophets." (Jer. 18:18)

"They will go searching for a vision [chazon] from the prophet, / priestly instruction in the law [Torah] will cease, / the counsel [etzah] of the elders will come to an end." (Ez. 7:26)

Priests think in terms of Torah. Prophets have "the word" or "a vision." Elders and the wise have etzah. What does this mean?

Kings and their courts are associated in Judaism with wisdom- chokhmah, etzah and their synonyms. Several books of Tanakh, most conspicuously Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (Kohelet), are books of "wisdom" of which the supreme exemplar was King Solomon. Wisdom in Judaism is the most universal form of knowledge, and the Wisdom literature is the closest the Hebrew Bible comes to the other literature of the ancient Near East, as well as the Hellenistic sages. It is practical, pragmatic, based on experience and observation; it is judicious, prudent. It is a prescription for a life that is safe and sound, without excess or extremes, but hardly dramatic or transformative. That is the voice of wisdom, the virtue of kings.

The prophetic voice is quite different, impassioned, vivid, radical in its critique of the misuse of power and the exploitative pursuit of wealth. The prophet speaks on behalf of the people, the poor, the downtrodden, the abused. He (or she) thinks of the moral life in terms of relationships: between G-d and humanity and between human beings themselves. The key terms for the prophet are tzedek (distributive justice), mishpat (retributive justice), chessed (loving kindness) and rachamim (mercy, compassion). The prophet has emotional intelligence, sympathy and empathy, and feels the plight of the lonely and oppressed. Prophecy is never abstract. It doesn't think in terms of universals. It responds to the here and now of time and place. The priest hears the word of G-d for all time. The prophet hears the word of G-d for this time.

The ethic of the priest, and of holiness generally, is different again. The key activities of the priest are lehavdil-to discriminate, distinguish and divide-and lehorot-to instruct people in the law, both generally as teachers and in specific instances as judges. The key words of the priest are kodesh and chol (holy and secular), tamei and tahor (impure and pure).

The single most important passage in the Torah that speaks in the priestly voice is Chapter 1 of Bereishit, the narrative of creation. Here too a key verb is lehavdil, to divide, which appears five times. G-d

divides between light and dark, the upper and lower waters, and day and night. Other key words are "bless" -- G-d blesses the animals, humankind, and the seventh day; and "sanctify" (kadesh) -- at the end of creation G-d sanctifies the Shabbat. Overwhelmingly elsewhere in the Torah the verb lehavdil and the root kadosh occur in a priestly context; and it is the priests who bless the people.

The task of the priest, like G-d at creation, is to bring order out of chaos. The priest establishes boundaries in both time and space. There are holy times and holy places, and each time and place has its own integrity, its own setting in the total scheme of things. The cohen's protest is against the blurring of boundaries so common in pagan religions-between gods and humans, between life and death, between the sexes and so on. A sin, for the cohen, is an act in the wrong place, and its punishment is exile, being cast out of your rightful place. A good society, for the cohen, is one in which everything is in its proper place, and the cohen has special sensitivity toward the stranger, the person who has no place of his or her own.

The strange collection of commands in Kedoshim thus turns out not to be strange at all. The holiness code sees love and justice as part of a total vision of an ordered universe in which each thing, person and act has their rightful place, and it is this order that is threatened when the boundary between different kinds of animals, grain, fabrics is breached; when the human body is lacerated; or when people eat blood, the sign of death, in order to feed life.

In the secular West we are familiar with the voice of wisdom. It is common ground between the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and the great sages from Aristotle to Marcus Aurelius to Montaigne. We know, too, the prophetic voice and what Einstein called its "almost fanatical love of justice." We are far less familiar with the priestly idea that just as there is a scientific order to nature, so there is a moral order, and it consists in keeping separate the things that are separate, and maintaining the boundaries that respect the integrity of the world G-d created and seven times pronounced good.

The priestly voice is not marginal to Judaism. It is central, essential. It is the voice of the Torah's first chapter. It is the voice that defined the Jewish vocation as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." It dominates Vayikra, the central book of the Torah. And whereas the prophetic spirit lives on in aggadah, the priestly voice prevails in halakhah. And the very name Torah-from the verb lehorot-is a priestly word.

Perhaps the idea of ecology, one of the key discoveries of modern times, will allow us to understand better the priestly vision and its code of holiness, both of which see ethics not just as practical wisdom or prophetic justice but also as honouring the deep structure-the sacred ontology- of being. An ordered universe is a moral universe, a world at peace with its

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MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Shlomo Shok,

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Spring cleaning, spring cleaning-Pesach is coming, and as usual it brings with it searching and scrubbing, cleaning and strict order in every nook and cranny in the house. And then my son reached the stage of organizing the "birchonim" (those booklets that have the Grace after Meals and other material). A memento of the wedding of... a memento of the bar mitzva of... My son asked in a weary voice: Who needs all these birchonim? Why does every celebration end with another item that will end up in some "geniza" (a repository for religious material)?

I hesitated, trying to find an answer that would help avoid despair about the labors that we had not done yet. In order to justify having kept so many of the booklets, I told him, "The birchonim are meant to help in reciting the 'beracha acharona'-giving thanks at the end of eating-and it may well be that we have not seen the people listed on the cover since we attended their affair." We pulled a few birchonim out of the pile, and each one was adorned with the name of the hosts at some happy celebration.

I suggested to my son that every time we use one of the birchonim we also glance at the inscribed names and make an effort to remember them. In this way we would be able to extend our wishes to renew our blessings to them, even if it is many years since we left them a present and continued on our own path. Who knows what has happened in the time since the happy occasion took place? Nothing is ever certain, and no matter how promising the future appeared to be at the time, the unexpected sometimes happens. Even the magnificent album with stultified pictures can become a distant memory, locked away in some closet.

So, aside from sending our blessings based on what we see on the covers, let us think a bit about the couples who got married and the boys who celebrated their bar mitzva (who by now are in the army). Let us wish them many more years of joy and love to Eli and Tal-just as we did at the time of the original affair.

