

God says, “You shall be holy to Me” (22:30)

וְאַנְשֵׁי-קֹדֶשׁ תִּהְיוּ לִי

What does being “holy” mean? I’ve wrestled a lot with this question in my studies of Judaism. Without question, holiness is one of the most important tasks in Jewish life, yet defining it can often be difficult.

In the Book of Leviticus, chapters 17-26 are referred to as the Holiness Code, so that would be a good place to turn if we want to know what holiness is.

Before turning there, we should at least dwell with our *parsha* – *Mishpatim* -for a period of time.

The placement of verse 30 of chapter 22 – “You shall be holy to Me” – is toward the end of the first part of the *parsha*. This first part lists a plethora of cases dealing with the death penalty, honoring mother and father, treatment of slaves, vengeance, goring oxen, thievery, and marriage. In each case, the Torah instructs us about what we should do. It effectively conveys a moral teaching. Since “You

shall be holy to Me” comes in the midst of these cases. Its placement teaches that holiness contains morality.

Holiness, however, cannot be synonymous with morality. If it were, the Torah would have said “You shall be moral before Me,” or something to that effect.

Now, I’ll turn to the Holiness Code. It conveys not only moral injunctions but ritual ones. Do not

“cut the side-growth of [your] beards” it states (21:5). This is a ritual, not a moral injunction.

What we learn is that holiness possesses two elements: moral and ritual. Among Jews today, holiness has been bifurcated. The two elements that constitute holiness have been split one from the other. Some Jews affirm morality as the central teaching of Torah, and other Jews affirm ritual observance as the central teaching of Torah. To be more explicit, those who affirm the moral dimension

of holiness see the essence of the Torah in a teaching such as “You must not carry false rumors; you shall not...act as a malicious witness” (23:1). This is clearly a moral statement since it speaks to right and wrong.

Those who affirm the ritual dimension of holiness see the essence of the Torah in a teaching such as “you shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” (v. 19). A statement like this might have moral

implications, but it is a ritual statement first and foremost.

The Book of Exodus is concerned with the subject of holiness, but holiness is the primary subject of the Book of Leviticus, so we have to turn there once again to learn more precisely what holiness is. Probably the most important verse in Leviticus and perhaps even the entire Torah is 19:2:

קְדוּשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְקוֹנֶה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

“You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” The first part of this verse is identical to what is written in Exodus. Israel is instructed to be holy. In this verse, however, we are given the reason why Israel shall be holy. Israel shall be holy because God is holy. The identification of God with holiness is quite important. God, who is transcendent, who creates the world but is not part of it is holy. That is who God is. Here, one of the parts of the definition of holiness with which we are familiar comes into

play. Many translate holy, or its Hebrew equivalent *kadosh* as “separate, apart.” To illustrate that God is distinct from the universe, we use the word *kadosh* to describe Him.

Last Shabbat, I argued that the Jewish people is meant to be integrated into, not isolated from, general society. How can that be that case if our imitation of God entails being holy?

To explain, I’ll turn to another concept that is related to holiness, and that is sanctification.

To understand sanctification, we have to acknowledge what the opposite of holy is. Holiness' opposite is the profane, or less pejoratively, the mundane. We call the profane, mundane quality of the world the secular. This is the natural state of the world. Our task is to sanctify, which means transforming the mundane into the holy.

Sanctification is that process.

A good example of sanctification is the blessing we utter for Friday night *kiddush*.

*“Baruch atah hashem mkadesh hashabbat”*

Through our blessing, the seventh day, which is inherently mundane is sanctified and becomes holy.

Is the seventh day the Sabbath for ritual reasons or moral reasons? The Torah does not understand this kind of question. The ritual and moral are simply united in the concept of the holy.

Admittedly, that's difficult for modern people to understand. What's the point of ritual? many ask. In truth, ritual is pointless, but not in the negative sense that the word "pointless" usually connotes. In our modern world, which is fixated on technology and what technology does for us, we struggle to understand that which does not have a functional purpose. By bringing our attention to holiness, our *parsha* teaches us to leave the mindset of the functional, of the mechanical. Rather than thinking

about effect, we need to concentrate on purpose.

Ritual is an aesthetic project that guides us toward

affirming purpose. I like to say that if you find a

ritual – like putting on tefillin – boring, then your

life is not exciting enough. What I mean is: Humans

as dynamic beings are nearly always in flux. Ritual

is the steady, consistent presence in our lives that

allows us to experience our own dynamism without

being throw into space by dynamism's centrifugal

force. Ritual does not serve the moral any more than

the moral serves the ritual. They work in concert. By helping us steady ourselves in the midst of our own dynamism, the execution of moral imperatives becomes possible.

I'd like to clear up one point. Just because God is not part of the universe does not mean that He does abide among us. When we cultivate holiness, God's presence – referred to as the *Shechinah* – dwells among us in the world. To wit, “The presence of the Lord abode on Mount Sinai” (24:17).

וַיִּשְׁכֵּן כְּבוֹד-יְהוָה עַל-הָרְ סִינַי

The Hebrew word “presence” is *shin-caf-nun*, which is the root of *Shechinah*.

Our purpose as a people is to be holy – that means living within the integration of moral and ritual instruction. *Parshat Mishpatim* clearly emphasizes the moral dimension of holiness, but it is complemented by the Book of Leviticus and its focus on holiness’ ritual dimension. For now, let us not be holier than Thou, but holy as Thou art.