

Be Holy!

“Holiness” is a familiar word, yet its meaning is complex and multi-layered. Leviticus 19 invites us to reflect on what it means to “be holy”, its relation to the divine and the human, to sanctification and ethics, to specific people and the whole community.

Whereas earlier sections of Leviticus focused on holiness in terms of sacred places, objects, priests, from chapter 19 there is a kind of ‘democratization’ of holiness, a vision of holiness focused on the ordinary person and human relations amidst the daily tasks of farming, business, family and community activities. Thus, in this chapter holiness is closely tied to ethics.

Read closely, aloud, chapter 19 of Leviticus, then return to ponder 19:2 with some of the great sages of the Jewish tradition.

You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy (Leviticus 19:2).

Amidst pages of teachings on holiness in the Book of Leviticus, this verse stands out for its brevity and simplicity. It catches the eye of Jewish commentators. Usually the commandment to be holy is associated with a specific ruling: you shall be holy by doing such and such, or you shall be holy in order that something will transpire. But here it simply says, “*You shall be holy.*” It connects holiness with God’s holiness (hence giving rise to a Talmudic teaching on ‘the imitation of God’). Yet no specific precept is attached. Why does it stand alone?

Two notable positions emerge among Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages. According to Rashi,¹ this verse is a general precept referring to the restraint required in sexual relations, of critical importance to the moral order. Hence 19:2 stands in close proximity to the rules of sexual conduct of the previous chapter.

Nachmanides,² on the other hand, sees it as promoting restraint in every aspect of one’s life, applying to all those activities *not* covered by specific rulings. For example, eating, drinking, speaking, marital sexual relations are all good, permissible actions, but the command to “be holy” cautions against over-indulgence (lest one become “a villain with the sanction of the Torah!”), for excess would

result in gluttony, drunkenness, slander and unchaste behaviour.

In summary: according to Rashi, the verse “*You shall be holy*” urges restraint in matters of sexual conduct; whereas for Nachmanides it reminds that appropriate restraint must be shown in all areas of life, in keeping with the rabbinic saying, “*Sanctify yourself in that which you are permitted*” (*Yevamot 20a*).

Leaping several centuries to explore a different view, we find Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto³ dissatisfied with this approach of defining holiness in terms of restraint. Abstinence creates only a preliminary path to holiness, he says. For Luzzatto holiness is about living in a state of communion with God in such a way that whatever life’s activity is being undertaken one never separates oneself from God. Attention to the commandments paves the way to deeper communion. Then, in seeking to grasp God’s grandeur through a daily stance of love and awe, one discovers a detachment from material concerns, and a heightened communion with the Lord. “*Then the Spirit from above will hover over him, the Creator will cause His Name to rest upon him...all his actions, even the most humble and most material, will then have the value of sacrifices and service to God.*”⁴

Share your own thoughts after reading Lev. 19. How would you describe a ‘holy’ person, and what light does this Torah reading shed on your understanding? Talk about the place of abstinence and abundance, of fasting and feasting in seeking holiness of life. •

Bibliography: Herczeg, ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (New York: Mesorah, 1994, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* (New York, 1993); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (New York: Mesorah, 1992); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York, 2006). Scripture: NJPS

1. Rashi: 11th century, France;
2. Nachmanides. 13th century, Spain.
3. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746): influential Italian scholar known for his ethical work *Messilat Yesharim* (“Pathway of the Just”).
4. Quoted in Munk, 208.

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