**PARASHAT KEDOSHIM**

**(Third Portion in Triennial Cycle)**

**Va’ykra (Leviticus) 19:18 – 20:27**

**Eytz Hayim 697; Plaut 896; Hertz \*\*\***

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| Parashat Kedoshim is an untypically short parashah. In many years it is combined with Acharei Mot. Also, untypically it starts right in the middle of a portion from Va’ykra (Leviticus) that is known as the Holiness Code. The sequence is confusing, so let’s work downward in three steps:1. The Holiness Code begins in Chapter 17 and extends to Chapter 26, which means that it encompasses about one-third of the Book of Leviticus.
2. Parashat Kedoshim deals only with Chapters 19 and 20, of which 19 is particularly important because it focuses on the concept of holiness.
3. The third part of triennial cycle--what we are supposed to focus on today--is the last part of Kedoshim, verses 19:18 to 20:27.

In Part 1 of my d’var I will discuss the Holiness Code as a whole. In Part 2 I will shift to Chapter 19 and the concept of holiness. Finally, in Part 3 I will conclude with some questions about specific verses that comprise today’s parashah.**Part 1 – What is the Holiness Code (Va-ykra Chapters 17 to 26)?**A good entry point into the Holiness Code is provided by the online description from the Encyclopedia Britannica:A collection of [secular](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secular), ritualistic, [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral), and festival regulations in the Old Testament Book of [Leviticus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Leviticus), chapters 17–26. The code stresses that the people of Israel are separated from the rest of the world because Yahweh (God) has chosen them. They are to demonstrate their unique election by disassociating themselves from profane worldliness and by retaining their ritualistic and moral purity.The Code of Holiness includes regulations for animal sacrifices, eating, cleanliness, priestly conduct, speech, and sexual regulations. Also included are a list of days that are to be held sacred and laws concerning the sabbatical (jubilee) year.The Holiness Code certainly starts on a positive note, with God speaking to Moses as follows (17:1; my bold italics):Speak to Aaron and his sons, ***and to all the Israelite people***, and say to them: This is what the Lord has commanded:Immediately thereafter we are into the first of dozens of ritual or ethical commandments essential to remaining God’s people. However, the late Rabbi Plaut says that these two chapters of Acharei Mot may be part of the Holiness Code, but they do “not have all the characteristic features of that document.” Specifically, Plaut argues that they never mention “holiness,” nor do they contain any moral commandments. Perhaps that is why almost the same words appear at the start of Chapter 19, but without reference to Aaron or his sons, and with what may be the most amazing and least expected statement in the whole Torah (again with my bold italics):The Lord spoke to Moses, saying Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them*:* ***You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am Holy.*****Part 2 – What is Holiness (Chapter 19 of Va-ykra)?**Clearly, we should move to Part 2 of my talk, which is all about holiness. We are now dealing with Chapter 19 of Leviticus, which *Eitz Hayim* describes as “one of the richest and most exalted in the Torah.”The first thing to know about the Holiness Code is that it is not exclusively divine. Even though God is inherently holy, the concept of holiness involves both ritual and ethical activities and both divine and human individuals. The short essay on page 693 of *Etz Hayim* is an excellent introduction to the subject. Shortly after its start, it asks, “What is holiness.” In the simplest sense, to be holy means to be different from the ordinary, to be set apart. However, as Jews use the term, it means also “to partake in some measure of the special qualities of God.”The term must be used carefully. For example, when God is present somewhere, that place becomes holy. And when a place is holy, it is either completely off limits to human beings or only accessible to those who've made necessary preparations, such as removing shoes, bathing, putting on special garments, etc. But when God's presence departs, the place reverts to its original status; it is no longer holy. On the other hand, holiness is not exclusive to God, human beings, and space. According to the essay in *Etz Hayim*, “Time can be sanctified when it is used to draw us closer to God. Objects can become holy when they help people rise toward God.” A quick digression: The text I have just quoted goes on to say: “The Torah is holy not only because it comes from God but because it leads to God.” I have no problem with the part about leading to God, but as a someone who accepts many aspects of the documentary theory of the creation of the Torah, I cannot say the part about the Torah coming from God. End of Digression.The Jewish people's relationship to holiness stems from some careful wording after the words, “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Va-Yikra 19:2). God does not say: "You are holy." Rather, you ***shall be*** holy, so long as you do God's mitzvot, in other words the commandments. We are not holy because God gave us the mitzvot; rather we become holy through doing them. When we do not do them, we become like everyone else; we are no longer holy. What distinguishes the Holiness Code from the rest of Leviticus is that the priestly materials focus on ritual activity whereas the Holiness Code has a parallel focus on ethics. This ethical focus is ***the*** unique contribution of the Holiness Code to the Torah, to the Jewish people, and ultimately to the world.**Part 3 – What is in Our Parashah (Va-Ykra 19:18 to 20:27)?**We can now shift to Part 3, our Parashah, which consists of verses 19:18 to 20:27. There are many things that I could talk about in those verses. However, instead I am going to propose answers to three questions posed by Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, who is on the faculty of the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, and from whom I have taken several courses. She describes this parashah as “a concentration of *Mitzvot* (commandments) from many spheres of life” and calls attention to a few of them by her questions.1. *When we enter the land and plant trees, we may not use the fruit grown in the first three years. In the fourth year, the fruit is to be used to praise God, and from the fifth year it may be eaten without restrictions (19:23-25.) Why do you think these restrictions were imposed?*

The answer to this question is partly a matter of biology and partly a matter of religiosity. Biology teaches us that trees—indeed, all plants--need time to mature before they can start to provide regular crops. At the same time, from early in the Book of Shemot, we know that the first of our male children must be dedicated to God, which means to work with the priests and the Levites. Later provisions allowed first male children to be freed from that role but added that the first harvest of plants and trees should be dedicated, which again means given to the priests and Levites. Thus, the directions correspond to biological and ritual requirements*.*2) *We are warned to have righteous measures and scales (19:36). The verse ends with a reminder that 'I am the Lord your God that took you out of the land of Egypt.' What might be the connection between the two parts of the verse?*This question is more difficult than the first, and I am just guessing at the answer. Having accurate and consistent means for measuring and weighing produce is essential to any people for which governance is to be sustainable and equitable. God does not make distinctions among Jews on the basis of class or tribe or family. (The families of Moses and Aaron are exceptions.) Neither should we. If our lives and our livelihoods are to be equitable, the same measures and scales should be available to everyone*.* |
| *3) Three times in the Parashah (19:31, 20:6, 20;27) we are warned against turning to or having in us a ghost or a family spirit. Why do you think that the Torah is so strongly opposed to these practices? Note that it does not ridicule the practices as being false.* The answer to this question is simple at one level, and fiercely complicated on another. It is simple in the sense that Jewish people do not have need of any ghosts or family sprits because we have God. It is therefore quite irrelevant whether those other means work or do not work. On the other hand, those ghosts and family spirits have been consulted by many people in many cultures. Why shouldn’t Jews also take advantage of them? The answer now becomes that they are unqualified to make judgements about our lives, and the more modern we are, they less qualified they seem. Of course, God knew that all along, so we can just go back to the simple answer. We should appeal to and listen exclusively to God.And with that third act, I come to the end of my d’var on Kedoshin for today.Shabbat shalom,. |

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