



Shabbat Shalom

Kedoshim

Leviticus 19:1 – 20:27

Through acts of compassion and charity we can indeed become holy and worthy of the description, 'A kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

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

Throughout Leviticus, God commands Moses to teach the Children of Israel, or to instruct them in various commandments and rules of behavior. With this scripture, God introduces a few laws pertaining to our relationship with God, such as the Shabbat and the prohibition against idol worship. However, most of the commandments in this section relate to relationships within society, the treatment of the poor, honest employment practices and the very basic commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself.

But in the first commandment, which serves to introduce the entire chapter, God commands us to be holy. And to be holy because He is holy. In this brief instruction, we come to understand the very essence of man's relationship to God. God is perfection. God is holiness. And it is God that we must emulate. We must be holy because He is holy!

And how is that holiness expressed? Not like in so many other religions, exclusively through rituals and ceremonies. Yes, we do need to keep the Shabbat and bring the ritual sacrifices to God and not to pagan idols. But that is dealt with so briefly. The thrust of the chapter is the expectation of holiness in our dealings with our fellow man.

"You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him, the wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:13-14).

These two verses present just one example of the density of the laws mentioned in this portion, their universal morality and their connection with God. The original Hebrew word for "shall not remain with you all night" is "talin", a word that literally means to stay overnight. In modern Hebrew, this word is used to describe the act of delaying a salary payment, which is illegal under Israeli law. It is this very verse that has served as the basis for the modern Israeli statute.

The prohibition against putting a stumbling block before the blind has been interpreted to include any action that would tempt someone to commit a sin against anyone who is without the knowledge or inner resources to resist the temptation. Just as a blind person is unable to see the physical obstacle before him and will therefore stumble, so too, a person with a known weakness for kleptomania, for example, should not be left alone in a shop, for he will be unable to comprehend the moral obstacle to theft and will help himself to the shop's goods. This becomes society's responsibility, not just the responsibility of the potential thief.

These verses, like so many others, end with the words "I am the Lord." The moral imperatives listed in this portion are all intimately connected with our relationship with God. The portion begins with the statement that we must be holy for God is holy. The continuation of the chapter represents the fullness of this concept of emulating God's ways: God is compassionate, and we must emulate this characteristic of God as well. For it is through our relationships with our fellow human beings, through acts of compassion and charity that we can indeed become holy and, as a people, become worthy of the description that God himself assigns to the people of Israel: "A kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6).