

KEDOSHIM (19:1-20:27)

How to be Holy

2011 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

1. Be Normal...

This Torah Portion opens with a tall order:

"Be holy, because I, your G-d, am holy." (Leviticus 19:2)

When the people talk about living a life of holiness, the tendency is to envision a life of asceticism and separation. We picture people living lives of self-deprivation and non-indulgence in the pleasures of the world.

What could be holier than climbing some remote Tibetan mountain and living as a celibate hermit; meditating in solitary contemplation of the sublime?

Actually the Torah lays out for us a description of holiness that differs considerably from what one might think:

Revere your parents...observe the Sabbath...don't worship idols...When you harvest your field, leave some over for the poor. ... Don't steal, don't lie, and don't swear falsely.... Pay your workers on time. ... Don't curse the deaf or mislead the blind.... Don't pervert justice. ... Give someone the benefit of the doubt...don't gossip...love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. (Leviticus 16:3-18)

In other words, be normal. Be responsible. Don't take advantage of people. Anyone can join a monastery and hide from the world. Get married; have children and raise them with proper values. True holiness comes when we emulate G-d and try to make the world a better place.

2. ...But Not TOO Normal:

Living in the orthodox community of Monsey, New York, I see obviously religious Jews in all walks of life. One can see beards and *Payos* in the drug store, the gas station, even behind the cash register in Pathmark. There is also Hatzalah, an emergency ambulance corps. It never ceases to amaze me when I see religious Jews behind the wheels of their cars on Shabbos afternoons as they rush to respond to medical emergencies.

"You will observe My decrees and laws, which man shall carry out, AND LIVE BY THEM". (Leviticus 18:5)

This Biblical statement, "*AND LIVE BY THEM*", is the source for the Commandment to violate the Sabbath, (or any of 610 out of the 613 Commandments) in order to save a life. "*Live by them*," says the Torah. "Don't die by them."

However, there are exceptions to the rule. Our history is stained with the blood of countless martyrs who gave up their lives rather than accept another faith. The requirement to violate the Torah rather than endanger a life has three exceptions. One may not worship other gods. One may not commit murder to save his own life. (For example, "Kill him or I'll kill you." In such a case the Torah would require you to give up your life. You may, however, kill the person making the threat in self-defense.)

The third exception is mentioned in the next verse. Immediately after the Torah gives us dispensation to violate MOST commandments to save a life, we find a list of forbidden intimate relationships. Chapter 18 tells us to avoid incest, adultery, and other deviant behavior. The Torah goes on to tell us that sins such as these were the cause of the expulsion of the Canaanites from the Land of Israel and to warn us that the Holy Land will not tolerate promiscuity.

The fact that a particular attraction may be "normal" and "natural" doesn't mean that it should be acceptable. One must be prepared to give up one's life rather than engage in forbidden intimate relationships. Such behavior, says the Torah, is so repulsive to G-d, and is so far beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior that it defeats the purpose of living!

Decadent behavior is defined by today's society as an "alternative lifestyle." Adultery is tolerated in our elected officials and celebrated in movies and on television. Fully one third of the babies being born in America today have parents who aren't married. In the words of former New York Senator Moynihan, "we have defined deviancy down!"

The Torah tells us that there are three partners in creation: G-d, the father, and the mother. Intimacy exists as a partnership with G-d in bringing holiness to the world. Behavior forbidden in this week's Torah reading and endorsed and accepted by today's society is the antithesis of that holiness.

Celibacy is not a virtue. Self-control is.

Have a great Shabbos.

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