

Parashat Kedoshim קדשים

Torah: Leviticus 19:1–20:27

Haftarah: Amos 9:7–15

Holy Living

General Overview

When many people think of Torah, they think of “law.” One reason for this is that many understand the Torah to be a long list of do’s and don’ts. We have attempted to demonstrate in *Briteinu* that the Torah is not such a document. Rather, we have tried to show that the Torah is a revelation of God’s righteousness, and the teaching manual for God’s holy community.

Those who have just begun to use these commentaries have entered the circle at a most difficult juncture. The Torah portion now before us is one that could certainly leave a novice with the impression that Torah is a boring manual of behaviour, just a list of laws.

At first glance, this really does seem to be the case but we all need to be reminded that the detailed instruction in chapters 19 and 20 are varied and detailed because they represent God’s instructions to the redeemed community. They concern how we are to walk and how we reflect the character of God in this world through His life. These teachings are not to be understood as a grocery list of human behaviours which, if obeyed will earn one a place in heaven, or if disobeyed, will result in one’s demise in hell.

Because the subject matter in this parasha is quite varied, we have decided to use a different commentary format. Usually, we summarize the contents of the parasha into a simple outline that is easy to follow and conducive to use for preaching or teaching. This time, however, we will switch to the more standard commentary format: verse-by-verse exposition.

This does not mean, however, that this parasha lacks structure. On the contrary, there is a most definite structure. Chapter 19 can be divided into several different sections, each with several paragraphs.

Each paragraph is punctuated with the phrase “I am the Lord (your God).” Moreover chapter 20, while containing some of the same material as chapter 19, adds an important feature. It presents to us the teaching on holiness with a cause and effect motif. In other words, chapter 20 says, in essence, “Be holy because God is holy.”

Exposition

As we make an exposition of this parasha we will, for the most part, use the outline set forth in G. J. Wenham’s commentary on Leviticus. We will proceed, not word-by-word, but phrase by phrase.

- I. Holy Living — Verses 1–2
- II. Religious Instructions — Verses 3–10.
- III. Good Neighborliness – Verses 11–18
- IV. No Mixtures — Verse 19

V. Patience! — Verses 20–25

VI. Prohibition against Canaanite Practices — Verses 26–31

VII. Ethical Instructions — Verses 32–37 VIII. Discipline — Chapter 20

In this excerpt from Parashat Kedoshim, we will focus on section I, Holy Living.

Speak to the Entire Assembly of the Children of Israel

The text indicates that Moshe was not just to speak to some of the children of Israel, but to the whole community, *kol-'adat* (כל-עדת) Because of this, Rashi contends that this section of Leviticus “was said at a gathering of the entire assembly of Israel.”¹ The magnitude of the crowd suggests a valuable spiritual lesson was at hand.

Moshe taught special things to the *kohenim*, which applied only to them. He also gave specific instructions to the elders, which he did not teach to others. However, the content of these chapters — the teaching about holiness — is applicable to the entire redeemed community. The point was that if Israel was to walk as God intended, it required the obedience of the entire community for it to come to pass. The presence of the entire assembly signifies that the ultimate goal of holiness can be achieved only through the collective efforts of the whole nation.²

From this we can all learn that there is a personal holiness in which the Eternal One wants us individually to walk. However, there is also a community holiness in which we, as a community, are to walk. An important point in this parasha is that we are not islands. As believers, we are intimately connected to each other, dependent on each other, and supportive of each other. God knew that. That is why He spoke to the entire assembly, instead of just to a certain group of members of it.

I. Holy Living — vv. 1–2

This parasha opens with an oft repeated phrase: “Be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy”. This phrase is the topic sentence for this whole section of Leviticus. It describes the normal walk for the new creation. It also tells us the purpose for each of the specific instructions in this parasha. It tells us the motive for following them and we believe, it also gives us the means by which we are able to do so.

A. A New Creation Description

What do God’s redeemed “look like”? That is, what does our walk with Him look like? It resembles, in one word: holiness.

God’s definition of holiness is spelled out clearly in this parasha. It encompasses being totally set apart to the Lord in every area of our lives. There cannot be even one aspect of our lives, which is not covered.

However, there is also another dimension to the holiness spoken of in this sidra. At the end of chapter 20, God reminds Israel that He does not want them to live like the nations around them. When they occupy the Promised Land, He does not want Israel to live like, worship like, think like, or look like the Canaanites. The holiness of Israel is, therefore, defined by being in complete contrast with the Canaanites. Israel is to be radically different. So different, that the only thing

they and the Canaanites should have in common is their language. (The Torah is silent about what kind of language the Canaanites spoke, but we know from other historical sources that it was a sister language to Hebrew. Many words were even identical.)

B. The Motive for Holy Living

When we read that God wants us to be holy because He is holy, we learn the motivation for being holy, which then describes how to live all the teachings in Leviticus. The only revealed motive is that we are to do so only because our God is holy. We are to seek only to be imitators of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. We are not to do so to earn merit with Him. We are not to do so to earn His love. We already have His love, and we rest totally on the merits of His Son, our Messiah Yeshua. We are to follow these teachings only because they reflect who He is inside of us.

In light of the above statements, we are to view each of the commands or teachings in this parasha as aids that help us to live a separate life from the idolatrous and immoral “Canaanites.” The meaning or interpretation of each command is to be considered in light of what it contributes to the holiness of Israel — and ultimately, how it would contribute to demonstrating the perfect holiness of God in this world.

In other words, when we consider living out these commands, we need to ask: How can I do this in such a way as to visibly communicate to those around me the matchless perfection of the God who instructed me to do this?

C. The Means to Holy Living

There is a secret hidden in these words, “Be holy because the Lord, your God is holy.” If we understand the secret, we will be able to accomplish what these words are asking us to do.

The first part of the secret is to understand that in and of ourselves we cannot be holy; we cannot live according to the standards set forth in this chapter. The second part of the secret is to make sure that He is, in fact, the Lord our God. If God is not our personal God, then it is impossible to be like Him. Yeshua the Messiah said that if we receive Him, it is the same as receiving His Father. In other words, how does a person have the Holy One as his God? The answer is, by receiving His Son. When that happens, the Scripture tells us that we are not only forgiven for all of our sins, but that we are made into entirely new people. We are made into people whose basic identity is that we are people who are desirous of living out what the Torah teaches because it is now written on our minds! It is who we now are!

That, then, is the secret! We can only be holy if we have trusted in Yeshua. He then makes us holy, blameless, righteous, upright — just like He is! For us who are believers, reading this list of holy actions in Leviticus is not a checklist of “do it or you will be zapped”! Nor are the teachings a standard that we have to achieve or live up to. Rather, the instructions of the Torah are like reading a description of what we really want from our innermost being.

¹ *Rashi: Leviticus*, ArtScroll Edition, 226.

² Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Leviticus*, 207.