

“*Kedoshim*: A Jeroboam of moral values”

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M. Cohen

The sidrah *Kedoshim* is a veritable Jeroboam of moral values which our people are commanded to embrace, with fifty-one of its laws compressed within the space of a mere 64 sentences.

Over the next five years (2025-2029 incl.), the sidrot *Acharei-Mot* and *Kedoshim* are joined together, and read as one, on as many as four of the years, indicative of their thematic unity. Hence, the final chapter of *Acharei-Mot* (Lev. 18) may be viewed as an introduction to *Kedoshim* by identifying both the real and a future potential source of degenerate immoral practices:

I am the Lord your God. You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws: I am the Lord your God...

None of you shall come near anyone of *his own flesh* to uncover her nakedness: I am the Lord.

There then follows a lengthy list detailing the particular near and extended family relatives (‘own flesh’) – up to four generations – with whom it is forbidden to marry or to have sexual intercourse. As these were all members of a man’s immediate family, with whom he might fraternise, develop a close relationship, and become the object of his desire, the Torah’s lengthy and cautionary list of prohibitions was intended to frustrate the development of such situations at the very outset.

The euphemistic phrase *lo t’galeh ervatahh*, lit. ‘do not uncover her nakedness’, which is consistently used for each prohibited category, was employed in postbiblical Hebrew in the nominal form, *gillui arayot*, as the standard term for incest, thereby intensifying its gravity.

Viewed as an introduction to the sidrah *Kedoshim*, the final chapter of *acharei-Mot* might be misconstrued as restricting holiness to the area of appropriate sexual behaviour. The title and content of *Kedoshim*, however, disabuse us of that assumption, given that it includes within the rubric of ‘holiness’ laws encompassing almost every area of human relations. These

include respect and reverence for one's parents, concern for, and support of, the poor and those without material support, such as widows and orphans. Theft is also listed as an act that is incompatible with holiness, and is equated contextually with fraud, robbery, and delaying a labourer's wages until the following day (see 19:11,13).

Other acts that are incompatible with *kedushah* (holiness) are mocking those with disabilities (v.14), corruption of judicial proceedings by judges to secure a verdict in favour one party, even if it is for the notionally worthy purpose of favouring a poor disputant on account of his or her plight (vv.15-16), and weakening or exploiting, nature or interfering with its laws and boundaries (vv.19,23-24).

Misleading or displaying insensitivity toward a stranger is also listed as incompatible with living the holy life (v.33). However, the Torah goes much further than merely condemning such conduct, and demands that we 'love him as ourselves, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (v. 34).' The implication is that the Israelites suffered such ill-treatment as slaves in Egypt that its indelible impression on them should serve as a model for the behaviour that, for them, should be, forever, anathema.

The basic meaning of the verb *k-d-sh* is 'to be separate, detached.' So, holiness as described in our sidrah doesn't necessarily involve the embrace of an aesthetic way of life. Pursuing our mundane way of life and business dealings with honesty and concern for the less fortunate is, of itself, a demonstration of holy living.

*

*

*

The sidrah *Kedoshim* is quite remarkable in that, within the space of a mere 64 verses, it succeeds in referring to 51 mitzvot, mainly, as we have observed, referring to the treatment of fellow man and the pursuit of moral living. Now, although most are couched in terms of things that should not be done to others, there is one mitzvah, that, according to the great Rabbi Akivah, (*Sifra Kedoshim* 1:12) should be viewed as *the* fundamental principle of the Torah, namely *V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocha* – 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord' (v.17).

Much has been written on the difficulty, or impossibility, of loving another 'as much as' one loves oneself, and putting concern for his or her life on a par with the natural urge for self-preservation. Hence, many commentators interpret it in the more attainable negative sense,

namely, ‘what actions you would regard as unacceptable, hurtful, or insulting if directed at you, do not do to your neighbour.’

Another way of understanding this is that, just as when we do or say something that we know in our heart is unworthy or wrong, we instinctively forgive *ourselves*, and seek to justify our action or make excuses for it (“I didn’t really mean that!”; “You misunderstood what I said!”; “I was only responding to what he said about me!”), in the same way we should judge those who hurt us charitably, and find excuses for their action (“Perhaps there was some justification for what he said!” “Perhaps he was depressed, ill, or had a problem at home or work and wasn’t thinking straight!”).

It may seem problematic, however, how such an abstention of action could be construed as a mitzvah. However, the Spanish philosopher, Bahya ibn Pakudah (11th cent.), deals comprehensively with this in his celebrated work, *Chovot Ha-levavot*, Duties of the Hearts, and affirms that standing aloof from unworthy or sinful acts is also a meritorious and religious act, by which we accrue merit. And in that way, the second statement, Ani HaShem (“I am the Lord”), is to be understood.

I once read a Chasidic exposition to account for the latter phrase. It views the mitzvah’s formulation as from God’s perspective, and divides it as follows: *V’ahavta l’rei’acha* – “Love (and forgive) your neighbour (even if he has hurt you)” - *kamocha ani HaShem* – “because I, the Lord, have suffered in that identical way. Although you have rejected and hurt Me on so many occasions, by disregarding My Torah, I have still loved and forgiven you.”

The exposition continues by pointing out that, if two people display love for, and consideration toward, one another, they make God (The Holy One, blessed be He), and His Shechinah (divine manifestation to mankind) complete thereby. This early mystical notion is reflected by the application of *gematria*, the relevant numerical values.

Thus, the gematria of ‘love’ (אהבה) is 13 [1+5+2+5]. Hence, when *two* people demonstrate that same אהבה toward each other, 26 units of love are generated. Now, 26 is also the gematria of God’s four-letter name: His first letter is ך (yod) = 10; the second is ה (hey) = 5; the third is ם (vav) = 6; and the fourth is another ה (hey) = 5; making that same total of 26 units of love, and exemplifying the fulfilment of God’s purpose for His world when humankind is unified within a bond of love and peace. In that way, the unity of man – *V’ahavta l’rei’acha kamocha* – mirrors the unity of God - Ani HaShem.

In this world of strife, war, envy, causeless hatred, and terrorism, the only way to secure the future of God's world is by turning to fellow man in a spirit of reconciliation and אהבה.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Jeffrey