

# **KEDUSHAH, HOLINESS, AND ETHICS**

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The problem with understanding *kedushah* in the Bible is not simply the inadequacy of the English translation "holiness," with its narrow implication of religion, reverence, ritual and prayer. Rather, it is in defining the term "holiness" as a Jewish concept. In the Bible, *kedushah* encompasses all of life, with a special focus on social behavior. This can be seen especially in the ethical rules of Leviticus 19, which are introduced with: *You shall be kadosh, for I, the Lord your God, am kadosh* (v. 2). This raises the question: What part does ethics play in biblical *kedushah*?

## **ETHICS IN THE HOLINESS CODE**

Modern scholars call Leviticus 17-26 the "Holiness Code" because these chapters repeatedly justify laws with the explanation *You shall be holy*.<sup>1</sup> The Code includes laws of kosher slaughtering (17); prohibitions of pagan practices (19); rules for priests (21-22); lists of sacrifices and offerings (23); and rules for the Tabernacle (24). It also contains laws governing sexual behavior (18, 20); commandments for ethical conduct (19); and laws concerning ownership and use of land (*Shemittah* and Jubilee, 25).

Rashi sees a direct relationship between sexual conduct and holiness. On the introductory verse to Chapter 19, *You shall be kadosh, for I, the Lord your God, am kadosh* (v. 2), Rashi says: "Be removed from sexual sin." And he adds that this chapter immediately follows the laws of sexual behavior in Chapter 18 because "wherever you find laws about unacceptable sexual behavior you find *kedushah*." Laws governing land use in Israel can be interpreted as showing that the land belongs to God and is therefore the Holy Land.

As for the ethical *mitzvot*, examining them in detail will help fill out the Jewish concept of holiness.

## **COMMENTS ON THE ETHICAL REGULATIONS**

It will help to look at what some commentaries say about the connection of

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the ethical commandments to *kedushah*.<sup>2</sup>

1. *A person shall revere his mother and father* (19:3).

Sifra: Honoring parents and observing the Sabbath are in the same verse to show that a person must revere the three beings who created him -- God, mother, father.<sup>3</sup> In other words, honoring parents is as holy as honoring God.

S.R. Hirsch: "'Fearing' mother and father and sanctifying Sabbath are the educators and guides of Jewish People to the sanctification of their lives, from cradle to the grave. *Yirat av ve-em* is the first step towards *kedushah*."<sup>4</sup>

Sifra addresses the issue of ethics and *kedushah* by implication; Hirsch does so explicitly and at length.

2. *You shall not harvest the corners of your field or collect the fallen stalks. You shall leave them for the poor* (19:9-10).

This *mitzvah* is repeated in 23:22, of which Rashi says: "Why did the Torah put these [laws] in the midst of [laws about] pilgrimages . . . and Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur . . . ? To teach you that whoever gives [these] properly is equated with someone who builds the Temple and brings sacrifices in it."

Sforno: "Once we have accepted Him as our God, it is proper for us to follow His behavior in doing *tzedakah* and justice, and the *tzedakah* is the dropped, forgotten and corner stalks mentioned here. And the reason for saying *I, the Lord, am your God* is that since I am God and all My paths are merciful and true, it is proper for you to observe this type of charity."<sup>5</sup>

Hirsch: "These foundations for holy living . . . start with the fundamental principles of the family and the individual with honoring one's father and mother and the Sabbath, and the finishing stone is laid with the fundamental basis of social life, the Jewish conception of *tzedakah* . . . . On the basis of a true Jewish life, social and so-called religious life form no contrast to each other . . . but belong together in essential organic unity . . . ."<sup>6</sup>

Rashi, Sforno and Hirsch all explicitly connect this ethical practice with the goal of achieving *kedushah*. Rashi equates giving charity with bringing sacrifices; Sforno and Hirsch say that by acting charitably, a person acts the way God acts.

3. *You shall not steal, lie or deal deceitfully* (19:11).

Hirsch: "One is still a long way from being a *kadosh* if one is simply not a

thief or does not commit perjury. But, addressed in the plural to the national community . . . it refers to . . . such unlawfulness, such dishonesty, such cursory swearing which have become so interwoven into the ordinary daily business and social life of the people, that they can become the ruling national characteristic of a people . . . ."<sup>7</sup>

Hirsch continues his theme that if everyone follows these commandments, then the whole community will be *kadosh*.

4. *You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind* (19:14).

Rashi: "Do not give advice that is bad for someone who is blind in the matter." Since the deaf person cannot hear the insult and the advisor can say he thought the advice was good, "people are not in position to know if his intent was good or bad . . . therefore it says, *And you shall fear God*, who knows your thoughts."

Hirsch: "In all these matters, we are not to feel ourselves under the judgment of our fellowmen . . . but to be placed under the Eye of God, the All-seeing One Whose constant presence teaches us the most conscientious watch over ourselves and self-criticism of all our behavior."<sup>8</sup>

Rashi does not explicitly connect this commandment to *kedushah*; but his reasoning implies that breaking this commandment desecrates God's name [*hillul HaShem*], and is thus anti-*kedushah*. Again, Hirsch explains this commandment as leading to a life of *kedushah*.

5. *You shall have honest weights and measures* (19:35-36).

Rashi: "Someone who falsifies weights undermines justice . . . [and] pollutes the land, desecrates God's name, drives away the *Shechinah*, destroys Israel by the sword, and exiles them from their land."

Hirsch: ". . . the Torah wants to impress that 'your yea shall be yea, and your nay, nay.' Thereby the principle is firmly established that, quite apart from the law courts, the word of a Jew must be a holy thing which can be utterly depended on."<sup>9</sup>

6. *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (19:18).

Rashi: "Rabbi Akiva says, 'This is a great principle in the Torah.'" [Some

scholars translate *klal gadol* as "fundamental rule," which is much stronger.]"<sup>10</sup>

Nahmanides: "[I]n his heart a person does not love someone else like he loves himself . . . . Sometimes he will love his neighbor in certain things . . . but he will not want him to be an equal, he will want more for himself. Therefore the Torah commands us against this kind of jealousy . . . ." <sup>11</sup>

Hirsch: ". . . the summarizing final maxim for the whole of our social behavior, in feelings, word and deed. The most noble fundamental feeling towards God and Man is Love . . . . It is something that is expected from us towards all our fellow-men in the Name of God." <sup>12</sup>

#### KEDUSHAH AND ETHICS

At the risk of drawing conclusions from the absence of evidence, we can suggest that the classic commentators do not seem very concerned with the special status of ethics. They see inter-personal behavior as an aspect of *kedushah* because all *mitzvot* lead to *kedushah*. Thus, Nahmanides says in his introduction to Leviticus that almost all the laws in the book are related to sacrifices in one way or another and are therefore connected to the priestly issue of *kedushah*.<sup>13</sup> But his comments on the individual ethical commandments do not develop this idea. Sifra, Rashi and Sforno address the connection of ethics to *kedushah* in several commandments, usually by implication, but explicitly once or twice.

In contrast, Hirsch, a 19th-century rabbi, bases his entire commentary in this chapter on the premise that ethical behavior makes a special, and essential, contribution to *kedushah*. Other modern scholars also address the connection between *kedushah* and ethics directly.

Baruch Levine maintains that holiness is not God's "nature" but describes His action. Attributes like holy, merciful and just "are associated with God on the basis of His observable actions: the ways in which He relates to man and to the universe. The statement that God is holy means, in effect, that He acts in holy ways." <sup>14</sup>

These holy ways are summarized in God's Thirteen Attributes in Exodus 34:6-7: *Lord, Lord, God of mercy, compassion, patient, generous, truthful, showing generosity to thousands, forgiving guilt, sin and error, and cleansing . . . .* And as Asher Eder says, "From this proclamation of the Thirteen Divine Attributes the sages developed the concept of *imitatio Dei* -- to im-

itate the Lord. Just as He is compassionate, so shall we be compassionate."<sup>15</sup> Levine agrees, and says that the verse *You shall be holy* (19:2) "is distinctive in that it provides a rationale for a commandment: Israel must be holy because God is holy. To have a close relationship to God, the people must emulate God."<sup>16</sup> Even though God chose Israel to be His holy nation, this did not automatically make them holy. "In order to achieve a holiness of the kind associated with God and His acts, Israel would have to observe His laws and commandments."<sup>17</sup>

Menachem Elon suggests that the ethical *mitzvot* give a religious foundation to society: ". . . just as the Written Law (i.e. the Torah) commands the individual and the people to carry out commandments that are clearly legal in character, it similarly and quite as categorically commands the performance of precepts considered to be moral and ethical in nature. Thus, just as the commands 'you shall not murder' and 'you shall not steal' are basic mandates contained in the Ten Commandments, the command 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord' is a major principle basic to the entire Torah."<sup>18</sup>

The Torah, Elon says, does not distinguish among ritual, law and morality. They are all equally *mitzvot*. "In the Ten Commandments, those commandments requiring observance of the Sabbath . . . are included in the same pronouncement . . . alongside 'You shall not steal' and 'You shall not murder.' The injunction that 'You shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind' and the direction that 'You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old' are both rooted in 'You shall fear your God. I am the Lord.'"<sup>19</sup>

In fact, the ethical emphasis in the Torah is so strong, some scholars see it as the reason for the ritual laws. Concerning the commandment of the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8-11), Eder asks, "How does the Creation of heaven and earth and sea in six days lead to the Commandment in Exodus that slaves and cattle should rest on the seventh day . . . ?"<sup>20</sup> He answers that the Sabbath Commandment was "a tremendous social revolution. Put into practice, it obliterates the right of slaveholders to push slaves, laborers, and even cattle, to incessant work like machines; it gives human status to the underprivileged . . ."<sup>21</sup>

In addition, these commandments build a holy community, not just individ-

ual saints. In discussing the concept *am kadosh* [a holy nation], Levine says, "This statement also conveys the idea, basic to biblical religion, that holiness cannot be achieved by individuals alone . . . . It can be realized only through the life of the community, acting together."<sup>22</sup> Hirsch explains why: ". . . those demands of social behavior . . . induce uprightness, sincerity, conscientiousness, brotherliness and the spirit of forgiveness, those traits of character which are the protecting genii of a happy and neighborly social life."<sup>23</sup>

By examining Leviticus 19, we see that *kedushah* is much more than the English word "holy." It is not limited to ritual, prayer, temples or priests (or rabbis). It is not even limited to what most people think of as religion. All Jewish law, Elon says, "is religious in that, according to principles of the Jewish faith, the source of all Jewish law is divine revelation . . . . In both areas -- the 'religious' and the 'legal' -- solutions to problems were found in the same source -- in the Torah."<sup>24</sup> In other words, religion is not a separate aspect of Jewish life. When Jewish life is grounded in the Torah, *kedushah* covers family life, business, community activity, and even emotions. As Levine says, the biblical ideal of holiness "could not be achieved through purity and proper worship alone; it had an important place in the realm of societal experience . . . . This chapter exemplifies the heightened ethical concern characteristic of ancient Israel."<sup>25</sup>

What we find, then, is that *kedushah* is not the same as holiness. *Kedushah* is not limited to purity, ritual, or religion. Rather, it is the process of making all aspects of life, including the personal and social, answer to a higher ideal. The implication is that Judaism is not merely a religion. It is a blueprint for a special community.

#### NOTES

1. Baruch A. Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) pp. 110-111.
2. Many of the most important classic Jewish commentaries are collected in *Mikra'ot Gedolot* (New York: M P Press, 1980) [Hebrew].
3. Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash*, 4th ed. (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1994) p. 657.
4. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, Vol. III, Leviticus (part 2), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. Isaac Levy (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1989) pp. 500-501.
5. *Mikra'ot Gedolot*, p. 255.
6. Hirsch, p. 510.
7. Hirsch, p. 511.

8. Hirsch, pp. 516-517.
9. Hirsch, p. 566.
10. Scherman, p. 661.
11. *Mikra'ot Gedolot*, pp. 261-262.
12. Hirsch, p. 527.
13. *Mikra'ot Gedolot*, p. 2.
14. Levine, p. 256.
15. Asher Eder. "The Sabbath Commandment: Its Two Versions," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 25:3 (July-September 1997) p. 189.
16. Levine, p. 125.
17. Levine, p. 256.
18. Menahem Elon, *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles*, Vol. 1, trans. Bernard Auerbach and Melvin J. Sykes (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994).p. 142.
19. Elon, pp. 4-5.
20. Eder, p. 189.
21. Eder, p. 191.
22. Levine, p. 256.
23. Hirsch, p. 498.
24. Elon, p. 4.
25. Levine, p. 257.

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