



Aspirational Holiness • Parshat Kedoshim

Parshat Kedoshim opens with a transformational idea: “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 19:2). Particularly inspiring is that God commands Moses to communicate this message to “all the community of Israel.” Despite the emphasis throughout Leviticus on the exclusive role of the priests, holiness is not just relegated to the elite. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks persuasively argues, we find here a “radical democratization of holiness” (“From Priest to People,” *Covenant and Conversation*).

Holiness is understood by many commentaries as an outgrowth of self-control. For Nahmanides, the value of holiness is that it is born out of abstention from behaviors that are technically permitted under the letter of the law. It entails a supererogatory self-imposition of an added layer of self-discipline above and beyond strict legal responsibility. This serves to prevent a person from behaving in a repugnant way that would technically, in Jewish law, be permitted.

Nahmanides points to a parallel commandment, “You shall do what is right and good” while interacting with others (Deut. 6:18), to demonstrate that the Torah tends to supplement specific sets of laws with broader value-imperatives. We need statements such as “what is right and good” for interpersonal regulations and “be holy” for spiritual goals because “it is impossible to mention in the Torah all aspects of man’s conduct with his neighbors and friends, and all his various transactions, and the ordinances of all societies and

countries.” These generalized, guiding principles evade precise parameters and fixed regulation, and therefore require individualized application and contextual flexibility.

Elaborating on this personalized aspect of holiness, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, in his influential 17th century work *Shnei Luchot HaBrit*, writes that the Torah cannot possibly explicitly anticipate the myriad permutations of holiness throughout time and place. There are no specific set rules on what or how much to eat, for instance, because doing so would require accounting for innumerable individual differences, shifting cultural milieus, and changing historical epochs. The Torah instead provides the general principle of holiness, and it is up to each individual, with self-awareness, to apply his or her own psychological, biological, and cultural context in fulfilling this value.

What emerges is that the imperative to “be holy” is unlike most other commandments. There is no uniform instruction, and it does not hold the status of a clear-cut, binding obligation. In his celebrated article, *Does Jewish Tradition Recognize An Ethic Independent of Halakha?*, Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, whose *yahrzeit* was this week, questions whether Nahmanides’ position falls under the prominent 20th century legal philosopher Lon Fuller’s “morality of duty” or “morality of aspiration” categories. Do I *need* to be holy under the rule of Jewish law, in the same way that I *need* to keep Kosher? Or is holiness an optional ideal I can choose to pursue if I so desire?

In a profound and pithy response, refusing easy categorization, Rabbi Lichtenstein writes, “A Jew is also commanded to aspire.”

The relegation of holiness to the individual is both challenging and empowering. In this liminal space between choice and obligation, we are called

on to aspire for subjective self-discipline and heightened ethical sensitivity. The Torah does not provide us precise details, and thereby affords us the autonomy, responsibility, and opportunity, for transformational and individualized moral refinement.

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Character Challenge: Choose an area where self-control is more challenging for you and aspire to “be holy” or to do “what is right and good” by acting beyond the level of obligation.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “It is the people as a whole who are commanded to “be holy”, not just an elite group of priests... What we witness here, in other words, is the radical democratization of holiness. All ancient societies had priests...The priesthood was not unique to Israel, and everywhere it was an elite. Here for the first time, we find a code of holiness directed to the people as a whole. We are all called on to be holy” (“From Priest to People,” *Covenant and Conversation*).