

Rabbi Shelley Goldman * Yom Kippur 5779 * Wed. September 19, 2018

Yom Kippur: The Holiness Code

Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the Jewish Year. On this day we examine our lives and recommit ourselves to our vision of a good life, a worthwhile life. On this day our thoughts turn to holiness.

The word holy is understood in English as sacred, a life of devotion. In Hebrew, the word *Kadosh* means to set apart. In Jewish tradition we set apart time, to observe Shabbat and holy days even while the outside world marches on. We set aside space, creating the beautiful sanctuary in which we pray today. In the past, *Kadosh* referred to "things and people ceremonially purified and separated as sacred."

And so, on this day, many of us abstain from food and water to bring ourselves to more heightened awareness of who we are, and who we would like to be. In my life, the various meanings of Holy and *Kadosh* exist in harmony. It is my highest wish to live a life of purpose. I have chosen the life of a rabbi because I consider serving people in community to be holy and the daily commitments of teaching, preaching and leading for social justice to be the best ways that I can make use of my gifts in this world. In addition to my vocation, I regard the ways that I attend to my family to be holy as well.

What is holiness to you? Do you feel that you fulfill your sacred purpose through your work, your labors of love within your family, as a volunteer in the community? What contains the divine spark that makes your journey of life unique, purposeful, and worthwhile?

Our ancestors explored the concept of holiness in a variety of ways. Much of the book of Leviticus, from which today's Torah readings come, were originally written for the Priests and functionaries of the ancient Temple. The ideas of holiness were woven throughout the book as a "how to" manual for the religious leaders of the ancient Israelites to keep the cosmos in balance through a system of sacrificial offerings to God. It is from this mindset that we get Leviticus 16 as the morning reading for Yom Kippur, the story of the two goats upon which our collective misdeeds are placed and then we are forgiven. With the sacrifice of the scapegoat, the ancients believed that they achieved ritual purity. Today, one of the ways we strive for ritual holiness, is by denying ourselves food and water, in an attempt to focus our minds and spirits on the year ahead.

This afternoon's Torah portion also comes from the book of Leviticus but instead of being written by the priests and for the priests, Leviticus 19 was written by a later generation of priestly leaders who wanted to include the whole people in the project of striving for holiness. Instead of focusing inward, on the functions of the Temple, these priests focused outward, exploring how each person could enact holiness in daily life. It is as if they said, "What if we compiled a "greatest hits" list of tasks that speak directly to the people reminding them how each one of us, each and every day, can be involved in creating a holy society?" The chapter they brought to the world is referred to as the Holiness Code and it begins, "You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy."¹ The phrase is in the plural suggesting that holiness is most easily achieved in community.²

¹ Leviticus 19:2

² Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary page 693.

The verses that follow cover every aspect of life, not only the intimate realm of the Temple. The verses are a reprise of the 10 commandments with other life enhancing rules added in. Leviticus 19 reminds us to honor our parents and keep Shabbat, thus having boundaries in our lives between the work-a-day week and the special times with our loved ones that make life worth living. Seamlessly, the chapter turns to injunctions about taking care of the poor by leaving the corners of your field uncut and not picking your vineyards bare so that the poor and the stranger, the refugees passing through and the new immigrants, can gather food to eat from your field. In our times, the holy act of taking care of those in need comes for most of us not from the “corners of our fields” but from our bank accounts and the good deeds of volunteer time.

The discussion of giving *tzedakah* concludes with the words “You shall not steal.” A leading Spanish Medieval Jewish commentator suggests that the concept of charity and the injunction not to steal are placed right next to each other to teach us that keeping everything we earn for ourselves, is a form of stealing³. Our livelihood is a trust to share with others. And so, the next line in our “greatest hits list” of ways to live a holy life says, “You are not to keep-overnight the working-wages of a hired-hand with you until morning⁴,” reminding us of the ways that many of us have power over other people in our lives and urging us to responsibility and kindness in our treatment of those who work for us. Today, as in Torah times, a hired hand may very well be using her wages from today to feed her family tonight. Elsewhere in the Torah we are

³ Ibn Ezra on Leviticus 19:11 in [Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary](#) page 695.

⁴ [The Five Books of Moses](#) translated by Everett Fox, page 602.

admonished not to keep overnight someone's garment taken as a pledge to make good on a loan, recognizing that in the ancient world someone's garment by day, doubled as his blanket at night. It would be cruel, even if you had not yet received back the full amount of your loan, to keep someone's only blanket overnight.

Leviticus 19 confronts us with the powerful statement: "You are not to stand idly by the blood of your neighbor". The Torah is arguing, sentence after sentence, that taking care of the most vulnerable members of our society is holy work. We can fail others by our inaction as well as our sometimes clumsy actions. Indifference to the plight of others is prohibited by the Torah.

The heart of the entire chapter, indeed, the center of the entire Torah, the middle of the middle chapter in the middle of this holiest of books, is the following: "You are not to hate your kinsfolk in your heart; rebuke, yes, rebuke your fellow, that you not bear sin because of him! You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your people. Love your neighbor as yourself: I am Adonai.⁵" These words are powerful because they speak not only of loving people when times are good but about offering constructive criticism so that we will be able to continue loving all those around us: our neighbors, friends, loved ones, coworkers, and even people we do not know well. We are responsible for one another, we are accountable, and often that means, calling others to account when we see them "missing the mark" and helping them to improve. The Torah instructs us to reach out to our fellow human beings and have difficult conversations, rather than thinking ill of others while bad behavior continues.

⁵ Leviticus 19: 17-18

This is a tall order for any day of the year, let alone the holiest day of the year! In the time since Leviticus 19 was chosen as a reading for Yom Kippur, our attention has shifted from offering rebuke to examining our own behavior and asking, "To whom in my life do I owe an apology? Who in my life have I treated with anything less than the utmost respect? And, what can I do to make amends?" I know from experience what an incredible feeling it is to make a good apology. There is a rush that I get from speaking the truth out loud to another person, someone whom I love and have wronged, and asking for forgiveness. I would argue that this too is holy work.

Have you ever considered all that goes in to saying "I'm sorry" in the best possible way? Our twelfth century sage, Maimonides, has a four point check list for true repentance: humility, remorse, forbearance, and reparation. A recent article in Tablet Magazine entitled *How to Say You're Sorry*, suggests:

"You have to take ownership of your offense, even if it makes you uncomfortable. You have to name your misdeeds and acknowledge their impact. Once you've said your piece, listen to what the other person has to say. If at first your apology isn't accepted, allow some time to pass, reflect on how you can better communicate, and then try a second and then a third time for reconciliation. Then you have to make reparations. You have to pay for what you have broken and/or make good where the hurt or wrong is not easily replaced with money. In your heart of hearts, you know what to do to try to make things right. Apologizing well requires both humility and bravery. A good apology means laying yourself bare. It means putting yourself in the other person's position and giving them what they want and need. In short, it's not about you.⁶"

Today's Haftarah from the prophet Isaiah, continues with the themes of holiness: "For thus said the One who high aloft forever dwells, in holiness; yet is with the contrite

⁶ Marjorie Ingall (adapted) <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/185193/how-to-apologize>

and the lowly in spirit – Reviving their spirits.⁷” Isaiah takes the laws that we have discussed in Leviticus 19 and the ideas we have explored about giving a good apology on a one-to-one basis and argues for holiness on a societal scale. The prophet reminds us that God does not only desires for us to fast on Yom Kippur and make amends for our individual wrongdoing, but that in the year to come we take seriously the ways that we can better function as a holy society. Isaiah continues, “This is the fast I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke and let the oppressed go free. Share your bread with the hungry, take the wretched poor into your home and when you see the naked, clothe them!⁸” The mandate is ever relevant.

The final selection of Bible that we read on Yom Kippur is the book of Jonah, that wonderful story of the run-away prophet, trying to escape from his true purpose that catches up with him anyways. Jonah is resistant to his task because he is being asked to travel a great distance to proclaim God’s holiness to a nation who are not part of his people, they are not even worshippers of Adonai. Jonah is included in our Yom Kippur readings not just because it is a beautiful story, but because it reminds us that God is the God of all peoples. God accepts the holiness and good intentions of all people, not just of those who live in a particular place. Jonah teaches that holiness is always accessible to all; the gates of repentance, forgiveness and renewal are always open.

In conclusion, I offer a modern liturgical poem which expresses, in contemporary language, our hopes for this day.

⁷ Isaiah 57:15

⁸ Isaiah 58:6-7

There is holiness when we strive to be true to the best we know.

There is holiness when we are kind to someone who cannot possibly be of
service to us.

There is holiness when we promote family harmony.

There is holiness when we forget what divides us and remember what unites us.

There is holiness when we are willing to be laughed at for what we believe in.

There is holiness when we love – truly, honestly, and unselfishly.

There is holiness when we remember the lonely and bring cheer into a dark corner.

There is holiness when we share – our bread, our ideas, our enthusiasms.

There is holiness when we gather to pray to the One who gave us the power to pray.

I wish you a year blessed with the demands and duties, the joys and beauty
of a life of holiness.

L'shanah tovah tikatevu v'tehatemu.