



5 ways to be holy

The Ten Commandments are repeated in the Holiness Code in Leviticus 19, though not in the same order as previously detailed in Exodus 20 (see Leviticus 19:4, 12, 3, 16, 29, 11, 16, 18). Here they are threaded through a longer listing of specific rulings on community relations. Mentioned below are five that suggest certain subtleties of the heart, mind and behavior.

1. Self-restraint.

“You shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field” (19:9). This form of restraint curbs tendencies for greed, as well as providing a system of charity allowing the poor to find food where fruits have not been gathered in the harvest operation.

2. Just work practices.

“The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning” (19:13). This verse is set in the context of a ruling against fraud and robbery.

3. Sensitive to disability.

“You shall not insult the deaf” (19:14). The deaf person can't hear the insult,

yet the Torah regards the insult as no less demeaning and warns against taking advantage of a person's disability.

4. Care not to confuse.

“Or place a stumbling block before the blind” (19:14). This has been interpreted at various levels.

Literally: do not taunt a person with a disability. Figuratively: do not mislead a person who is ignorant or inexperienced.

5. Attitude of the heart.

“You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart” (19:17). The Torah is concerned not only with external behavior but the heart's orientation.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

Today's Torah reflection takes us into the Holiness Code (chapters 17-26) of the Book of Leviticus. 'Holiness' is a familiar word, yet its meaning is complex and multi-layered. Our reading invites us to reflect on what it means to 'be holy', its relation to the divine and the human, to sanctification and ethics, to specific people and the whole community.

An unfortunate consequence of anti-Jewish tendencies in Church history is that even today many Catholic parishioners regard the Judaism of Jesus' day as being hopelessly distant from God, in contrast to Jesus who brought people close to God. Such over-simplifications not only misrepresent Judaism, they distort our grasp of Jesus and the Jewish context from which he lived and taught. They can lead to a dismissive attitude towards texts like Leviticus even though we find them in our own bible.

To be sure, Leviticus is an ancient text and can sound unfamiliar to 21st century ears. Yet it continues to carry the precious thread of divine revelation, received and interpreted by Jews and Christians through centuries of religious development. Here we explore some of its beauty and power with the help of traditional Jewish interpretations.



Leviticus 19:1—20:27

Kedoshim: 'holy'



Light of Torah
www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 19:1—20:27

Our focus is on those chapters known as the Holiness Code. Whereas earlier sections of the Book of Leviticus approached holiness in terms of sacred places, objects, priests and sacred time, with chapter 19 there is a kind of 'democratization' of holiness, a vision of holiness focused on the ordinary person and human relations amidst the daily tasks of farming, business, family and community activities. Read closely, aloud, chapter 19 of Leviticus, then return to ponder 19:2.

Tasting Torah

You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy (Leviticus 19:2).

Amidst pages of Torah teaching on holiness this verse stands out for its brevity and simplicity. It catches the eye of Jewish commentators. Usually the commandment to be holy is associated with a specific ruling; i.e. you shall be holy by doing such-and-such, or you shall be holy in order that something will transpire. But here it simply says, "You shall be holy". It connects holiness with God's holiness (hence giving rise to a Talmudic teaching on *Imitatio Dei*, 'the imitation of God'¹). Yet no specific precept is attached. Why does it stand alone? Ponder this with the sages.

Touching Torah

Two notable positions emerge among Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages. According to Rashi,² this verse is a general precept referring to the restraint required in sexual relations, an area of critical importance to the moral order. Hence 19:2 follows the rules of sexual conduct of the previous chapter.

Nachmanides,³ on the other hand, sees it as promoting restraint in every aspect of one's life, applying to all those activities *not* covered by specific rulings. E.g., eating, drinking, speaking, marital sexual relations are all good and permissible actions, but the command 'to be holy' cautions against over-indulgence (lest one become "a villain with the sanction of the Torah!"), for excess would result in gluttony, drunkenness, slander and unchaste behavior.

Depthing Torah

In summary: according to Rashi, the verse "You shall be holy" urges restraint in matters of sexual conduct; whereas for Nachmanides it reminds that appropriate restraint must be shown in all areas of life, in keeping with the rabbinic saying "Sanctify yourself in that which you are permitted" (*Yevamot 20a*).

Leaping several centuries to explore a different view, we find Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto⁴ dissatisfied with this approach of defining holiness in terms of restraint. Abstinance creates only a preliminary path to holiness, he says. For Luzzatto holiness is about living in a state of communion with God in such a way that whatever life's activity is being undertaken one never separates oneself from God. Attention to the commandments paves the way to deeper communion. Then, in seeking to grasp God's grandeur through a daily stance of love and awe, one discovers a detachment from material concerns, and a heightened communion with the Lord. "Then the Spirit from above will hover over him, the Creator will cause His Name to rest upon him...all his actions, even the most humblest and most material, will then have the value of sacrifices and service to God."⁵

Doing Torah

How would you describe a 'holy' person, and what light does this Torah reading shed on your understanding? Talk about the place of abstinence and abundance, of fasting and feasting in a life of holiness.



Faith & life

"Reading Lev.19 aloud, I notice the text is punctuated by the repetition: "I am the LORD" (14 times). Verse after verse details how people should relate to one another. Yet it is more than a humanitarian plan. This drumbeat (*I am the LORD*) insistently reminds me that human relations are inseparable from relationship with the Lord our God."

Bibliography: Herczeg, ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 1994, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* (NY, 1993); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 1992); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2005, 2006). Scripture: NJPS

1. Discussed in the Talmud: TB Sotah 14a and TB Shabbat 133b.
2. Rashi: 11th c. France;
3. Nachmanides. 13th c. Spain.
4. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746): influential Italian scholar known for his ethical work *Messilat Yesharim* ('Pathway of the Just')
5. See Munk, 208..