

“You Shall Be Holy”  
*Parashat Kedoshim*  
 Cornell University  
 April 29-30, 2011

The 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus is one of the richest in the Bible, replete with any number of verses and even phrases that could be the subject of a *d’var torah* in itself; beautiful, inspiring injunctions juxtaposed with verses that strike us as rather primitive. Perhaps the two most famous verses in entire book of Leviticus come in this *parashah*, and I will focus on one of them: קְדוּשִׁים תְּהִיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, “You shall be holy for I the Eternal your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2).

Let’s compare this verse to a passage that we shall be reading in another eight weeks: the account of the rebellion led by Korah against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Here is the challenge publicly hurled against Moses and Aaron: “You have gone too far, כִּי כָל הָעֵדָה כֹּלֵם קְדוּשִׁים, for all the community are holy—all of them—and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord’s congregation?” (Num. 16:3).

It looks as if Korah is making a telling point. If every member of the community is holy, if God is accessible to everyone, if each member has the inalienable right of dignity and freedom of thought, then any kind of leadership claiming the power to compel obedience becomes at best problematic, and at worst inherently illegitimate. God had commanded Moses to inform the whole Israelite community, *kedoshim tihyu*, “You shall be holy”, and Korah, apparently echoing this verse from our *parashah* and taking it very seriously, says, “All the community are holy”. What was wrong with his challenge to Moses and Aaron?

The answer, of course, is that he confuses an aspiration with an achievement, a goal toward which we must strive, with a present reality already accomplished. The instruction *kedoshim tihyu* does not miraculously change the ontological nature of the Jewish people. Only God is *kadosh* at present. For the people, it is an objective to be attained in the future.

Two examples illustrate the importance of this distinction. First, the prayer for the State of Israel read after the Torah reading in Israel itself and in many Diaspora communities. It was composed by two Israeli Chief Rabbis based on a text by the Nobel Laureate Shai Agnon. How does it begin? *Barekh et medinat Yisrael, reshit tsemihat ge’ulatenu*, “Bless the State of Israel, the beginning of the sprouting of our redemption.” Now this is a double hesitation—the beginning of the sprouting—yet it still asserts that there is a direct connection between the establishment of the State of Israel and the traditional hope of messianic redemption. This is a link that many secular Zionists repudiated from the outset, and that many Jews today find increasingly problematic. The assertion that the State of Israel today is even “the beginning of the sprouting” of the messianic age seems paradoxical and somewhat pretentious, certainly out of synch with what we know about the realities of the Middle East.

I once heard Rabbi Barry Freundel of the Orthodox congregation Keshet Israel in Georgetown, Washington DC, say, “If I were not an Orthodox rabbi, and had a lit-

tle more freedom to manoeuvre, I would add a single word to that blessing: *she-tihyeh*, “that it may be”. Bless the State of Israel, *that it may be* the beginning of the sprouting of our redemption. Note the difference made by that one word: the difference between a potentially arrogant claim about the present, to a challenging aspiration for the future. Not being an Orthodox rabbi myself, I would certainly add that transformative word to the prayer.

A second example, which requires no additional word, but only the correct punctuation. This pertains to our national hymn called, “America the Beautiful”, a musical setting to a poem by Katherine Lee Bates, a writer, editor, and professor of English literature at Wellesley College in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, inspired by a visit to Colorado and the view from the top of Pike’s Peak in 1893.

We all know the first verse:

O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain,  
For purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain.  
America, America, God shed His grace on thee,  
And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.

Despite the gender specific language relating to God and human beings, I always felt the sentiment was uplifting and sound. But for a long time I was troubled by a subsequent stanza, which begins:

O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years,  
Thine alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears.

OK: the United States does have majestic mountains towering above amber waves of grain. But cities with buildings that shine white (that’s the meaning of “alabaster”), inhabited by people who are all happy and content – “undimmed by human tears”? What could the poet have been thinking? Had she never been in the slums of an actual city with its grime, its poverty, its suffering?

Eventually I worked out the meaning, obscured by the melody that demands a pause and a breath after the first line (“that sees beyond the years”). The correct reading should be: “. . . patriot dream that sees—beyond the years—thine alabaster cities gleam. . . .” The second line about gleaming cities undimmed by human tears is not an assertion about the present, which would be a fraudulent denial of reality, but a dream for the future. The patriot envisions a time when human misery will disappear from our cities. That small change in punctuation and pauses totally transforms the meaning, from descriptive of the present, to hope for the future. And the *true* patriot not only dreams of such a time, but works in the present to help bring that time nearer.

And so we return to the verse from our parashah: *Kedoshim tihyu*. . . . If taken as confirmation that we have a special status, that we are *mamlekhet kohanim ve-goy kadosh*, “a kingdom of priests and a holy people” (Exod. 19:6), fundamentally different from all the other peoples in the world because of a unique relationship with God, then this verse is likely to produce arrogant hubris, a sense of privilege and entitlement, a license to assume that standards observed by other peoples do not always apply to us.

If on the other hand, the verse is taken as an aspiration, a vision and a challenge—a statement of what ideally we are to become rather than what we are—then it is a rebuke for our present shortcomings and a goad to self-improvement.

How do we become “holy” as a people? By carrying out the other instructions in this *parashah*. By ensuring:

- that whatever harvest we take in from our work, some must be reserved for the poor and the stranger (19: 9–10),
- that we conduct our business affairs with scrupulous honesty and integrity (19:11–12, 35),
- that we judge our neighbours with impartiality and fairness (19:15–16),
- that we never take advantage of the weaknesses or disabilities of others (19:14),
- that we show respect and honour for the aged (19:32),
- that we do not take vengeance or harbour a grudge (19:18),
- that we endeavour to love our neighbours as ourselves, that we love even the stranger, the resident alien, the asylum seeker, as ourselves (19:18, 34).

These are the ways in which we may transform ourselves and our people to come closer to the ideal of holiness, the ways in which we may bring our society closer to the vision of cities and countryside “undimmed by human tears.”