

Parashat Kedoshim

Leviticus 19:1–20:27

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This week's commentary was written by Dr. Judith Hauptman, E. Billi Ivry Professor of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture, JTS.

Kedoshim in Context

Chapter 19 of Parashat Kedoshim contains some of the loftiest statements in the entire Torah. Consider, for example, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (verse 18) and "Light up the faces of the old" (verse 32). It is strange that this high-minded set of directives finds itself sandwiched between two chapters that focus on forbidden sexual liaisons: chapter 18 lists the bans and chapter 20 the punishments. The women forbidden to men on the list in chapter 18 include a mother, stepmother, sister, granddaughter, aunt, daughter-in-law, and so on. If we recognize that in a patriarchal society sexual relationships are more likely to be initiated by men than women, the sense of these verses is that men should not impose themselves on female relatives. It is difficult to imagine a scenario in which sex with one's granddaughter would be fully consensual. To this day, we speak in one breath of abortion following rape or incest, implying that both are acts against a woman's will.

Later in the same chapter, we find a ban on giving one's seed to Molekh (verse 21), an act that would be against the child's will. It therefore stands to reason that the very next verse—"do not make a man lie with you as one lies with a woman"—is yet another instance of forced submission (verse 22). It speaks of one man using another for his own sexual pleasure. Such a scenario is reminiscent of the men of Sodom who wanted to have their way with Lot's male visitors (Gen. 19:5). Lot offered the men his daughters instead, which suggests that the rape of a *woman* by a man is less offensive than the rape of a *man* by a man. The same sequence of events appears in Judges 19, where the men of the town seek to rape a male visitor but are given a woman instead. Unlike Genesis 19, no angel intervened to stop this horrific act from taking place (verse 25). We can now understand the use of the word *to'evah*, abomination, in Leviticus 18:22, when referring to sex between men. It is especially abhorrent for a man to force himself sexually on a man, more so than if he forces himself on a woman. To generalize: the acts listed in Leviticus 18 are hateful because many of them, *by their very nature*, involve sex against the partner's will.

Leviticus 19 moves from the mundane to the holy and from the depths to the heights. It presents a theology of concern for others as the verse says, *kedoshim tih'yu kee qadosh anee adonai eloheikhem* (be holy because I, the Lord, am holy; verse 2). Whereas Leviticus 18:7 says don't sleep with parents, Leviticus 19:3 says, revere your parents. The chapter continues: concern yourself with those less fortunate than you who are open to exploitation. Leave the corners of your field for the poor (verse 9). Do not oppress others; pay your workers on time (verse 13). Do not hate and do not take revenge, but rather love your fellow human being as yourself, *v'ahavta l'rei'akha kamokha* (verse 18). Do not lie with someone else's female slave (verse 20). Do not pimp your daughter (verse 29). Honor the elderly and light up their faces (verse 32).

And, finally, do not oppress the foreigner, the *ger*, who lives among you (verse 33); treat him like one of you and love him like yourself, *v'ahavta lo kamokha* (verse 34). In other words, do not take advantage of vulnerable others, as prohibited by Leviticus 18, but rather love and cherish them. That is the grand message of Leviticus 19.

Leviticus 20 returns to the forbidden unions of Leviticus 18 and prescribes punishments for them, one by one. Its tight connection to Leviticus 18 suggests that all three chapters—Leviticus 18, 19, and 20—constitute one continuous unit. It follows that Leviticus 19, the peak chapter of the book, and perhaps of the entire Torah, attains deeper meaning when read against Leviticus 18 and 20, which flank it. Leviticus 19 portrays the pinnacle of human behavior, which means seeing every person as valuable on his or her own. Leviticus 18 and 20 describe the nadir of human behavior, which is when one person uses another for his or her own benefit. To paraphrase Erich Fromm, a person must not say, "The world is created for me alone," but should recognize that others are not intended to be the means for him and her to achieve their ends.

It therefore seems to me that when people ask "How can we sanction sex between men if the Torah forbids it?" the answer is that the Torah bans forced sex of all kinds, but does not forbid consensual homosexual sex. There is thus no Torah basis for discrimination against gay people. But there is a very clear Torah commandment to act lovingly and without prejudice toward all human beings.

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