



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

בס"ד

קדשים תשע"ט
Kedoshim 5779

From Priest to People

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks* for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT KEDOSHIM IN A NUTSHELL

Parshat Kedoshim continues to discuss the laws of holiness, changing focus from the world of the Sanctuary and Priests to the Israelites as a whole, commanding them to be holy. The opening chapter contains the "holiness code" with its

commands to love the neighbour and the stranger, as well as other ritual laws. The second half of the parsha deals with forbidden relationships and prohibited pagan practices.



THE CORE IDEA

Until now the book of Vayikra has been largely about sacrifices, the laws of purity, the Sanctuary, and the priesthood. It has been, in short, about a holy place, holy offerings, and the elite and holy people – Aaron and his descendants – who are the Priests. Suddenly, in chapter 19, the Torah shifts its focus to the whole of the people and the whole of life:

The Lord said to Moses: "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them, 'Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy.'" (Vayikra 19:1-2).

This is the first and only time in the book of Vayikra that the entire people are included in a command concerning holiness. The Sages say that it means that the contents of this chapter were declared by Moses to a formal gathering of the entire nation (*hak'hel*). It is the people as a whole who are commanded to "be holy," not just an elite, such as the Priests. In fact, it is life itself that is to be sanctified. Holiness is to be achieved in the way the nation makes its clothes and plants its fields, in the justice of its law courts, the way workers are paid, and the way business is conducted. The vulnerable – the deaf, the blind, the elderly, and the stranger – are to be protected. The whole of society is to be governed by love, without anger or revenge.

This is a radical idea. It is the democratisation of holiness. Just as in a democracy all people have equal rights, the Torah tells us here all people have and can achieve holiness. All ancient societies had Priests. We have several examples in the Torah of non-Israelite Priests (for example Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, was a Midianite Priest). The Priesthood was not unique to Israel, and in all places it was an elite group. However, here for the first time, we find a code of holiness directed to the people as a whole. This is a radical and new idea the Torah brings to the world – we are *all* called on to be holy.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you think holiness means? How and when can you be holy in your life?
2. If the Priests are not holier than the rest of the people, why are they separated as an "elite"?
3. What do you think the phrase democratisation of holiness means here and why was it such a radical idea?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

One Yom Kippur, a young boy who could not read came to the synagogue of the Ba'al Shem Tov with his father. They were desperately poor and his father could not afford to send the boy to school. He could not even read the siddur or follow with the prayers. But the boy had a deep desire to join the community in their prayers and so accompanied his father to shul anyway. He sat down next to his father and closed his eyes tight, and whispered to Hashem, "I don't know the prayers. All I know is the letters of the Alef-Bet that my father taught me. Please take the letters and turn them into the right words, to say what I feel in my heart."

He then began to sing the Alef-Bet over and over again. His father became embarrassed and began to shush him, but the Ba'al Shem Tov stopped him, and asked him to allow the boy to continue to pray. At the conclusion of the final

service of the day, Ne'ilah, the Ba'al Shem Tov announced to the community that not only were the boy's prayers accepted by the Master of the Universe, but they broke through the gates of heaven, helping the prayers of the rest of the community to enter as well!

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you think the message of this story is? How is it connected to the message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation*?
2. Do you feel you can approach God and talk to Him? Do you think there are more "holy" or scholarly people that find it easier?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

This radical idea, the *democratisation of holiness*, that all people have and can achieve holiness, should come as no surprise to us. The idea, if not the details, had already been hinted at in the Torah. The most explicit instance comes in the prelude to the great covenant-making ceremony at Mount Sinai when God describes the potential of His people to be a "kingdom of Priests and a holy nation" (Shemot 19:5-6), that is, a kingdom *all* of whose members are to be in some sense Priests, and a nation that is, in its entirety, holy.

The first indication is much earlier still, in the first chapter of Bereishit, with its monumental statement, "God created mankind in His own image" (Bereishit 1:27). What is revolutionary in this declaration is not that a human being could be in the image of God. That is precisely how kings of Mesopotamian city states and Pharaohs of Egypt were regarded. They were seen as the representatives, the living images, of the gods. That is how they derived their authority. The Torah's revolution is the statement that not some, but *all*, humans share this dignity. Regardless of class, colour, culture, or creed, we are all in the image and likeness of God.

Thus was born the cluster of ideas that, though they took many millennia to be realised, led to the distinctive culture of the West: the non-negotiable dignity of the human person, the idea of human rights, and eventually, the political and economic expressions of these ideas: liberal democracy on the one hand, and the free market on the other.

The point is not that these ideas were fully formed in the minds of human beings during the period of biblical history. This is clearly not so. The concept of human rights is a product of the seventeenth century. Democracy was not fully implemented until the twentieth. But already at the beginning of Bereishit, the seed was planted.

The concept of equality we find in the Torah specifically and Judaism generally is not an equality of wealth: Judaism is not communism. Nor is it an equality of power: Judaism is not anarchy. It is fundamentally an equality of dignity. We are all equal citizens in the nation whose sovereign is God. Hence the elaborate political and economic structure set out in Shemot, organised around the number seven, the sign of the holy. Every seventh day is free time. Every seventh year, the produce of the field belongs to all, Israelite slaves are to be liberated, and debts released. Every fiftieth year, ancestral land is to return to its original owners. Thus the inequalities that are the inevitable result of freedom are mitigated. The logic of all these provisions is the priestly insight that God, Creator of all, is the ultimate owner of all:

"The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is Mine and you reside in My land as strangers and temporary residents" (Shemot 25:23).

God therefore has the right, not just the power, to set limits to inequality. No one should be robbed of dignity by total poverty, endless servitude, or unrelieved indebtedness.

What is truly remarkable, however, is what happened after the biblical era and the destruction of the Second Temple.

Faced with the loss of the entire infrastructure of the holy, the Temple, its Priests, and sacrifices, Judaism translated the entire system of *avodah*, Divine service, into the everyday life of ordinary Jews. In prayer, every Jew became a Priest offering a sacrifice. In repentance, he or she became a High Priest, atoning for his sins and those of his or her people. Every synagogue, in Israel or elsewhere, became a fragment of the Temple in Jerusalem. Every table became an altar, every act of charity or hospitality, a kind of sacrifice.

Torah study, once the speciality of the Priesthood, became the right and obligation of everyone. Not everyone could wear the official crown of Priesthood, but everyone could wear the crown of Torah. A *mamzer talmid chacham*, a

Torah scholar of illegitimate birth, say the Sages, is greater *than an am haaretz* Kohen Gadol, an ignorant High Priest. Out of the devastating tragedy of the loss of the Temple, the Sages created a religious and social order that came closer to the ideal of the people as “a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation” than had ever previously been realised. But the first clue is to be found much earlier, in the opening of Vayikra 19: “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them, ‘Be holy because I, the Lord, your God, am holy.’”

Holiness belongs to all of us when we turn our lives into the service of God, and society into a home for the Divine Presence.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Judaism represents a highly distinctive approach to the idea of equality, namely that it is best served not by equality of income or wealth, nor even of opportunity. Nor is it sufficient that we each have equal standing before God at times of prayer, and before the law (in cases of dispute). A society must ensure equal dignity – the Hebrew phrase is *kavod habriyot*, “human honour” – to each of its members.

To Heal a Fractured World, p.39

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. This quote could be seen as a critique of political systems that try to ensure equality in other ways, such as socialism, and even liberal democracy. On what basis could these systems be critiqued?
2. How does Judaism try to ensure all members of society have *kavod habriyot* and equal dignity?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What do you think holiness means? How and when can we be holy in our lives?
2. Are the *Kohanim* and *Levi'im* (the tribe of Levi – the Priests) holier than the rest of the people? What about Rabbis and scholars?
3. How is Judaism radical when it comes to the question of who can be holy?
4. Do you think to be equal everyone needs to have equal money and wealth?
5. How does Judaism try to ensure everyone is really equal?



QUESTION TIME

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THE CORE IDEA

1. Holiness means to be separated and elevated. The root of the Hebrew word k-d-s literally means separated. The message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation* is that all people can be holy in their everyday lives, through separating themselves and their actions, elevating them to a higher good, connecting them to the Divine. Our lives can be holy in the way we dress, plant our fields, carry out justice, conduct our business, and the way we protect and care for the weak in our community and society at large. We can also be holy in the way we interact with our friends and family, conduct ourselves in school, and how we behave when we walk down the street or when we play sports.
2. The tribe of Levi (the Priests, including the *Kohanim*) were chosen to serve on behalf of the people in the Temple (today we remember this by calling up *Kohanim* and *Levi'im* first to the Torah). In fact, the original plan was the first-born of every family would be their representative in the Temple service (showing that this role is not intrinsic to the tribe of Levi but in fact available to all Israelites). However, God gave this merit to the Tribe of Levi in reward for their not becoming involved in the sin of the Golden Calf (unlike the rest of the people).
3. Just as the political system we call democracy ensures that all people have equal rights (and votes), the Torah's approach to holiness says that all Jews (and in fact all human beings) have equal potential to become holy and connected to God. This is radical because ancient civilisation (like some societies still today) was hierarchical, believing only the elite classes can be holy and can have an intimate relationship with the Divine.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Despite this little boy being very young, uneducated, and unfamiliar with the prayer service, he was able to stand in front of God and open his soul in communication and love, showing us that all people can have a meaningful relationship with God. The context of the story, the Ba'al Shem Tov's synagogue on the holiest day of the year, emphasises this message. The Ba'al Shem Tov was the founder of Hassidut, and is revered as a holy man who had a deep and powerful relationship with God. However, he also saw the holiness in all people, and in fact this is a core message of Hassidic thought – all Jews are holy and can approach God, not just Rabbis and scholars, Priests and Prophets.
2. The answer to this question should be yes. The message of the *Covenant & Conversation*, and the story, is that every single person, no matter their age or education or experience, can approach and connect to God, and regular Torah study and daily prayers are one important way to practise and strengthen our connection to Him. Also see *Around the Shabbat Table*, answer 2.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Socialism (especially communism as a political system based on the values of socialism) tried to ensure economic equality for all people in society. But as history shows, it was rarely concerned also with ensuring equality of dignity of all people. Much evil and suffering has often resulted from societies based on socialist political thought, when the dignity of citizens were compromised. Even liberal democracy unchecked, while ensuring legal and civic equality, has often failed to ensure dignity and social equality for all of society.
2. Judaism approaches this in both philosophical and practical ways. The message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation* is an example – all people are considered equal when it comes to holiness and standing in the eyes of God. All humans are created in the 'Image of God', and this is the source of the "inalienable rights" they have to dignity in society. However, philosophies and ideas are never enough to protect values in society in a practical way. So Judaism protects this core value in its ethical code on which society must be built – such as the laws of charity and business, as well as other civil and social laws, such as the laws of slander and the protection of the weak in society.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea*, answer 1.
2. See *The Core Idea*, answer 2. While Rabbis (both ancient and contemporary) are in a position to achieve holiness, and perhaps have an advantage from their dedication to Torah scholarship, (and have a responsibility to be holy as the spiritual leaders of the people) there is nothing intrinsically holy about them to begin with. Hence there is no reason why any Jewish person could not achieve the position of spiritual leader – because each and every one of us can achieve holiness. This is what the term "the democratisation of holiness" means.
3. Societies and religions that pre-dated the Torah were hierarchical. There was a ruler on top, surrounded by a royal court, beneath which was an administrative elite, and at the bottom, an illiterate mass seen as a labour force for the economy and military. Hierarchy is also seen in the religions of these societies with the polytheistic belief in many gods, each one more powerful than the previous. Judaism is a political and religious statement against hierarchy (this is the message of the two great migrations in the Torah, away from the ultimate hierarchical and polytheistic societies in ancient times in search of the one true God – when Abraham left Mesopotamia and the Israelites left Egypt.) When Judaism says that everyone can be holy, this is a radical idea that was first introduced to the world with the revelation on Sinai.
4. Equality is not about wealth but about dignity and value in society. See *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, answer 1.
5. See *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, answer 1.