

## RELIGION, MODERNITY AND MORALITY

A commentary on *Parashat Kedoshim*  
By Michael Wegier

Our *Parasha* contains Chapter 19 which is a fascinating collection of commandments covering a range of religious, ethical, commercial, agricultural and sexual matters. Not by chance do modern biblical commentators refer to this part of the book of Leviticus (Chapters 17-26) as the Holiness Code but this term was not used by traditional religious commentators.

The laws address many issues with which contemporary liberals can easily agree. “*You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a labourer shall not remain with you until morning. You shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind.*” (Verses 11-14) Other verses continue setting out a moral framework for interpersonal relations.

So far so good. But *Parashat Kedoshim* does not argue for a moral code independent of G-d or the commandment to sacrifice. Indeed, the 2nd verse reads “*You shall be holy for I, the Lord your G-d, am holy.*” And in verse 5, “*When you sacrifice an offering of well-being to the Lord, sacrifice it so that it may be accepted on your behalf.*”

There are also intriguing laws about the mixing of species. Cattle should not mate with different kinds and clothes should not be made from different materials. Harlotry is bad for the people.

The Chapter goes on to forbid the consumption of blood and to avoid divination, speaking with spirits

and even the cutting of one’s hair in a certain way. And it ends with more moral laws and a reminder that G-d freed the people from Egypt.

Modernity has shown us that the ethical life does not require religious faith and practice. Almost all secular and atheist people live decent lives without a need for G-d. And of course that is also true of religious people. But there are also, clearly, people who claim faith in G-d while behaving unethically if not far worse. Yet that is a straw man with which to beat religion. The genius of our *Parasha* and much of Leviticus is that it presents an archetype of how a profoundly religious life and a moral one can be one and the same. The Torah does not see the distinction between the secular and religious that is so natural for most of us.

*Kedoshim* teaches that the ethical life will be lived by the community of Israel within a framework of ritual and faith in the Lord. I am indebted to Professor Arnold Eisen of Jewish Theological Seminar for articulating this point. It is ritual and community that give the people of Israel a particularist identity with which to live out universal values. And it is the boundaries that are set by our moral, culinary, sexual, legal and economic behaviour, that together with both explicable and sometimes inexplicable laws, make the Jewish people distinct.

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