

*Acharei Mot–Kedoshim*      May 6, 2017

דִּבֶּר אֶל כָּל עֵדֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תְּהִיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

Leviticus 19:2 *Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your G-d, am holy.'*

In the second portion of this week's double portion, *Acharei Mot-Kedoshim*, we find the commandment *V'ahavta Lereiacha kamocho* - "love your neighbor as yourself." Yet as many commentators have asked, can a person (or a people) be commanded to "feel" an emotion such as love?

In a broader context we see that this law is embedded in a list of commandments that would guide the Israelites (and future generations) to behave in ways that would give the *appearance* of love and caring. Refraining from stealing or cheating, avoiding the defrauding or oppression of others, not insulting the deaf, not placing a stumbling block in the way of the blind, nor showing particular favor to the poor or special deference to the rich, judging with fairness, avoiding taking revenge or bearing a grudge are all ways that a just society of people care for and protect one another. An observer of such a society might assume that, indeed, these people "love each other as they love themselves."

Does Modern Israel, created as a Jewish state, exhibit this "love of neighbor," a seminal Jewish value from this Torah passage from the "The Holiness Code?" Israel as a country and people works to embed that in the country's ethos, with its many diverse peoples living side by side. As a nation of immigrants, the ethical value of taking care of one another and of sustaining the broader ideas of the Ten Commandments still holds.

In his address at the AIPAC Policy Conference in 1989, Alan Dershowitz explained, "One does not judge a democracy by the way its soldiers immediately react, young men and women under tremendous provocation. One judges a democracy by the way its courts react, in the dispassionate cool of judicial chambers. And the Israeli Supreme Court and other courts have reacted magnificently. For the first time in Mideast history, there is an independent judiciary willing to listen to grievances of Arabs—that judiciary is called the "Israeli Supreme Court."

At the same time, there has been a proliferation of civil rights organizations created in Israel in the past 50 years. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (established in 1972), the Israel

Religious Action Centre (1987), and The Israel Democracy Institute (1991) are just a few of the dozens of groups that have emerged to fight for and protect the civil rights of Jews, Arabs, Christians, refugees, the disabled, vulnerable women and children, LGBTQ individuals, as well as the Palestinians who live in the West Bank and Gaza.

Clearly, we can see that the ideal of neighborly love commanded in *Kedoshim* is not yet fully realized all the time between and among communities within Israel. Yet, the mechanism of democracy, along with public support for government and NGO civil rights groups, help to ensure that citizens of Israel and neighboring Palestinians have a chance to assert their rights, work toward greater camaraderie, and look toward a future of mutual coexistence.

### **Discussion Questions:**

*Kedoshim* is much more than the plural form of "holy." Rather, *kadosh* connotes: sacred, unique, Divine, complete and separate. What are some elements of Israeli society that set it apart from the rest of the world? Is it easier to maintain our identities as Jews if Israel maintains itself as separate from the non-Jewish world? What does that mean for non-Jews living there?

We know from Israel's Declaration of Independence that the state's founders expressed the hope that "the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel... return to the ways of peace and play their part in the development of the State, with full and equal citizenship and the representation in all its bodies and institutions, provisional or permanent." It took Israel more than two decades to implement that aspiration. Sixty-five years after its founding, the state's improving track record for its Arab minority is significant, with Arabs holding 15% of Israel's parliamentary seats, and Arabs serving on Israel's Supreme Court and in the foreign ministry. Compare Israel's efforts on behalf of minorities to other nations, either within the Middle East or in Europe and North America.

What are some advantages and disadvantages of being set apart? Has the Israel which was founded as a Jewish state and guided by a desire to be an *Am Kadosh*, a Holy Nation, influenced the behavior of other countries of peoples of the world? If so, in what ways? How about examples of Israel sending its expertise abroad to help countries and people under the duress of sudden natural disaster, like the earthquake in Haiti in January 2010 or the civil war in Syria.

### **Additional References:**

<http://www.hamoked.org/links.aspx?pageID=israeli-human-rights>