

## **Leviticus 19:1-18: Holiness Without Going Overboard**

Robert Weintraub, Yom Kippur Mincha, October 8, 2011

I titled my drash today, “Holiness Without Going Overboard.”

Modern Biblical criticism generally regards chapters 17 through 26 of Leviticus, as a separate unit, entitled the “Holiness Code” – with the portion we read today at its heart. It is often compared to the portions containing the Ten Commandments, in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Rabbi Gunther Plaut, a leading figure in modern Reform Judaism, summarized the Holiness Code as ways to be a holy people through the normal day-to-day relations of farming, commerce, family living, and community affairs.

Jacob Milgrom, a Conservative rabbi and Torah scholar, and the late father of Shira Milgrom, rabbi of our neighbor synagogue, Kol Ami, explained that MOST of the code focuses on ways of setting ourselves apart from other peoples and their practices. On the other hand, he asserted, what we read TODAY focuses on ways we can and should – actually must – emulate God.

But even in this small core, we see the contrasting types of mandates that make being a modern Jew so uncomfortable.

As throughout the Torah, there is a mix of religious, cultural and ethical duties. Biblical commentators consistently note that in the ancient world the importance of these duties is often undifferentiated.

The Etz Chaim Chumash, which we use here on Shabbat and other holidays, states that the modern distinction between the “religious” and “secular” is unknown to the Torah – so the commandments within the code – ritual, business ethics, behavior toward the poor and afflicted, family relations, sexual relations – are given to us on an equal plane.

This surely violates our modern sensibilities and sense of rationality.

The question is: how can we organize these precepts in a sensible and rational way that still supports OUR quest for holiness?

This is risky business, given our limited perspective on history and human behavior. It's pretty *chutzpahdik* to "mix and match" the pieces of a code for holiness that has stood the test of time for thousands of years.

Well, I'm far from the first person with *chutzpah* to stand before this congregation, in this role. So, let me suggest – for drash, provocative, and sacrilegious purposes only – a different division of the mandates, based on what we might call 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Jewish American pragmatism. More specifically, let me divide those mandates into two groups – those requiring thought, study, experience and action as an INDIVIDUAL Jew, and those requiring thought, study, experience and action as a Jewish COMMUNITY.

Here's how I place the duties set before us today into this framework.

In the category requiring INDIVIDUAL thought, study, experience and action:

- Don't deal deceitfully
- Don't lie
- Don't exploit
- Don't steal
- Pay on time

These are clear, YOU accept them, YOU work on understanding the shadings of them, YOU decide, and YOU act.

Let's go on.

- Don't pervert the cause of justice by favoring the lowly or the mighty
- Don't gossip
- Don't bear grudges
- Don't take vengeance

Ok, not so clear-cut. But, still, with these, YOU do your best to develop mature, thoughtful practices; and, for the most part, you say, I can handle this. I can be the judge. And throughout my life, with thought, study and experience, I'll get better at it.

Let me make sure you understand my premise at this point. I'm not saying it doesn't help, and it's not desirable, to have input from others around you. I'm just saying that, for the most part, today, we separate these from our efforts as a Jewish community.

As an aside, I'll tell you that I, for one, need help with the "don't gossip" principle. And I once got it from my daughter. She attended a Jewish kindergarten that taught proper Jewish behavior. One day, when I was gossiping about my neighbor, she approached me with a look of consternation and indictment and said, you can't say that, daddy, that's "Russian horah." For those who don't know, that's usually referred to as *la'shon ha'rah*, or *loshen hora*, speaking with an evil tongue about others.

Let's continue.

- Respect, really revere, your mother and father

Come on, all you "baby boomers" out there. You know you're going to make your own judgments on this one. Wasn't our real precept, "come mothers and fathers throughout the land, and don't criticize what you can't understand"?

And, then there are the instructions that we take more figuratively:

- Don't curse the deaf
- Don't put a stumbling block before the blind
- Don't turn towards idols – which many of us see as fighting against the idolization of the material world
- Leave unharvested the corners of your field and don't pick your vineyards completely, and don't pick up whatever falls. Leave it for the poor and stranger. As is Bet Am Shalom's policy, it's up to YOU.
- And finally, even this one, as comprehensive and lofty as it may be, "love your neighbor as yourself" – in another form, Hillel's summation of the teachings of the Torah.

But, almost by definition, "as YOU love YOURSELF," it is for individual interpretation and action, at least for us today. YOU consider it, YOU study, YOU learn from experience, and YOU make the call.

For better or worse, most of us, as modern, American Jews will follow the laws and norms of society, our consciences, our instincts, our consideration of the consequences, our experience, and our learnings – and most of us will continue to learn and develop our positions in regard to these duties, as citizens and as Jews.

I say for better or worse, because there are many Jews who would condemn this position.

My orthodox relatives, my Conservative movement friends, and maybe my more traditional Reconstructionist colleagues, might suggest I am forsaking the Jewish civilization and the structures and institutions that have made us who we are and need to be.

Again, though, I'm not saying it's not desirable for us to discuss and study these important principles as a Jewish community. I'm just saying that it's likely that we don't and won't consider it necessary for us in our quest for holiness as Jews.

So what's left in this heart of the Holiness Code?

In the category requiring COMMUNAL thought, study, experience and action:

- Observe Shabbat
- Observe the protocols for your offerings – that is, for prayer

Permit me, for the sake of time, as well as retaining fodder for future drashes, to leave these “religious” injunctions unexamined. I'll simply contend that, if you're expecting to derive holiness from Shabbat and prayer individually, it won't work.

So, now, we're down to just two remaining principles that require the community, the “sacred community,” if you will:

- First: *lo ta'amod al dam rayecha* – literally, Do not stand over, near or by your neighbor's blood; the most commonly accepted interpretation being “don't stand by inactively when someone's life is in danger”

- And second, what immediately follows and is very much connected: Make sure to speak out to your neighbor in reproof of any wrongful act

Unless, as Jonah, we're directly conversing with God, these are the ethical principles that take a community to properly consider and enact with holiness.

So, why do I argue that these two principles stand apart for the modern Jew, as needing COMMUNAL thought, study, experience and action? Three reasons:

- One, because many of us won't act if we don't have the community to prod us – to ask us, to challenge us, to encourage us, maybe even to make us uncomfortable.
- Two, because, while it's nice to ponder how a butterfly flapping its wings changes the world, little happens without a "great wind," like the *ruach ge'dolah* that hit the ship on which Jonah traveled to avoid his responsibility.
- And three, because history has shown us that individuals too often fall into the traps of arrogance and self-righteousness unless they are regulated by a thoughtful community; a community that makes sure the *ruach ge'dolah* doesn't become a *ruach...chareesheet*, a vehement wind – like the one that afflicted Jonah – and that can bring unintended and destructive consequences.

In sum: As Jews, our holiness depends upon our HUMBLY and EFFICACIOUSLY speaking out and not standing idly by – and we can't do so without our community.

The sad irony, for me, on this Yom Kippur day, is that this past year, I've thought a lot, studied a lot, and acted little. I am a news junkie and an avid learner. But, when it comes down to it, I mostly talk a good game. My family will tell you that one of my favorite pastimes during a storm is to take a good nap.

And my conscience constantly talks to me. So, Robert, "Rise up, go to Ninevah, (or wherever people are in danger) and proclaim against it that its evil has come up to me."

And, Robert rises to FLEE...

And my community calls out and says: “O, please, let us not perish for the life of this one man, and do not hold against us the BLOOD of someone innocent.”

Ok. So, on Yom Kippur, I vow to change. And I think, and I study, and I talk, AND I act. And what happens, at least in my mind, is what was going to happen anyway: “...Was this not the very thing I thought would happen while I still was standing on my native land?” It’s fate. It’s the inevitable flow of history.

And, by the way, while I was away on your social action project, Irene took down one of my big, shade trees!

But, seriously, I don’t have any answer. We all know what we should do, but, year after year, many of us don’t act, at least not enough. And many of us are overwhelmed by what we see around us, and its apparent inevitability. I can only suggest today that our Torah, and Haftarah, portions try to teach us how to be holy. And, perhaps, for a modern Jew, their most important teaching is that holiness comes from speaking out and not standing idly by our neighbor’s blood; AND, that the only way it can work is if we think, study, experience and act together.