

TIMELESS TORAH

ACHAREI-KEDOSHIM: SACRED BOUNDARIES - THE PATHWAY TO RESPECT

Privileged Restrictions

The double parshah of Acharei Mot-Kedoshim contains a large number of laws governing the sanctity of the Beit HaMikdash precinct, Eretz Yisrael in general and the sphere of personal relationships. Understood properly, however, these seemingly restrictive laws are actually remarkably liberating.

The very first words act as an introduction to this theme. Describing the one occasion in the year that the Kohen Gadol was allowed to enter the inner sanctum of the Beit HaMikdash, the Holy of Holies, the Torah references the two sons of Aharon who perished when bringing an unlawful offering (as described in Parshat Shemini). This, explains Rashi, is a veiled allusion to the care that must be taken to preserve the sanctity of the Holy of Holies. Although the Kohen Gadol may enter on this particular occasion, he must ensure that even this small familiarity should not engender disrespect. Even the greatest of people must be sensitive to the boundaries of sacred space and sacred moments in time.

Another passage from the parshah illustrates how boundaries allow one who stands on a higher level to maintain a sense of humility and respect for their surroundings. The verses (17:3-4) state that an animal that has been designated for sacrificial purposes may not be slaughtered outside of the Beit HaMikdash. In itself, this prohibition is understandable; a sacrifice may be offered only in the specific place designated for that purpose. What is noteworthy, however, is that the Torah couches this prohibition in the strongest of terms, comparing it even to '*dam shafach* – bloodshed'.

In an insightful observation, Rabbeinu Bechaye (Spain, d.1340) explains that this

passage is meant to counterbalance the fact that human beings are permitted to slaughter and consume animals for food. In fact, it was only after the Flood that this privilege was given to mankind (See *Bereishit* 1:29 and 9:3), but like any privilege, it comes with certain risks. How do we, as people, retain our sense of respect towards the natural world when we are given ultimate mastery over Creation? This is the depth of meaning behind this passage in the Torah. Absent the boundaries that we are commanded to protect, slaughtering animals is indeed in a certain way akin to bloodshed. Our license to exercise control over the rest of the natural world must be tempered with respect for the specific restrictions regarding how this may be carried out.

Land of Growth

A large portion of the parshah deals with the laws of *arayot*, forbidden relationships. Interestingly, the Torah here stresses a particular connection between these laws and Eretz Yisrael, stating that the land itself will not tolerate transgression of these laws: '*Vataki ha'aretz et yosheveha* – The land will spew out [those who ignore the laws]' (18:29). With these words, as repeated elsewhere in the Torah, the verses are expressing that, although we may not notice it, the physical Land of Israel is imbued with holiness and is a portal for us to access spirituality. Rabbi Shimon Schwab (New York, d.1995) compares this to the human brain. Just as a layman, without any particular medical proficiency, will see nothing in the brain but grey mass, we accept the fact that the brain is actually the seat of human intellect. So too, while a person might not notice particularly special about Eretz Yisrael, the Torah emphasises both its significance and spiritual sensitivity.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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Two other lands that are mentioned in this context are the lands of Egypt and Canaan: Do not act as the inhabitants of those lands act, exhorts the Torah (18:3). On a simple level, this is a warning to the Jewish people to preserve their own identity and not to become negatively influenced by the nations with whom they have shared or will share a dwelling place. In a homiletic interpretation, however, the Kli Yakar (d.1619) takes this as both a criticism as well as a future expectation of the Jewish people. 'You have dwelled in the land of Egypt', the Torah says, meaning that you enjoyed the immoral lifestyle of the Egyptians. And even now that you are traveling to Eretz Canaan, the Torah continues, '*Ani mevi etchem shamah* – I am bringing you there'; you are not going there yourself, but I must constantly persuade you and encourage you to go there.

Understood this way, these verses stress the sensitivity that must be developed towards the Holy Land. The challenge laid at the feet of the Jewish people on their journey towards it was to embrace its unique spirituality willingly.

Unified System

Three verses in this double parshah (18:4-5, 19:37) seem to convey the same identical idea: to observe carefully all of Hashem's statutes and judgements (*chukim* and *mishpatim*). Indeed, of the numerous mitzvot mentioned in Acharei Mot and Kedoshim, some of them are *mishpatim*, meaning mitzvot that are based on an understandable social or moral logic, while others are *chukim*, mitzvot such as *shaatnez* or *kashrut*, mitzvot such as *shaatnez* or *kashrut*, which are not inherently obvious. In these verses, the Torah instructs us to be meticulous in our observance of all of them.

Elaborating on this idea, Rav Soloveitchik (d.1993) discusses the specific connection between these two types of mitzvot. As an analogy, he explains, there are two logical

principles why we might trust another person: the principle of deduction and the principle of induction. The former means that since we are aware that people are made in God's image, and that God is inherently good and merciful, we can deduce that a person too has an intrinsic greatness. In the latter principle, we make an empirical observation; we observe other people doing good things and behaving in a trustworthy way, and it is logical to assume that this will continue. The same applies to the Torah. If we know and observe that God is good and just, we can deduce that the same applies to the Torah and the mitzvot that He gave us. But we can also make an empirical observation about the mitzvot. If we see that many of them are logical and ethical - the *mishpatim* that have formed the basis of so many great civilisations - we can assume that the *chukim* are also noble principles.

This is a crucial lesson when approaching the mitzvot. As powerfully illustrated in Fyodor Dostoevsky's 'Crime and Punishment' (first published in 1866), the frailty of human reasoning means that we are in constant state of self-deception. In the novel, a good, honest, former law student ends up murdering an unscrupulous pawnbroker, convincing himself that a cause for the greater good would be served by her death. Afterwards, he is consumed by guilt, paranoia and disgust at the awful deed he has done. One message from this story is that without developing a deep respect for the Divine boundaries that the Torah gives us, we are liable to persuade ourselves of the most absurd untruths. But when we accept that the Torah is a single unified system, we can trust that just as the *mishpatim* guide us towards a moral and ethical existence, so do all of the principles of the Torah.

NEXT WEEK: EMOR - The Contrast Between Role & Responsibility