

Shabbat Parashat Aharei Mot-K'doshim
Setting the Example for the World

There is a great deal of debate both in the traditional Jewish literature and in the modern period about the meaning of the Jewish people being told that it is and should be an “*or la’goyim*/light unto the nations.” Some commentators believe that it is a statement describing the Children of Israel as “better” than all the other nations of the world, while yet others – perhaps recognizing the risk of making such a statement – claimed instead that God was commanding the people to hold themselves to a higher standard and to set an example of virtuosity that the rest of the world could follow. In the end, the debate continues to rage on. However, given the subject matter of this week’s double *parasha*, it is a very relevant topic because God singles out the Israelites by telling them that they are to be “holy because I, the Lord your God am holy.”

What it means to be holy is also an amorphous idea. There are several definitions of the word holy, but in the biblical context, it most often means “different” or “separate.” When these two *parashiyot* are read together, it is clear that this is the meaning intended because God also makes the specific command that the Israelites “not copy the practices of the land of Egypt from whence they came or of the Land of Canaan to where they were going.” God wants a new and different kind of nation, with particular characteristics, ritual practices, and ways of life that are based on faith, compassion, and respect for God and all human beings.

Beginning with chapter 18 of *Sefer VaYikra*/the Book of Leviticus and going all the way through chapter 20, the Israelites are given a variety of particular instructions in order to make God’s command a reality. Many of them are directly related to or are expanded forms of the Ten Commandments, which, like this week’s directives, can be divided into the categories of those dealing with the relationship between humans and God and those dealing with the relationship between human beings. Here are just a few examples:

- Observe Shabbat
- Do not take the name of God in vain
- Fruits of the tree first are committed to God, then can be consumed by the grower
- Do not make or worship idols
- Do not dedicate your children to the foreign god Molekh
- Honor your parents
- Do not steal
- Leave specific parts of your ripened crop for the poor
- Do not lie or commit fraud
- Do not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind
- Incest is forbidden
- Stand up in the presence of the elderly and the wise

There are many others, but it is easy to see from this group of examples that God is establishing a nation that will set a standard and an example for goodness, loyalty, and ethical behavior for the entire world to see and emulate. This is the true meaning of our holiness. We are different. We are meant to be separate. We are not better. We have “only” been charged with a holy responsibility. May we all live up to it.

Take an opportunity this Shabbat to discuss and determine how we can all begin to do a better job of living up to God’s standards and setting the example that our world so desperately needs.

Shabbat Shalom!