

Kedoshim, Richard Wolfe, 2017

Though I am not sure, I think this might be a first for Kol Nefesh, that one member has written the article for Reflections and the spouse has given the drosh. Whether it is or not I quite like the co-incidence. Though I am glad that Georgia chose a totally different topic to mine, it is not always easy being married to an academic.

The opening of Kedoshim is:-

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them, You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.

אֲנִי דִבַּרְתִּי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר
בְּדִבְרֵךְ אֶל־כָּל־עֵדֻת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תְּהִיּוּ כִּי
קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

This is the only time when God speaks to Moses that he uses the words,

בְּדִבְרֵךְ אֶל־כָּל־עֵדֻת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל

i.e. Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel

At all other times the words used by God to Moses are:-

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Speak to the children of Israel. i.e. this time, in this Parsha, it is to 'the congregation'.

The question is 'why?' Why to 'the whole congregation of the children of Israel' and not just 'to the children of Israel'. Why add the word 'congregation'?

According to tradition, according to Rashi, normally God instructed Moses, Moses then instructed Aaron, then separately Aaron's sons, then the elders and then the people of Israel.

The clue as to why it is different this time lies in the last part:

אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תְּהִיּוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.

And then following this there is a string of noble commands, appealing to Jews to revere one's parents, to keep the Shabbat, not make idols, show kindness to the weak, respect the aged, leave untilled the edges of one's fields, not steal, swear falsely, to not place a stumbling block before the blind, not partake of blood, and many others, culminating in the golden rule "Love your neighbour as yourself". Rabbi Akiva calls this culmination of this passage, the Klal gadol, the great principle of the Torah.

But this still begs the question, why should Moses speak this one time to the entire

congregation and why would it not be taught to each group, according to their capacity and intelligence?

One of the principle answers is that this underlying demand of Jews to be holy has to be taught without distinction, irrespective of whether this demand is to priesthood, to class etc. This highest and noblest of ideals, to be holy, can be demanded of and can be attained by all, they are not for a select few; they should not apply to a selection, whatever the selection may be. This demand applies to all and by speaking to the 'entire congregation' without distinction at one session then this universality is fully emphasised.

This leads to what is meant by kadosh, by being holy and the word holiness.

According to Plaut, holy is used and understood in 6 main ways:-

1. To divinity, to God
2. To places, the holy of holies being Kodesh Kadoshim
3. Spiritual. When God says to us, you shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy, it is an invitation to us to imitate God.
And when we fail, as the sages remind us; this causes our destruction, the destruction of the temples.
4. Holiness is the fundamental link between thought and action, between ethics and the practice of religion.
5. The call to holiness is the call to justice, to the humane and sensitive treatment of others. Whether to the aged, the handicapped, the prompt payment of the labourer, the treatment of the stranger and also with our motives, not to be vengeful, to bear grudges. These are not just decrees; we follow them to elevate our personal and family life.
6. Holiness applies to the entire community of Israel, to the land of Israel and whatever the political situation, we expect it to be the way to behave as a community and how we expect the state of Israel to behave.
As an aside when I asked a non-Jewish friend of mine, a pro-Palestinian, someone who is against the state of Israel, why she should apply such different standards to Israel compared to any other regressive (according to her) country, her response was that we fail because we set ourselves up to be holy. This idea of a Jewish holiness has permeated beyond our walls.

Which then brings us back to the climax of the parsha and in particular the summation of the whole chapter, which leads to the Golden Rule. That is, the aim to be holy and the commands to follow all the commandments in the chapter can be encompassed in the few words "Love your neighbour as yourself". Hillel, of the one foot fame, could sum up the whole Torah by rephrasing the words as "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow". Rabbi Akiva, as I said before, called it the great principle of the Torah.

It is the ultimate message of the Torah.

No wonder Moses had to say this to whole congregation, we are all united to be bound by this instruction.

