

Kedoshim, May 2022

Let's look at the opening verses of our parashah:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר.
דַּבֵּר אֶל-כָּל-עַדַת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם--קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ: כִּי קְדוֹשׁ, אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

1 And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying:

2 Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them: Ye shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy.

The theme is repeated throughout the parashah, through to almost the closing verses:

כֹּה וְהִבְדַּלְתֶּם בֵּין-הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּהוֹרָה, לְטֹמֵאָה, וּבֵין-הָעוֹף הַטָּמֵא, לְטָהוֹר; וְלֹא-תִשְׁקְצוּ אֶת-נַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם בַּבְּהֵמָה וּבָעוֹף, וּבְכֹל אֲשֶׁר תִּרְמַשׁ הָאֲדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר-הִבְדַּלְתִּי לָכֶם, לְטֹמֵא.
כּו וְהִייתֶם לִי קְדוֹשִׁים, כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה; וְאִבְדַּל אֶתְכֶם מִן-הָעַמִּים, לְהִיּוֹת לִי.

25 Ye shall therefore separate between the clean beast and the unclean, and between the unclean fowl and the clean; and ye shall not make your souls detestable by beast, or by fowl, or by any thing wherewith the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean.

26 And ye shall be holy unto Me; for I the LORD am holy, and have set you apart from the peoples, that ye should be Mine.

In the middle is a series of precepts, many of them alternative versions of precepts we've seen elsewhere in the Torah, notably the Ten Commandments. Moreover, the precepts are both ritual and ethical. We get rules that are purely to do with the social or interpersonal: revere your mother and father, and save the edges of your harvests for the poor, and pay your workers on time, and don't put a stumbling block before the blind, and even love your fellow as yourself. We get rules that have to do with basic social identity and cohesion: keep Shabbat, don't worship idols. And we get rules that seem to have little practical or interpersonal meaning, like when it's no longer okay to eat certain sacrifices, and distinguishing between foods we can eat and foods we can't eat, and rules about forbidden mixtures (interspecies mating, and sowing two kinds of seed in the same field, and wearing different kinds of materials together), and so on. And all of this we're enjoined to do so that we will be holy.

What is this holiness, this *kedushah*? Nowhere is it defined. It seems to be simply the main attribute of God, and therefore undefinable. That is, holiness is what differentiates God from man. Yet at the same time, man is enjoined to be holy – to be like God! This is kind of astonishing.

But even more astonishing is that these rules and injunctions are given to the whole people, *kal-adat b'nai Yisrael* – the entire congregation of the children of Israel.

Today's sedra falls within what scholars call the Holiness code, or to its friends – H. This is a priestly text, sitting in the middle of the book of Vayikra, which is normally attributed to the author or school known as P. Yet it couldn't be more different from the chapters that precede and follow it. Think, for instance, of the descriptions of the Tabernacle, with its trappings of gold and silver and lapis lazuli and fine linen and expensive crimson dyes. Or consider the laws of worship. In the world view of P, people don't pray to God directly. God forbid! If you want to ask something of God, or give thanks to God, or make things good with God after sinning – you have to go through the priests. If you want to know whether you're in a fit state to do those things (i.e., ritually pure), you have to go through the priests. The priests are the guys at the top of the power structure. As I wrote in a Reflections piece long ago, the priests are the ones on the dais looking down, the ones with the scribes and servants following them around, the ones making the decisions about what to do with other people's money. They're the ones deciding who's in and who's out.

The Holiness Code turns all this upside-down. Or rather, it offers a corrective, back to the more egalitarian ethos of the other parts of the Bible. To offer the quintessential example: “All the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19: 5-6) [attributed to the E text]. Or the concept of man being created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, as we discussed during the Ten Day programme a few years ago.

What's perhaps most interesting is that both of these different worldviews were included in the sacred texts that have come down to us. The texts that comprise the Torah are in a way paradoxical. On the one hand we have this fixation on categories, and keeping different kinds of things separate – seen in kashrut, and the laws of kilayim (forbidden or unnatural mixtures), with the ultimate expression at the end of our sedra: that through our behaviour, and our pursuit of holiness, we must separate ourselves from the nations. This fixation on categories points to an underlying anxiety about order and chaos. Yet the texts in which these rules and strictures have come down to us are themselves chaotic! This paradox is frustrating. But it is also reassuring in a way, because it tells us that our messy, egalitarian way of doing Judaism is rooted in our own tradition – even in the places where it seems most to be lacking.