

TORAHSCOPE:
Acharei Mot-Kedoshim
(After the death-Holy Ones)

by Mark Huey posted 01 May, 2009 www.outreachisrael.net

Leviticus 16:1-18:30; 19:1-20:27
Amos 9:7-15

“Holiness and the Golden Rule”

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy’” (Leviticus 19:1-2).

“Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine” (Leviticus 20:26).

This week we get to examine a double Torah portion, *Acharei Mot* and *Kedoshim*. After the death of Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, the text details the requirements for the Day of Atonement that are performed annually by the high priest of Israel. Reflecting on this commandment some six months before or after its yearly remembrance is a reminder to us of the atonement we need for our sins of commission or omission. But rather than go into an exhaustive study on this topic, I would instead like us to focus upon the holiness that God’s people are to have evident in their lives.

The overriding premise of *Kedoshim* is the admonition “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). We see a list of “do’s and don’ts” that promote this requirement for God’s people. From simple ways to on how handle the harvest, properly manage labor, and Israel’s foreign relations, to restrictions about the occult and deviant sexual activity, the wide variety of instructions are all designed to sanctify a people for the pleasure of the Lord.

As we meditate on each of these commandments, a sense of protection from the wickedness of the world should hopefully come to mind. Even though the thought of participating in many of these activities is often never considered by us, the sad reality is that these depraved activities do occur in many civilizations. Lamentably, even in the Judeo-Christian culture of America, the laxity of moral codes and basic human ethics is fostering a proliferation of many of these formerly illegal actions. One could readily conclude from observing the society that surrounds us that we are seeing some of the same things that Paul warned Timothy about:

“But realize this, **that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these**” (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

When you take a look at this list of how humans will behave in the Last Days, you can see some parallels between these gross sins and the instructions Moses gives in this week’s Torah portion. But rather than focus on all of the negative aspects of this week’s reading, I would like to focus on the small section of text that focuses on the actions among the people, brethren, and neighbors of Israel. The positive commandments about how we should treat our neighbors is something that all need to take serious note of as Believers, as the distinction of our walk with Yeshua the Messiah should testify that we are indeed living out the just requirements of the Torah in our lives:

“You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, **but you are to judge your neighbor fairly. You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the LORD. You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD**” (Leviticus 19:15-18).

The concept of how we should properly treat our neighbors, or even our fellow brothers and sisters in the faith, is something that is sorely needed in the emerging Messianic movement. Regrettably, it has been my experience that many who profess to be pursuing a “Torah observant” lifestyle do not adhere to the basic ethical commandments of how we relate to our neighbors. This is very troubling, because unlike some of the more obscure commandments buried in the Torah, with little or no reference in the Apostolic Scriptures, the decrees for us to treat others fairly and love our fellow man is something that should be second nature to us. These admonitions are replete throughout the New Testament. When Yeshua was asked what the greatest commandment was, He responded with a partial quote from Leviticus 19. This is included in each one of the Synoptic Gospels¹:

“And one of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, ‘What commandment is the foremost of all?’ Yeshua answered, ‘The foremost is, “HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.” The second is this, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF” [Leviticus 19:18]. There is no other commandment greater than these.’ And the scribe said to Him, ‘Right, Teacher, You have truly stated that HE IS ONE, AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE BESIDES HIM; AND TO LOVE HIM WITH ALL THE HEART AND WITH ALL THE UNDERSTANDING AND WITH ALL THE STRENGTH, AND TO LOVE ONE’S NEIGHBOR AS HIMSELF, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.’ And when Yeshua saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ And after that, no one would venture to ask Him any more questions” (Mark 12:29-34).

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And He said to him, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF’ [Leviticus 19:18]. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40).

“And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ And He said to him, ‘What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?’ And he answered and said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF’ [Leviticus 19:18]. And He said to him, ‘You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live’” (Luke 10:25-27).

If you look at these three separate passages, you will detect that the two questions had three similar but not identical answers as detailed by the different authors. Regardless of the specific formulation, the greatest commandment was considered to be one’s love of God, and the second greatest commandment is to be a person’s love for his or her neighbors. It is commonly observed that if you love a God who cannot be seen, then you should certainly love your neighbors *who can be seen*. You have the opportunity every day to visibly display love for your neighbors or brethren by the actions that you take toward them. Whether these actions are positive or negative is entirely up to you.

Loving Our Neighbors

As you dig deeper into this Torah portion, you will detect that Leviticus 19:15-18 has a more explicit way of telling us how to love our neighbors. We are commanded to judge fairly. We should not fall into the trap of believing that our neighbors are beyond judging, because life being what it is, there will inevitably be times when we are called upon to judge circumstances. Of course, when we are in those predicaments, the admonition is very clear to judge fairly and equitably:

¹ Note that I have quoted Mark’s Gospel first, as most scholars are agreed that Mark was written first, and then Matthew and Luke adapted Mark’s material for the composition of their own Gospels.

“You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly” (Leviticus 19:15).

The Prophet Zechariah reemphasizes this premise, telling us that impartiality is critical for implementing proper justice:

“These are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates. Also let none of you devise evil in your heart against another, and do not love perjury; for all these are what I hate,’ declares the LORD” (Zechariah 8:16-17).

It is clear that if you judge with evil in your heart, that you will be opposing the Holy One of Israel. You will have exposed yourself as one who does not love the Father and his neighbor as himself.

The second principle that this portion declares relates to the chronic problem of *lashon hara* or the evil tongue in the camp of Israel. In Leviticus 19:16, the offender is referred to as a “slanderer” or “gossipmonger” (ATS):

“You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:16).

There is nothing more damaging to a person, short of physical harm, than the wickedness of defaming someone by speaking falsehoods. Sadly, this is one of the most prevalent sins among God’s people today. The Jewish Rabbis know the damage that an evil tongue can bring to the community, and consequently the *siddur* includes a prayer to guard against this and other similar acts:

“May it be Your will, HASHEM, my God, and the God of my forefathers, that You rescue me today and every day from brazen men and from brazeness, from an evil man, an evil inclination, or evil companion, an evil neighbor, and evil mishap, an evil eye, **evil speech**, informers, false witnesses, the hatred of others, libel, unnatural death, harmful illnesses, unfavorable occurrences, the destructive spiritual impediment, a harsh trial and a harsh opponent—whether he is a member of the covenant or whether he is not a member of the covenant—and from the judgment of Gehinnom.”²

The Talmud makes some very poignant remarks about the effect of the tongue on the community of Israel:

“It was taught: R. Eleazar b. Perata said, Come and see how great the power of an evil tongue is! Whence do we know [its power]? From the spies: for if it happens thus to those who bring up an evil report against wood and stones, how much more will it happen to him who brings up an evil report against his neighbour! But whence [follows] that? Perhaps it is as explained by R. Hanina b. Papa; for R. Hanina b. Papa said: A stark thing did the spies say in that hour, as it is written: ‘For they are stronger than we’. Do not read: ‘than we’ but ‘than He’: as it were, even the Master of the house cannot remove his utensils from here! Rather, said Rabbah in the name of Resh Lakish: Scripture said, even those men that did bring up an evil report against the land, died by the plague against the Lord, i.e., [they died just] because of the evil report which they had brought up” (b.*Arachin* 15a).

Among some Rabbis, the admonitions about avoiding slander are coupled with the command to “not stand aside while your fellow’s blood is shed” (Leviticus 19:16, ATS). With this being the case, how should we react when we hear our neighbor’s name or character being slandered—*meaning murdered*? Should we not stand up and prevent character assassination? Sadly, the Body of the Messiah largely does not know or employ these commands. We would all benefit greatly if we simply came to our brother’s or sister’s defense.

Next, we are commanded not to hate our neighbors in our hearts:

“You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him” (Leviticus 19:17).

² Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur: Nusach Sefard* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1985), 23.

Many Believers talk a great deal about the “intentions of the heart.” Here in the Torah, the Lord makes sure that the issues about what is going on in one’s heart are amplified. He states that we are not supposed to hate our fellow countryman. Some may assume that this pertains only to acts of hatred, but by telling us “Do not hate your brother in your heart” (NIV), any confusion is immediately stopped. The teachings of the Apostles mention the sin of one’s heart many, many times. In fact, John equates it to a battle of light and darkness in the human soul:

“The one who says he is in the light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes” (1 John 2:9-11).

If a person has any hate for a brother or sister, he or she needs to check the darkness that may be present in the heart. We should not have any malice toward someone, but the reality is that disagreements do occur in human relations. The Torah gives us a very solemn warning about reproving our neighbors without incurring sin. The Apostle Paul further amplifies our understanding of how to lovingly rebuke those in the faith:

“Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning. I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Messiah Yeshua and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality. Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thus share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin” (1 Timothy 5:19-22).

Here, Paul gives Timothy instruction about how to properly handle a problem with an elder in the assembly. The key is to do so soberly and without falling into sin. Too often, people level charges against other people for the slightest provocation. In this account, as should be practiced with others, the necessity for multiple witnesses to a charge should be obtained. The sin of a spirit of partiality is sternly warned against. Obviously, if you harbor hatred in your heart, then you will not be able to be impartial.

Finally, Leviticus 19:18 tells us that we are to “love your neighbor as yourself.” It is very important that the concept of loving is coupled with the prohibition against taking vengeance. The Apostle Paul reiterates this, instructing the Romans to let God discipline those who do them wrong:

“Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,’ says the Lord. ‘BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:17-21).

Paul links verses from this portion from teachings that Yeshua Himself made, as well as a well-known proverb:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44).

“If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you” (Proverbs 25:21-22).

The Final Measure

When we consider the referenced verses in this week’s Torah selection, we lay the foundation for one of the most important commandments in the Bible. Many refer to this as the “Golden Rule, derived from Yeshua’s words “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12, NRSV). Remember that after loving our Heavenly Father, we are

supposed to love our neighbors. As you meditate upon this word, you might ask yourself just how well you are loving your neighbor.

If you are married, you might start by considering your spouse as your closest neighbor. Are you looking out for his or her needs? Are you putting his or her needs ahead of yours? Are you seeking ways to serve him or her? Are you coming to the defense of him or her when your spouse is being wronged? This list could go on and on. But when considering this most crucial of human relationships, you must exercise love by putting your spouse's needs ahead of your own.

After going through this exercise, you might want to consider contemplating how you love your other neighbors. This can range from those in your fellowship or those in your neighborhood that you interact with on a daily basis.

Finally, allow me to give you an important thought to meditate upon. **Imagine that the Golden Rule is a measuring rod that determines your degree of holiness.** If you are honest with yourself, hopefully you will conclude you are probably lacking some holiness. After all, when analyzing our human interactions with other "neighbors," just about all of us can recall times when we were impartial in judgment. What about times that we said something that could be considered slanderous? What about the times we hated someone in our hearts because of something done to us? Is it possible we said or did something to take vengeance? Is it possible that we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves?

I hope that you see the picture. If you take the time to perform some personal introspection you might conclude that this is a very convicting exercise. Obedience to the second greatest commandment may be more theory than it is reality in your life. But this is why the faithful Torah student can be blessed. Every year we have the opportunity to let the Spirit of God instruct us about loving our neighbor!

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