

## February 19

It's About Us not About Me

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

“You shall be Holy because I the Lord your God am Holy” is how this passage begins. Leviticus, chapter 19, is one of the great chapters in all of the first five books of the Bible. It is one of the most quoted and most often read chapters in American Reform Judaism. It is their main reading for the celebration of Yom Kippur, one of their holiest days. To put it into perspective, we need to think about Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth. We hear it read every year and it is preached on frequently so we know it. This is what this chapter is like to those of the Jewish faith. Yet we Christians are often unaware of what it says or we think, “Is it really important to me?” Yet, the message of “You shall be Holy because I the Lord your God am Holy” is mirrored in the teachings of Jesus. Remember when he says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”? We find that as part of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:43. So we are to be Holy or to be perfect. What does that mean?

Too often one of the failings of faith is that we are told to be something but never given the tools to achieve that goal. We feel a bit clueless as to what this means in any practical sense. What does it mean after all to be a light on the hill, or to hunger and thirst after righteousness, to mention just two from that same Sermon on the Mount? Leviticus 19 does not just tell you to be Holy but we are then given detailed and precise actions to help us achieve that goal. Each of them ends, “I am the Lord” with the implication being this is part of how our Holy Lord looks at people and we should do the same.

Chapter 19 is divided into three main sections. Verses 3-8 deal with two fundamental duties of life; to honor parents and to reverence God. Verses 9-18, which I read today, explores holiness in neighborliness. We will explore them in more detail in a moment. The last segment examines holiness further through a wide range of life experiences, from prohibitions that we would consider silly, such as a ban on tattooing or wearing a garment made with two different fabrics, to serious actions that concern

important topics like honesty in trading, and caring for the immigrant, to mention a few. Leviticus 19 is not shy on specific examples of what it means to live a Holy life. We are to do all these things and more because “I am the Lord your God.”

In brief: 9-18, explores what it means to achieve holiness in neighborliness. There are specific rules of behavior in regards to the poor. Among these are specific guidelines related to gleaning. We are reminded about the importance of telling the truth and there are admonitions that you shall not steal, lie or deal falsely. If you are an employer, in relationship to employees, you are told that you shall not keep their wages. Also holiness towards the helpless means you are not to scorn the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind. We are also reminded of the need to be impartial and not render an unjust judgment, and respect our neighbor, with reminders that you shall not hate your neighbor or take vengeance but love them. All of these end by saying you do these because “I am the Lord.” A list like this can be overwhelming in scope and it is easy to think they don’t really apply to me because I don’t hire anyone or own a field. Let us step back from the precise examples to see what they are sharing with us as to what it means to be a person of faith.

Holiness of life, when you look at these particulars from Leviticus, makes it plain that it’s not about me it’s about us. None of these reminders are sharing what God will do for us, but instead what we are to do for others because we follow a loving God. When you think about it, it makes sense. Inward focused actions lead to selfishness. Outward focused living means we get to bless others in God’s name. And if you think, “What about me or what do I get out of it?” recall that God is asking others to treat you with kindness, and honesty and all the rest. God blesses us through the actions of others. Holiness of living comes about when all are doing their best to make the community a better place. Holiness is transformational for the person but more importantly for the community. So our first challenge is always to look outward in our faith and ask for the strength, and courage, and love of God to be a blessing for others. When we do this we will find that in the giving we are blessed.

Now that we clearly understand that it is not about us, we need to see that we are striving to be holy when others are taken care of. The ripple effects of our caring are

often hidden from us but have profound potential for society. I think about these gleaning rules. They were a sensible way of trying to help the poor. To not harvest to the edge of your fields or strip your vineyards bare was a reasonable accommodation. Although this was a purely practical way of living faith and taking care of a need, look at what flowed from this action. A few centuries later a young widow relies on this rule of gleaning to provide for her mother-in-law and herself. Through her gleaning activities she finds a husband and the baby born is the grandfather of Israel's greatest king. The woman was Ruth. God used this call to holiness to transform a nation. So even to this day when we are challenged to take care of those in need, remember it is not just the right thing to do, it is a way for God's transformative actions to be at work. We never know the ripples to what we are doing.

A second thing all these rules seem to share is that Holiness happens when we are respectful and honest. This is such a no-brainer when we think about creating community, yet respect is often lacking and truth sometimes seems to be flexible and changeable. So what are some of the specifics, as far as Leviticus is concerned? We are not to steal, lie, swear, put down those with disabilities, and not hate your family or your neighbor. Most of us, if we are honest and do a little self-introspection, realize that we sometimes fudge in some of these areas. We let out a naughty word when we are upset, we laugh at an inappropriate joke, or we feel grumpy towards a family member or neighbor. But I believe beyond the momentary reflexive actions that all of us can be guilty of falling into, this is talking about creating in our lives a climate where all are respected, all are valued. This is done because then we also know that we are challenging others to value and respect us.

Jenny and I were just at a workshop for Roots and Wings, our district training event, and we went to a class where we were challenged to see people in different ways. We went through an exercise where it became clear that we all take whatever facts we have, interpret them through our own lenses of experience, and then place some kind of value on the situation. The presenter did this through giving us pictures she had taken. We were to list the facts, make a guess as to what was happening and then share some positive and negative feedback concerning what we saw. It was eye

opening to see how far from the truth we sometimes were. My group was given a picture of two women preparing food in a kitchen. Because there was very little food on the table and no paper towels in the holder behind them we saw scarcity. In fact it was two women working on a feeding program that had transformed their community. Most of the food was in the ovens. We saw little yet it was about abundance. This has made me so aware of how I place inappropriate values on many interactions. I have been continually stopping myself from assuming I know what is going on and moving to listening or trying to be respectful would be another way of saying it. This is one small way of living more holy.

Finally, Holiness happens when we love. Again, that is one of those terms that means different things to different people. Jesus said love happens when you treat others as you wish you were treated. Love happens when you forgive. Love happens when you offer the hungry food, visit the sick and offer a cup of cold water. Love builds community.

Holiness, it is not about us but about them. The better we treat others the better the community we live in. Doing so makes us feel better as well and ultimately if we do it well enough we transform society and all, even our own lives are transformed.