Kedoshim: Vayikra (Leviticus)

What's it all about?



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"You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." So begins this week's parsha, following up on this spirit statement by delivering dozens of commandments intended to help us sanctify every aspect of life. These include positive mitzvot, like keeping the Sabbath and remaining honest in our business dealings, as well as prohibitions against idolatry, sexual impropriety, and other undesirable behaviors. And if that wasn't enough, the parsha also contains the one commandment that the great rabbi Hillel said was the entire Torah: **"Love your fellow as yourself."**

> "You must neither take revenge on nor bear a grudge against the members of your people. You must love your fellow as yourself; I am God."

Take a deeper dive

"What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."

This, arguably, is the most famous dictum in all of the Talmud, shared by Hillel the Elder when asked to recite the entire Torah while standing on one leg. There's great simplicity, elegance, and force to this statement. And yet, sadly, it is often—too often—thwarted and misunderstood.

What do we mean when we think about that which is hateful to us? The very question is an invitation to dive deep into our own minds, to get into our own heads and start making lists of things that we hate. But here's the thing: while there are some things that indeed displease every human being—being slapped in the face, say, or being denied justice—there are many others that are purely subjective. Some of us find menial chores like drying the dishes or folding the laundry to be a real pain; others welcome them as soothing distractions. **If we follow Hillel's dictum literally, we run the risk of discovering that the things that are hateful to us may be a real treat for our neighbors.**

Thankfully, then, this week's parsha gives us the same principle in its original formulation, one much more difficult to understand than Hillel's clear catchphrase but also deeply moving and instructive: "love your fellow as yourself."

At first blush, this dictum, too, is preposterous. Does the Torah truly expect us to love other people with the same level of intensity, self-involvement, and care that we bestow on ourselves? If we find ourselves on a remote island with one other person and just enough food to sustain a single soul, for example, are we expected to show this great love by offering to die of hunger while our fellow survives?

Of course not. But to understand that, you must know a little bit of Hebrew. The precise phrase the Torah uses is Ve'ahavta le'reacha kamocah. That ka is deeply meaningful; it means, roughly translated, "as you would." And so, put bluntly, understood properly, here's what the famous verse means: **to truly love your fellow, make sure he or she enjoys the same circumstances and advantages as you would like to enjoy.** Outcomes may vary; opportunities should not. Presented with the same possibilities, different people will end up making different decisions and experiencing different outcomes. That's natural and good. **But a truly just society must make sure that all begin the race from the same leveled starting line.**

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