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News

Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim 5780

Rabbi Ariel J Friedlander – 1 May 2020

Thoughts of the world outside our current Lockdown bubbles turn first to those stricken by Covid-19 – may they be healed in body and spirit. We also think of those who do their best in myriad ways throughout the system to care for the sick. There are no words to describe the magnitude of their service. We thank them with all our hearts.

To protect ourselves, and each other, we have remained physically within our homes. Hopefully they are places of safety, even if we feel constrained. We reach out into the ether via unstable internet connections to continue work, if we still have a job; to contact loved ones far and near, and to occupy our minds and hearts. Much time has been spent in alien worlds, ranging from a Borg cube to the imagined centre of ultra-orthodox communities in Brooklyn & Bnei Brak. And people have come to synagogue! Zoom¹ has brought us together to pray, to celebrate our festivals, and to study *Torah*.

Acharei Mot-Kedoshim is one of the double *Torah* portions that can be split when there is a leap year in the Hebrew calendar and extra portions are needed for the extra leap month. 5780 may not be a leap year, but 2020 is. And in 2020, I see a split between the portions.



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Acharei Mot is set in the period after the death of Nadav and Avihu, the sudden, inexplicable and devastating death of Aaron's sons. In the wake of this shocking event, Moses is given instructions for *Yom Kippur*, followed by a list of sexual prohibitions that define the Biblical boundaries of family relationships. God says that following these *mitzvot* will protect the Israelites from spiritual corruption, and keep them safe in their land. While now we have a different interpretation of some of these ancient laws, we can certainly empathise with tough measures as an initial response to a severe threat to the entire community.

Kedoshim takes us into Phase 2. Having turned our faces from the *yetser ra*, our evil inclinations, God teaches us what we should be doing, pointing us towards the *yetser tov*. The topic sentence of the portion is: "Be holy, because I, Adonai your God, am holy."² But what does it mean to be holy? This is a question that we don't often discuss. We might talk about being separate, but what does that mean? Different? Special? Each word leads to a further examination of its own meaning, and even further from the original question. What does it mean to be holy? Rabbi Joe Black reminds us that we are created *b'tselem elohim*, in the image of God, which means that we have holiness naturally within us.³ We don't have to define it. We just need to learn how to find it.

Could this be the purpose of the *mitzvot*? When we are in lockdown, there's not much we can do but think about things, turning them this way and that. As the windows and doors open, and we are able to interact with each other again, what are we going to do? How shall we behave? Will we do anything differently?

Kedoshim commands us to leave the corners of our fields and the gleanings for the poor and the stranger.⁴ We must not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another.⁵ We must not stand idly by while the blood of our neighbour is shed.⁶ There are a lot of marvellous *mitzvot* in *Kedoshim*, but if I could choose one with which to start it is, "Love your neighbour as yourself."⁷ It all begins with compassion.

This week, I see my neighbours in the UK in *Acharei Mot*, in the valley of the shadow of death. Your phase of the journey still has some way to go. But it will end, hopefully very soon. Here in Italy, we are a couple of weeks ahead of you, and about to enter Phase 2, *Kedoshim*. Our nerves are terribly frayed, and it is so easy to take offence at words said or typed by others. As we move towards more social interaction, we should recognize how sensitive we are. We should begin with compassion, being kind to others, and gentle with ourselves. And, as we regain our strength, we can return to the holy work of reconnecting with our loved ones, and

rebuilding our communities. We will be holy, because it is an essential part of our nature. We learn from what we do well, and from where we falter. Meanwhile, we look forward to the time when we can continue that work together with all of you.

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Shabbat shalom.

¹ and, of course, other platforms, e.g., Google Hangouts, Skype & FaceBook. But mostly Zoom.

² Leviticus 19:2

³ CCAR RavBlog 28.04.20

⁴ Lev. 19:9

⁵ Lev. 19:11

⁶ Lev. 19:16

⁷ Lev. 19:18

[Rabbi Friedlander serves the Or 'Ammim community in Emilia Romagna, Italy]

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