



  
WOHL LEGACY

# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

אחרי-מות  
קדושים  
תש"ף  
Acharei-Mot  
Kedoshim 5780

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## The Ethic of Holiness

Kedoshim contains the two great love commands of the Torah. The first is, "*Love your neighbour as yourself*. I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:18). Rabbi Akiva called this "the great principle of the Torah." The second is no less challenging: "*The stranger living among you must be treated as your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt*. I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 19:34).

These are extraordinary commands. Many civilisations contain variants of the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do to you," or in the negative form attributed to Hillel (sometimes called the Silver Rule), "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary; go and learn." But these are rules of reciprocity, not love. We observe them because bad things will happen to us if we don't. They are the basic ground-rules of life in a group.

Love is something altogether different and more demanding. That makes these two commandments a revolution in the moral life. Judaism was the first civilisation to put love at the heart of morality. As Harry Redner puts it in *Ethical Life*, "Morality is the ethic of love. The initial and most basic principle of morality is clearly stated in the Torah: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." He adds: "The biblical 'love of one's neighbour' is a very special form of love, a unique development of the Judaic religion and unlike any to be encountered outside it."

Much has been written about these commands. Who exactly is meant by "your neighbour"? Who by "the stranger"? And what is it to love someone else as oneself? I want to ask a different question. *Why is it specifically here, in Kedoshim, in a chapter dedicated to the concept of holiness, that the command appears?*

Nowhere else in all Tanach are we commanded to love our neighbour. And only in one other place (Deut. 10:19) are we commanded to love the stranger. (The Sages famously said that the Torah commands us thirty-six times to love the stranger, but that is not quite accurate. Thirty-four of those commands have to do with not oppressing or afflicting the stranger and making sure that he or she has the same legal rights as the native born. These are commands of justice rather than love).

And why does the command to love your neighbour as yourself appear in a chapter containing such laws as, “Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material”? These are *chukim*, decrees, usually thought of as commands that have no reason, at any rate none that we can understand. What have they to do with the self-evidently moral commands of the love of neighbour and stranger? Is the chapter simply an assemblage of disconnected commands, or is there a single unifying strand to it?

The answer goes deep. Almost every ethical system ever devised has sought to reduce the moral life to a single principle or perspective. Some connect it to reason, others to emotion, yet others to consequences: do whatever creates the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Judaism is different. It is more complex and subtle. It contains not one perspective but three. There is the prophetic understanding of morality, the priestly perspective and the wisdom point of view.

Prophetic morality looks at *the quality of relationships within a society*, between us and God and between us and our fellow humans. Here are some of the key texts that define this morality. God says about Abraham, “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right [*tzedakah*] and just [*mishpat*].” God tells Hosea, “I will betroth you to Me in righteousness [*tzedek*] and justice [*mishpat*], in kindness [*chesed*] and compassion [*rachamim*].” He tells Jeremiah, “I am the Lord, who exercises kindness [*chesed*], justice [*mishpat*] and righteousness [*tzedakah*] on earth, for in these I delight, declares the Lord.” Those are the key prophetic words: righteousness, justice, kindness and compassion – not love.

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When the Prophets talk about love it is about God’s love for Israel and the love we should show for God. With only three exceptions, they do not speak about love in a moral context, that is, vis-à-vis our relationships with one another. The exceptions are Amos’ remark, “Hate evil, *love* good; maintain justice in the courts” (Amos 5:15); Micah’s famous statement, “Act justly, *love* mercy and walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8) and Zechariah’s “Therefore *love* truth and peace” (Zech. 8:19). Note that all three are about loving abstractions – good, mercy and truth. They are not about people.

The prophetic voice is about how people conduct themselves in society. Are they faithful to God and to one another? Are they acting honestly, justly, and with due concern for the vulnerable in society? Do the political and religious leaders have integrity? Does society have the high morale that comes from people feeling that it treats its citizens well and calls forth the best in them? A moral society will succeed; an immoral or amoral one will fail. That is the key prophetic insight. The Prophets did not make the demand that people love one another. That was beyond their remit. Society requires justice, not love.

The *wisdom* voice in Torah and Tanach looks at character and consequence. If you live virtuously, then by and large things will go well for you. A good example is Psalm 1. The person occupied with Torah will be “like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.” That is the wisdom voice. Those who

do well, fare well. They find happiness (*ashrei*). Good people love God, family, friends and virtue. But the wisdom literature does not speak of loving your neighbour or the stranger.

The moral vision of the Priest that makes him different from the Prophet and Sage lies in the key word *kadosh*, “holy.” Someone or something that is holy is set apart, distinctive, different. The Priests were set apart from the rest of the nation. They had no share in the land. They did not work as labourers in the field. Their sphere was the Tabernacle or Temple. They lived at the epicentre of the Divine Presence. As God’s ministers they had to keep themselves pure and avoid any form of defilement. They were holy.

Until now, holiness has been seen as a special attribute of the Priest. But there was a hint at the Giving of the Torah that it concerned not just the children of Aaron but the people as a whole: “You shall be to Me *a Kingdom of Priests* and a *holy nation*” (Ex. 19:6). Our chapter now spells this out for the first time. “The Lord said to Moses, “Speak to *the entire assembly of Israel* and say to them: Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Lev. 19:1-2). This tells us that the ethic of holiness applies not just to Priests but to the entire nation. We, too, must to be distinctive, set apart, held to a higher standard.

What in practice does this mean? A decisive clue is provided by another key word used throughout Tanach in relation to the Kohen, namely the verb *b-d-l*: to divide, set apart, separate, distinguish. That is what a Priest does. His task is “to *distinguish* between the sacred and the secular” (Lev. 10:10), and “to *distinguish* between the unclean and the clean” (Lev. 11:47). This is what God does for His people: “You shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and I have *distinguished* you [*va-avdil*] from other peoples to be Mine.” (Lev. 20:26).

There is one other place in which *b-d-l* is a key word, namely the story of creation in Genesis 1, where it occurs five times. God *separates* light and dark, day and night, upper and lower waters. For three days God demarcates different domains, then for the next three days He places in each its appropriate objects or life-forms. God fashions order out of the *tohu va-vohu* of chaos. As His last act of creation, He makes man after His “image and likeness.” This was clearly an act of love. “Beloved is man,” said Rabbi Akiva, “because he was created in [God’s] image.”

**“The ethic of holiness tells us that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God.”**

Genesis 1 defines the priestly moral imagination. Unlike the Prophet, the Priest is not looking at society. He is not, like the wisdom figure, looking for happiness. He is looking at creation as the work of God. He knows that everything has its place: sacred and profane, permitted and forbidden. It is his task to make these distinctions and teach them to others. He knows that different life forms have their own niche in the environment. That is why the ethic of holiness includes rules like: Don’t mate with different kinds of animals, don’t plant a field with different kinds of seed, and don’t wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.

Above all the ethic of holiness tells us that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. God made each of us in love. *Therefore, if we seek to imitate God* – “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” – *we too must love humanity*, and not in the abstract but in the concrete form of the neighbour and the stranger. The ethic of holiness is based on the vision of creation-as-God’s-work-of-love. This vision sees all human beings – ourselves, our neighbour

and the stranger – as in the image of God, and that is why we are to love our neighbour and the stranger as ourself.

**I believe that there is something unique and contemporary about the ethic of holiness. It tells us that morality and ecology are closely related. They are both about creation: about the world as God’s work and humanity as God’s image. The integrity of humanity and the natural environment go together. The natural universe and humanity were both created by God, and we are charged to protect the first and love the second.**

Shabbat Shalom

Jonathan Sacks

**COVENANT AND  
CONVERSATION**  
*Family Edition*

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

The **Family Edition of Covenant & Conversation** is an accompanying resource available to download each week from [www.RabbiSacks.org/CCFamilyEdition](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/CCFamilyEdition) (or via the main Covenant & Conversation email). It helps parents and educators take Rabbi Sacks’ ideas from this essay and make them more accessible to teenagers. Each week, we will include three key questions from the Family Edition to inspire discussion around your Shabbat table. For more educational content as well as discussion pointers when answering these questions, please see the Family Edition!

- 1. How are love and holiness connected?**
- 2. What are the differences between the prophetic, wisdom, and priestly voices in Tanach?**
- 3. Why is the priestly voice the one that commands us to love humanity and protect the natural universe?**

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