

# Shabbat Shalom: Acharei Mot-Kedoshim (Leviticus 16:1-20:27)

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## By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

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*Efrat, Israel* – **“And you shall observe My decrees and My laws which a human being shall perform and he shall live by them; I am the Lord.” (Lev. 18:5)**

It is fascinating that our Bible commands us to perform the laws and statutes of the Lord, and then it adds “and he shall live by them.” Would any moral individual think to perform laws that could cause him to die? Our Sages use this seemingly superfluous phrase to teach a most important lesson, one which distinguishes Judaism from some other religions: “You shall live by these My laws and not die by them. If someone says to you, ‘Desecrate the Sabbath or I’ll kill you,’ you must desecrate the Sabbath; desecrate one Sabbath so that you will live to observe many more Sabbaths” (BT, *Yoma* 85b).

Our religion revels in life. To be sure, there are instances when one must be ready to die for one’s faith, but this is limited to three most egregious crimes: murder, sexual immorality and idolatry. If one says to a Jew “kill X or I’ll kill you; rape Y or I’ll kill you,” the Jew must give up his or her life rather than commit these crimes. Similarly, in times of persecution, Jews must demonstrate that they will not give in to gentile pressure – even pressure unto death – to relinquish their faith or to relinquish their land in *milchemet mitzva*. But under ordinary conditions, no Jewish law overrides the preservation of human life – as we have recently experienced surrounding the Corona epidemic.

Even the famous test of Abraham, the apparent Divine command that Abraham sacrifice his son to Him, concludes with Abraham being forbidden to harm his son (Kierkegaard notwithstanding). The most classic commentary, Rashi, even goes so far as to say that Abraham misunderstood the Divine command, that God never meant that he should slaughter his son, but rather dedicate him in life and not in death.

Unlike the Christian symbol of the cross, which eternalized the martyrdom of the founder of Christianity, and far from the glory some militant Islamic groups ascribe to the *shahidim*—the so-called martyrs who are urged (and handsomely paid) to blow themselves up together with innocent Israelis amid the promise of eternal bliss with 72 virgins—Judaism has never courted martyrdom.

Indeed, our priests-kohanim aren't even allowed to come into contact with a dead body, so consistent are we in promoting Judaism as a life-fostering and this-world oriented religion.

What still remains strange and difficult to understand is that immediately following the biblical mandate to "live by God's laws," in our weekly portion of Aharei Mot comes a long list of prohibited sexual relationships which fall under the rubric of "one must die rather than transgress." If living by God's laws is so important, why follow that stricture with laws for which one must be willing to die rather than transgress?

I believe the answer is to be found in a difficult conundrum suggested by the Elders of the Negev. The Talmud (BT, *Tamid* 32b) records a discussion between Alexander the Great and the Elders of the Negev: Alexander asked, "What ought people do if they wish to keep on living?" The Elders answered, "They must slay themselves". Asked Alexander: "What ought people do if they wish to die?" Answered the Elders. "They should try to stay alive!" Permit me to explain. Let us answer the second question first. If an individual lives only in order to keep on living, he is bound to fail, and he will die in the end; after all, I am not aware of any individual who got out of this world alive! Hence if a person wishes to die, let him continue to try to stay alive forever. He will surely die because he will surely fail.

And what ought someone do if he wants to keep on living? Let him slay himself, or at least let him find an ideal to live by and for which he is ready to give up his life. Then even if he dies in pursuit of that ideal, his life will have gained ultimate meaning, and he will thereby be linked to eternity.

Martin Luther King, Jr. put it very well in his Detroit speech in June 1963: "And I submit to you that if a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he is not fit to live."

The only life that is truly meaningful is a life dedicated to an idea which is greater than one individual's life.

Hence it is specifically our portion which praised the value of life teaching that "You shall live by My laws," which appears within the context of a group of laws for which one must be willing to give up his life!

## Shabbat Shalom!

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