

Acherei Mot/Kedoshim
Delivered by Deborah Ross
April 28, 2018

In this week's double parasha of Acherei Mot and Kedoshim, we find what scholars refer to as the Holiness Code. God exhorts us multiple times: You shall be holy because I, your God, am holy. What does it mean to be holy? The text doesn't tell us. Perhaps, like Justice Stewart's definition of pornography, we know it when we see it. Nonetheless, the text provides many specifics:

Acherei Mot sets out rules of priestly conduct for, among other things, purification of the temple, and how to perform an animal sacrifice. Today, because there is no temple and there are no priests, we don't pay them much attention. Others that we ignore from parashat Kedoshim are the proscriptions against mixing two seeds in one's field, or mixing cloths in a garment. They don't make sense in a world of hybrid crops and Lycra. They seem archaic. The world has moved on. More relevant rules address conduct between individuals, such as caring for the poor and the stranger, judging fairly, not stealing, not dealing falsely, treating workers well. These establish a universal ideal code of law for civilized societies, and remain valuable and necessary. We **do** pay attention to them, and they form the basis for democracy and rule of law. These laws are keepers.

Rabbi Akiva identified a sentence from Kedoshim that he believed was the great principle of Torah. It is, in fact, one of the most famous sentences in all of Torah:

Love your fellow as yourself. *Ve'ahavta l'arayecha kamocho.*

And Rabbi Akiva should know. After all, he is the rabbi who spent all the years of his life after age 40 studying Torah. Legend has it that he had 24 thousand disciples, and as we know from the Yom Kippur liturgy, he readily accepted a martyr's death at the hands of the Romans.

So, I want to pay tribute to Rabbi Akiva because he has just upped our Jewish trivia game, and because of the contributions he made to our ability to interpret Torah, in the past, in the present and into the future.

To illustrate, let me share a well-known story from the Talmud:

When Moshe ascended to heaven [to receive the Torah] he found the Holy One sitting and fashioning coronets for the letters.

Here, the story is referring to those little decorative, but meaningless, crowns that we find on certain letters of the Torah scroll.

[Moshe] said to Him: "Master of the world, who requires you [to do this]?" / why are you doing this?

[God] replied: "There is a person who will come to be after many generations, called Akiva ben Yosef; he will one day expound heaps upon heaps of laws from each and every crown."

In other words, Akiva will interpret the Torah (those heaps upon heaps of laws) that you, Moshe, are receiving today.

[Moshe] said before God: "Master of the world, show him to me."

Now we get into time travel: God sends Moshe centuries ahead to Akiva's academy.

[God] replied: "Turn around." Moshe turned around and [found himself] behind the eighth row [in the Talmudic academy--behind the regular students arranged in order of excellence in the first seven rows]. Moshe did not understand the discussion and was distressed.

Note that not only did Moshe not understand the discussion of Torah, but he was placed in the eighth row behind all the best students! Of course Moshe is distressed. This is a demotion of historical proportion.

When [Akiva] came to a certain point [in his lesson], his students asked him "How do you know this?" Akiva replied, "[This is] a law [given] to Moses from Sinai." (*Halacha l'Moshe miSinai*).

In other words, the law is from the one Torah.
Moshe was reassured.

He then traveled back in time to where the story began:
Moshe turned back and stepped before the Holy One and said: "Master of the world, You have such a person (meaning Akiva), yet You give the Torah through me?"
God replied: "Be still, that is how it entered my mind."
I intended this all along.

What is this story teaching us? God is adding meaningless crowns to the Torah scroll that even Moshe, who received it, won't be able to understand. Yet God knows that Akiva will be able to find laws in them because creative possibility is also rooted in that text.

Just as Moshe couldn't see beyond his world, the ways future generations will interpret and understand Torah is equally unfathomable to all of us here. And this was God's plan from the beginning.

Due to Akiva's brilliance, (or God's divine plan—take your pick), we have inherited a dynamic religion.

This is both a blessing and a challenge.
How do we reconcile the tension between remaining faithful to the foundational text that Torah is, and adapting its teachings to our lives today?

Perhaps the most obvious example of Judaism's evolution is the inclusion of women in all facets of religious life. The Torah is without doubt a male-centered book, yet we have found ways to become egalitarian, and this has strengthened rather than weakened us.

What was once unacceptable is now accepted. We learn, we grow, we adjust. Remaining static is a recipe for failure, for humans and for religions. I don't think anyone wants to see animal sacrifice reinstated, or banning of Lycra for that matter.

When we change, we aren't abandoning Torah and our three thousand year heritage, but to the contrary, we are making it our own.

Here at Kol Shalom we now face a major crossroads with Rabbi Maltzman's upcoming retirement. Many of us are beginning to think about what kinds of changes we might be ready for. As we are only too aware, there is no one like him. We miss him already.

We will miss his thought-provoking d'verei Torah, his leadership in our spiritual lives, his warm and enduring connections to our children, his incomparable sense of humor, his excellent sartorial taste. We owe him so much. I think we can all agree that whatever and whomever comes next, it will be different from what we are comfortable with.

Nor are we the only shul facing changes. Across the Jewish world, the synagogue model as WE know it is poised at the threshold of seismic change. We must accommodate ourselves to new realities.

Like Moshe, we are unable to see the future. But like Akiva, we can be creative in considering it. Like Moshe, our integrity requires us to treasure the text, and like Akiva, the real world requires us to be open to interpreting it. We are heirs to both.

About six weeks ago on successive days, I read the obituaries of two individuals who had played cameo roles in my life. One was a history professor; the other a portrait artist. Each left me with a lesson.

Hayden White, who taught European intellectual history to me at UCLA, taught that history is made up of stories imposed upon facts, and that meaning is derived from their plots. History is a living, breathing entity shaped by those who write it. The historian, he wrote, decides where the story begins and ends.

Apropos of *my* topic, he stated, "The historian serves no one well by constructing a specious continuity between the present world and that which preceded it. On

the contrary, we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot." Change is inevitable. Recognize it. Embrace it.

The artist, Lithuanian-born Holocaust survivor Kalman Aron, drew my portrait in pastels when I was nine. I own it now, and when I look at it, I see myself as I was as a child. Does it still look like me? I am the same person, but I am also a different person. The nine-year old me had no idea what the current me's life would be like. If the young me could drop in on the current me, she would not understand anything: this digital life, grandchildren who are citizens of another country, a life in Washington, D.C.

Yet all these things are real now, and all were possibilities then. Like Moshe, we will all one day sit in the back row and watch as others fashion the unexpected from those crowns.

In the days ahead, let us at Kol Shalom channel our inner Akivas, and use our creativity to inspire our own living Torah. Let us love our fellow as ourselves, let us consider change and tradition both, and let us strive to be holy as we do so.