

The Importance of Asking Questions Kedoshim- The Jewish Advocate

As another Passover fades in our rear-view mirror, we experience a renewed understanding of the value Judaism places on the act of questioning. For weeks leading up to the most-celebrated Jewish holiday, children across the world practice singing the Four Questions, while adults spend hours crafting inquiries, prompts, and activities that will spark curiosity and engagement at their seder tables. There is no time of year more ripe for questioning meaning than now.

Parashat Kedoshim is perhaps the most central parasha in the Torah; it can be seen as God's manifesto for how the Jewish people should live. As such, it is both the least and the most obvious place in the Torah to ask "Why?" Why, for instance, are we to be a holy people? The parasha opens with the command that "k'doshim tiyu", "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." We are God's chosen people; God is holy; thus, we too must be holy.

It is for this very reason that I - along with many others - struggle with Leviticus 20:13: "If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, the two of them have done an abhorrent thing; they shall be put to death." Many have questioned this line's meaning, looking for ways around the words, attempting to understand reason and rationale in a prohibition that is used by many to attack, demean, and marginalize others.

The Four Children of the Seder provide a set of lenses through which we might view this divisive verse. In some ways, we play role of the Simple Child, choosing not to question the verse's origin and context, but rather looking at the interpreted meaning. The Wicked Child, whose question is "What does this mean to you?", allows us to see this through our own prejudices. And the one who does not know how to ask gives others permission to interpret it as they wish.

It is the Wise Child who strives to understand the intent and value behind this line. This person sees that we can take the verse at face value, with its awkward grammar and odd placement within the parasha as a whole, or that we can attempt to reconcile the verse with its surrounding context.

Two examples offer meanings that advance our notion of holiness, melding into the overall context of Parashat Kedoshim. Rabbi Steven Greenberg reads the line as a prohibition against force; that is, one should not forcibly lie with another person (ie. rape). The use of force, manipulation, or deceit would make the act to'evah, an abomination, and a clear violation of the kedusha, holiness, on which this parasha centers.

David Greenstein's understanding hinges on two letters. Greenstein notes that the word "et" is used elsewhere in the Torah as an object of an action. However, he writes, "the first place where it is unambiguous that the word et is being used in another way is in the verse, 'And Enoch walked with (et) the Almighty...' In this verse it is clear that the particle does not signify an

object indication. Rather it means ‘along with.’” Applying this interpretation, the prohibition would read, “If a man lies along with a[nother] man in sexual intercourse with a woman, the two of them [the two men] have done an abhorrent thing.” This would appear to forbid sexual acts involving more than two people; given the orgiastic cultures of many polytheistic religions of the time, it’s not surprising that God’s Holy People would be prohibited from participating in such activities.

The remainder of the parasha contains many beautiful, often common-sense laws that guide us toward leading holy lives. It is here, in Kedoshim, that we are taught how to treat our fellow community members as people - each possessing a spark of the Divine:

The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning. (Lev. 19:13)

You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. (Lev. 19:14)

You shall not render an unfair decision; do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly (Lev. 19:15)

You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old (Lev. 19:32)

You shall not falsify measure of length, weight, or capacity. You shall have an honest balance and honest weights...” (Lev. 19:35-36)

These laws serve to keep the community in balance, pushing us to forego personal advantages in favor of communal benefit; they aim to create harmony and cohesion and reduce divisiveness. Martin Buber sums it up beautifully, teaching that “holiness is found not in rising above the level of one’s neighbors but in relationships, in human beings recognizing the latent divinity in each of us” (Etz Chayim Chumash commentary)

As another Pesach slides away, we should remember to continue to ask questions. The more we ask why things are the way they are, the better able we are to understand the divine holiness inherent in each of us. Seeing ourselves as holy allows us to see the spark of God in everyone; seeing each other as holy gives us the power to create the world envisioned in Parashat Kedoshim, a world full of empathy, deeds of loving kindness, and striving to elevate God’s name.