

## Parshat Kedoshim; Leviticus 18:1-20:27

By Rabbi Denise Eger

This week's Torah portion is both famous and infamous. Known as the Holiness Code, this portion describes the ways in which we emulate God's Divine Holiness and become sanctified to God. It is famous because contained in the parasha is the section we Reform Jews read on Yom Kippur afternoon. On Yom Kippur afternoon we start at Chapter 19, verse 1 and continue through 18 and then continue with verses 31-37.

We read about many basic laws of caring for one another in these sections. We read of saving part of the land and produce of the land for the poor. We learn not to insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind. More than just courtesies, these actions teach us to respect and honor those in society who are at a disadvantage. We are to rise before the aged showing deference to their experiences and life lived. We are to treat stranger and citizen equally.

This section of Leviticus teaches us that the humane way of acting is the Godly way of acting. We cannot simply take those in society be it the physically challenged, the elderly, the immigrant or the poor and toss them aside. The Torah teaches us that even those who are traditionally powerless must be treated with dignity and respect. These ethical behaviors embody the highest ideals of the Jewish tradition. It is fitting that these be read aloud on the afternoon of the most sacred day of the year. As the parasha teaches all of these are summed up in the verse, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Thus when we come to the infamous sections of this week's portion, it is even more difficult to understand. This parasha is infamous because contained within this holiness code is also a description of acceptable and unacceptable sexual liaisons. In Leviticus 20:13 we come specifically to one of two Levitical passages that forbid, sexual liaisons between men. "If a man lies with a male as one lies with a woman, the two of them have done an abhorrent thing, they shall be put to death; their bloodguilt is upon them."

In our day and age, when we know that gay men and lesbians are part of society's oppressed minorities, it seems hard to reconcile the death penalty on the one hand and the passage about treating the powerless among us with dignity and respect. Thus we must think carefully about what the Torah is teaching here. How is sex to be used? Is it to elevate and make holy? Or is it to demean and objectify? Homosexual rape was commonly used as a form of humiliation and torture. Often in war situations it was (and sometimes still is) used to demoralize and dehumanize heterosexual men. Could this be what the Torah is addressing? If a heterosexual man has sex with a man as if he were a woman, then indeed you are guilty of demeaning that human being. Thus the message we are to take away about holiness, sexuality and dignity is that relationships must be based upon honor and dignity even in sexuality.



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Thus this is one way we might reconcile these two parts of the same Torah portion and to especially find a way to say to the gay and lesbian communities, we accept you and we welcome you and we honor your relationships. By understanding that the Torah is addressing only in authentic sexual behavior and sexual behavior used in an evil way, we can learn that there is room at the table of community for gay men and lesbians who within their loving and committed relationships can also have sanctified and holy lives.

I believe strongly that the Torah, if written today, would celebrate the many different kinds of family relationships and would equally celebrate the marriage of gay men and lesbians who commit to one another in a life of kedusha, a life of sanctity.

Let us not confuse these Torah passages on rape with the loving expression of sexuality within the context of a committed relationship. For the loving and healthy expression of sexuality between two men or two women can be filled with the same dignity honor and respect that other parts of our torah portion speaks of.

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