Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Kedoshim

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Kedoshim:

What Is Holiness?

The opening half of the Book of Leviticus revolves around a single sacred center: the Mishkan, Tabernacle. Chapters 1–7 detail the sacrificial system; chapters 8–10 describe the dedication of the Mishkan, alongside the tragic cautionary tale of Nadab and Abihu, who approached improperly. Chapters 11–15 delineate who may not enter the Mishkan, and how one may regain access through purification. Finally, chapter 16 outlines the purification of the Mishkan itself, ensuring that God's presence can continue to dwell among Israel.

Beginning in chapter 17, however, the Torah pivots. The focus shifts from sacred space to sacred life. The laws of chapters 17–26 extend holiness into every sphere of existence—dietary practice, interpersonal ethics, sexuality, ritual observance, and beyond. Already in Leviticus 11:44–45, within the earlier section, the Torah introduces the foundational principle: "You shall be holy, for I am holy." This refrain reappears as a governing theme in our parashah (19:2) and beyond (20:7; 21:8).

Yet, we must ask: what does holiness actually mean?

Holiness as Imitation of God

The Torah's central formulation—"You shall be holy, for I am holy"—defines holiness relationally—as a response to God's own nature. Holiness is not an abstract state, but a call to emulate God. Scripture repeatedly refers to God as *kadosh* (e.g., Isaiah 40:25; 57:15; Habakkuk 3:3), and rabbinic tradition crystallizes this idea through *imitatio Dei*: just as God is compassionate, gracious, and just, so too must human beings strive to embody those traits (Sotah 14a; Shabbat 133b).

On this view, holiness is not confined to ritual precision. It is a mode of living in which one's entire life reflects God's values.

Two Classical Models: Restraint or Refinement

Medieval commentators debate how this ideal is realized in practice.

Rashi, following Leviticus Rabbah (24:6), understands holiness primarily as **restraint**—specifically, refraining from prohibited behavior. This interpretation fits the immediate context of chapters 18–20, which emphasize sexual prohibitions. For Rashi, the root *k-d-sh* conveys separation: to be holy is to set oneself apart from that which is forbidden. The same root can even describe something "set aside" for prostitution (*kedeshah*), underscoring that holiness is fundamentally about designation and separation.

Ramban, however, pushes further. Drawing on Yevamot 20a, he argues that one can technically avoid all prohibitions and still live a coarse, self-indulgent life. Such a person, though legally compliant, fails to achieve holiness. For Ramban, holiness is **refinement**—a disciplined, elevated mode of existence shaped by the spirit, not just the letter, of the law. The commandments aim to cultivate a morally and spiritually refined personality.

Halakhic observance alone does not necessarily produce ethical or spiritual excellence. Yet at the same time, the Torah insists that the path to holiness must pass through the framework of mitzvot.

Ethics at the Center of Holiness

Several nineteenth-century thinkers, including R. Yisrael Salanter, R. Moshe Sofer (Hatam Sofer), R. Hirsch, and Netziv, emphasize that holiness is most visibly expressed in **ethical conduct**, especially honesty in business and interpersonal integrity. In their view, one's treatment of others is the truest measure of religious life.

This position captures a vital truth—but it risks reduction. Holiness in the Torah is inherently religious and cannot be limited to ethics alone.

Jacob Milgrom therefore offers a more precise formulation: what distinguishes the Torah is not ethics alone, nor ritual alone, but their integration. Ethical conduct is not optional—it is an essential component of holiness alongside ritual observance. Jeremiah Unterman sharpens this point further: in the ancient Near East, legal systems prohibited wrongdoing but did not mandate active care for the vulnerable. The Torah uniquely mandates care for the vulnerable as an obligation of justice.

Holiness, then, is not only about avoiding harm, but about actively building a just and compassionate society.

Holiness as a National Calling

A striking perspective emerges from Joshua Berman. In Tanakh, individuals are almost never described explicitly as *kadosh*. The lone narrative exception is the Shunammite woman's description of Elisha as an *ish kadosh*, holy man (II Kings 4:9)—and even there, it is her perception, not the Torah's or God's designation.

By contrast, the nation of Israel is repeatedly called a *holy nation* (*goy kadosh*) beginning at Sinai. The concept of holiness, Berman argues, is fundamentally **collective and covenantal**. It arises only with the formation of Israel as a nation bound to God through law and mission.

Holiness, in this sense, is not merely personal piety. It is a national identity expressed through shared practices, boundaries, and commitments that distinguish Israel from other nations. Even when applied to individuals—such as priests or Nazirites—holiness is institutional, defined by roles within the broader covenantal system.

This framing yields a powerful corollary: when Israel lives up to its calling, God is sanctified in the world. When it fails, the result is *hillul Hashem*, a desecration of God's name. Holiness is thus both privilege and responsibility, inseparable from the public and national life of the people.

Conclusion: A Multi-Dimensional Ideal

The command "You shall be holy" resists reduction to a single definition. It encompasses:

- **Separation from the prohibited** (Rashi),
- **Refinement of character and conduct** (Ramban),
- **Integration of ritual and ethical life** (Milgrom, Unterman),
- **Imitation of God's attributes** (rabbinic tradition),
- And **participation in a national covenantal mission** (Berman).

Together, these perspectives reveal that holiness is not a single trait, but a multi-layered religious ideal. Holiness is not one dimension of religious life—it is its totality. It demands discipline and aspiration, law and spirit, individual growth and collective identity. Above all, it calls upon Israel to live in such a way that the presence of God is reflected not only in sacred spaces, but in the entirety of life.