

When I wrote the following short sermon this is what I extrapolated:

GOD IS IN THE DETAILS

Sermon given by Rabbi Dr. Richard Allen in Lyons, France

Communauté Juive Libérale Rhône Alpes

Yom Kippur – Kedoshim – Lev. 19

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Translated from the French

It seems to me that the Parashah, or if you wish, the most important portion, of the Torah from the point of view of rapport between human beings and God and even human beings among themselves, is the portion that we read this morning, Leviticus 19. This portion is often referred to as the "Holiness Code."

Since my childhood this Parashah, this portion has struck me by its simplicity and, at the same time the great depth of its contents. If there were only one portion or one chapter of the Torah to be *chosen as the single most important to be taught to our children*, one portion *to exemplify Jewish tradition and Jewish ethics*, I would have chosen, as have many others, the first chapter of Leviticus 19.

These are the words that begin the chapter: The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: **דַּבֵּר אֶל כָּל עַדְתֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל**. Speak to the whole Israelite community. It might seem that some words are superfluous. It could have been written: "Speak to the Israelites," or: "Speak to the children of Israel, or even: "Speak to the House of Israel."

But no! By this repetition which might seem somewhat useless, the Torah has chosen to demonstrate that everyone was obliged to hear, to listen and understand. In addition, everyone was obliged to hear these words at the same time in order that there be absolutely no confusion with respect to what God had said.

It was not only to underscore the importance of of who had to hear this teaching, that is to say, everyone, but also when they had to hear it. The importance, the imperative, of the content is indicated, so to say, by the rest of the verse:You shall be holy In other words, being holy is not a choice! according to the Torah, one must be. It is a commandment. And then, so that the reader does not forget the manner in which the chapter is introduced, there are variations on this refrain, which I now cite: "Be holy, for I the Lord, your God, am holy." These variations appear regularly in the chapter.

It is not surprising that in a chapter entitled one should find commandments about those things that concern religious life at all! What **is** surprising is the emphasis upon those things that have to do with human relationships. **The Torah leaves absolutely no doubt** that holiness may be achieved by religious reverence alone. It is made clear, however, that holiness must be comprised also by a portion of the social contract. The theme, or refrain, "I am the Lord, your God," it appears, follows those commandments which, on the surface, at least, seem to fall into the category, that is to say, between human beings as opposed to between God and humanity. This theme is designed to demonstrate that, what might appear to be, commandments between human being and human being are, in reality, also between God and humanity.

Thus there are **not** two categories of there **exists only one** category of that is to say between God and humanity, which takes into consideration not only all, but also a sub-series, if I may call it that, of relationships between human beings. ***In other words, the manner in which I treat my fellow human beings is an indication of my rapport with God.***

If the message of Kedoshim were that by our own actions we wish to imitate God, we would be justified in thinking that these actions have the highest importance. Despite the fact that one finds a repetition of the Ten Commandments in the contents of this chapter, one also finds the existence of commandments that are very simple, very down-to-earth, one might say. These take into account prohibitions against harboring a grudge, thoughts of taking vengeance upon someone and speaking ill or spreading gossip while chatting with another person.

Other prohibitions are so simple that one could say that they are self-evident. Must one be commanded not to speak ill of the deaf ...or be commanded not to put a stumbling block in the path of a blind person? The Torah also says: ***"You will not withhold the wages of a worker until the next morning."***and the Torah also points out that he who commits such a sin must be reproached!

Is this alone what makes a people holy? I think not. I believe, rather, that one can find God in the details. Thus, for example, I would like to indicate what one of our sages says about not putting anything in the way of a blind person, which would cause him to stumble:

In the Talmud, Abaye wrote that the verse cited above teaches that if one lives in a town where there is no demarcation of a cemetery, or the graves are not marked, it is necessary to mark the graves. In that way the Priests, or Kohanim,

would know where they are, so that they might avoid entry to a place where it is forbidden for them to go: a cemetery. There is neither provocation here, neither deception, nor a temptation.

Let us say that you have moved to a community after the construction of a cemetery and it is the tradition of the community not to mark the graves. Nor has it been for a long time. Nevertheless, it is the edict or decree of Abaye that one is responsible. He says that if one belongs **to** a community one **is, by extension, responsible for what happens in that community.**

Precisely, in order to construct a holy community, no one has the right to say, "It was not I who created the problem, therefore it is not my responsibility to find a solution." In a holy community it is not possible for people to do nothing when it is obvious that action must be taken in a dangerous or illegal situation.

There are other citations in Kedoshim, which reinforce the notion that God is in the details. *Nevertheless it must be remembered that the Torah was written by an agrarian society.* The Torah speaks of vengeance, evildoing, grudges and foul play, but it also speaks of the ancient equivalents of the farms and homes of today.

Instead of regarding what I have just said as a diminution of the rules and teachings in the Torah, it would be better that we understand that what I have said is again an effort to find God in the details. Let us recall the Viddui, the confession of sins on Yom Kippur, which, in its long list of wrongs enumerates the great errors we have made as well as the small.

Those who composed the Kedoshim knew very well that most of us would not be guilty of taking vengeance,¹ carrying a grudge or even things of a greater magnitude. Most of us, however, **are capable of and guilty of** those small wrongs and faults that happen every day. We are not going to commit murder nor are we going to steal or maim. But We **will** make the error of saying something in jest, insulting some one without wishing to; we **will** degrade and/or damage some one without knowing or without wishing to. It is our natural and human tendency, **dare I say, frailty, to dismiss** lightly, if I might say the word, acts which seemingly have no importance. After all, we didn't really want to do the wrong thing or hurt anyone, did we?

If we respond to our neighbors in an agreeable manner, it is quite possible that they will respond to us in the same way. It is in this fashion, with this kind of rapport, this kind of communication, that a holy community is built.

Finally, Kedoshim teaches us that in Judaism, all things, the great and the small, are important. The tradition recognizes that a holy community is built little by little, act upon act, good deed upon good deed. The concept of "**Imitatio Dei**" means that we must, at the very least, think about what God expects of us. When we, in our turn, recognize that all of our actions, both great and small, toward our fellow human beings, are equally important, we will have begun to respond to the divine imperative: "**Kedoshim Tih'yu, Be holy.**"

Lyon, le 11 octobre 1997 10 Tishri 5758