

**Parshat Acharei Mot - Kedoshim**  
**Backwards Revelation**  
**Aliza Libman Baronofsky - Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track**

The celebration of Israel's 72nd birthday (a chai multiple!) this week is an occasion where minhagim diverge: do we say Hallel? Do we say Hallel with a bracha? Growing up in Toronto, my Zionist girls' school made sure to bus us on Yom Ha'Atzmaut to a place where we could daven with a minyan and say Hallel with a bracha. Among the reasons for this custom is the clarity of the miracle: In 1948, the Jews had an indomitable spirit but were militarily outmatched. For those who are looking for it, the survival of the fledgling state is a clear sign of the hand of God.

Once we, the Jewish people, had the ability to have a state, we also had to answer questions about the kind of state we would build. Many of these questions rage on until this day: how does Israel balance the tension of being a Jewish state and a democratic state? How does it provide for the less fortunate? How does it treat its non-Jewish citizens and resident aliens? What higher moral compass must the Jewish state have to be worthy of the gift it has been given?

Those who wish to answer these questions have often looked to the Torah, and our Torah portion provides much food for thought on these questions. The opening words of Parshat Kedoshim tell us that we must strive to be *Kadosh*, a multi-faceted term that is translated as 'holy' but can be best explained by noting that it is a descriptor of what God is:

”וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

דַּבֵּר אֶל-כָּל-עַדְת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy.” (Leviticus 19:1-2)

This week is a double parsha with a curious change in topic: In the first part of Parshat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim, Sefer Vayikra pivots from its first 17 chapters, which address the Kohanim exclusively, to the final half of the book, which is addressed more generally to all of the Jewish people.

Rabbi Menachem Leibtag of Yeshivat Har Etzion, notes that Sefer Vayikra is known traditionally as Torat Kohanim and the first 17 chapters provide guidelines for the descendants of Aharon, the Kohanim who represent the Jewish people to God. Rabbi Leibtag argues, though, that when the Jews accepted the covenant at Sinai, God made them all into Kohanim:

”וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ-לִי מִמְּלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ

but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:6)

The juxtaposition of our parsha's title, Kedoshim, and the need to be a nation of Kohanim answers the question, 'how are we to be a nation of Kohanim?' By following God's exhortation to be Kadosh, we can be Kohanim: a nation that represents God to the world. Like God is Kadosh, we are Kadosh and we show the world what it means to be Kadosh.

The parsha, particularly chapter 19, lays out many ways to be a Kadosh nation. Starting with the power duo of honoring your parents and Shabbat and ending with honest weights and measures, the middle is filled with laws about justice, witchcraft, how to maintain a Kadosh body, crops that must be given to the

poor and much more. As early as the midrash in Vayikra Rabba, close readers of Kedoshim noticed that chapter 19 contains many parallels to the Aseret HaDibrot that form the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Our chapter, it seems, elaborates on how to take those Ten Utterances and turn them into a national system of laws.

Each law in the parsha is worthy of its own shiur, but I'd like to zoom in on the final law chosen for this illustrious chapter:

לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂוּ עֹל בַּמִּשְׁפָּט בַּמִּדָּה בַּמִּשְׁקָל וּבַמִּשׁוּרָה

You shall not pervert justice [by falsifying] measures of length, weight, or capacity.

מֵאֲזַנִּי צֶדֶק אֲבִנִּי-צֶדֶק אֵיפֶת צֶדֶק וְהִין צֶדֶק יְהוָה לָכֵן אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר-הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

You shall have an honest balance, honest weights, an honest ephah, and an honest hin. I the LORD am your God who freed you from the land of Egypt.” (Leviticus 19:35-36)

The first clause is a throwback to verse 15, where the judges of our nation were told not to bias their judgements in support of either poor or powerful people. Here the phrase does not seem to be the simplest way to say “maintain honest weights and don’t cheat people.” The Torah knows it is speaking to a nation that will have more shopkeepers than judges - the deliberate reference to judicial integrity tells merchants and those with weights and measures that their daily conduct is no less crucial to having a society based on truth, honesty and trust.

In his commentary, the Ha’Emek Davar, the Netziv tells us that while this law could have been included in a general prohibition of stealing, it is mentioned separately to teach how improper weights and measures are wrong even if the person being cheated does not mind. Perhaps the customer is not inclined to be precise or is willing to forgive the improper measurements. Even so, maintaining inaccurate weights and measures is still forbidden by the God who took us out of Egypt. God took us out to be truthful and trustworthy. Any corruption in commerce undermines the fabric of society itself.

There are different customs as to the haftorah for this week’s Torah portion. Sepharadim read a section of Ezekiel 20 while Ashkenazim read a section of Amos 9. Both haftarot refer explicitly to the failure of the people to keep God’s laws. Ezekiel specifically references them following the abhorrent practices of their former Egyptian masters, noting that the Torah is one designed to benefit the people:

וָאֶתֵּן לָהֶם אֶת-חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי הַדְּעֵתִי אוֹתָם אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָם הָאָדָם וְחִי בָהֶם

I gave them My laws and taught them My rules, by the pursuit of which a man shall live.” (Ezekiel 20:11)

In contrast, the Ashkenazi haftorah starts with the most painful assertion by God:

הָלֹא כִבְנֵי כְשִׂיִּים אַתֶּם לִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נָא-הִלֹּא אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל הִעֲלֵיתִי מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּפְלִשְׁתִּיִּים מִכַּפְתּוֹר וְאַרְם מִקִּיר

To Me, O Israelites, you are Just like the Ethiopians — declares the LORD. True, I brought Israel up From the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir.” (Amos 9:7)

If we are not willing to hold ourselves to a high standard, to be Kadosh, to build a society of justice and righteousness, we are no more special than any other nation not chosen by God, we are told. A harsh rebuke, but one that is followed quickly with consolation. Once chosen we cannot be unchosen, and better days are indeed coming.

וְשִׁבְתִּי אֶת-שְׁבוֹת עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבָנָו עָרִים נְשֻׁמוֹת וַיֵּשְׁבוּ וַיִּנְטְעוּ כְרָמִים וַיִּשְׁתּוּ אֶת-יֵינֵם וַעֲשׂוּ גִזְוֹת וְאָכְלוּ אֶת-פְּרִיָהֶם

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I will restore My people Israel. They shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit them; They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine; They shall till gardens and eat their fruits.

וְיִנְטְעֵתִים עַל-אֲדָמָתָם וְלֹא יִנְתָּשׁוּ עוֹד מֵעַל אֲדָמָתָם אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לָהֶם אָמַר ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ

And I will plant them upon their soil, Nevermore to be uprooted from the soil I have given them —said the LORD your God.” (Amos 9:14-15)

This beautiful verse so moved me that when studying in Israel in 2002, I had it inscribed in a ring from an Old City jeweler. I still cherish it. Nonetheless, thinking about the verse in context, not in isolation, I often find myself asking the question: what choices will lead to greater Kedusha as befits both the words and the spirit of this week's parsha?

I pray that in these times of turmoil, we (and our leaders) all take actions that fulfill our mandate of kedusha.

Shabbat Shalom.



Aliza Libman Baronofsky was born in Ottawa, Ontario and grew up in Toronto. She studied Tanach at Midreshet Lindenbaum and York University, where she earned an advanced certificate in Hebrew and Jewish studies in addition to her academic degrees. Aliza also has an ALM in Math for Teaching from Harvard University. Aliza taught Tanach and math to middle and high school students at the Maimonides School in Brookline, MA from 2005-2016. There, she launched [www.chumashandmath.blogspot.com](http://www.chumashandmath.blogspot.com), a repository of interdisciplinary lesson plans she has designed and implemented. In 2016, Aliza moved with her husband and daughters to Rockville, MD. She now teaches at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School and is a proud member of Kehilat Pardes - the Rock Creek Synagogue, where she volunteers as a Mikvah administrator.