

Judaism's Three Voices By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The nineteenth chapter of Vayikra, with which our parsha begins, is one of the supreme statements of the ethics of the Torah. It's about the right, the good and the holy, and it contains some of Judaism's greatest moral commands: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," and "Let the stranger who lives among you be like your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt."

But the chapter is also surpassingly strange. It contains what looks like a random jumble of commands, many of which have nothing whatever to do with ethics and only the most tenuous connection with holiness:

Do not mate different kinds of animals.

Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed.

Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material. (19)

Do not eat any meat with the blood still in it.

Do not practise divination or sorcery.

Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard. (26-28)

And so on. What have these to do with the right, the good and the holy?

To understand this we have to engage in an enormous leap of insight into the unique moral/social/spiritual vision of the Torah, so unlike anything we find elsewhere.

The West has had many attempts at defining a moral system. Some focused on rationality, others on emotions like sympathy and empathy. For some the central principle was service to the state, for others moral duty, for yet others the greatest happiness of the greatest number. These are all forms of moral simplicity.

Judaism insists on the opposite: moral complexity. The moral life isn't easy. Sometimes duties or loyalties clash. Sometimes reason says one thing, emotion another. More fundamentally, Judaism identified three distinct moral sensibilities each of which has its own voice and vocabulary. They are [1] the ethics of the king, [2] the ethics of the priest and fundamentally, [3] the ethics of the prophet.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel talk about their distinctive sensibilities:

For the teaching of the law [Torah] by the priest will not cease,

nor will counsel [etzah] from the wise [chakham],

nor the word [davar] from the prophets. (Jer. 18:18)

They will go searching for a vision [chazon] from the prophet, priestly instruction in the law [Torah] will cease, the counsel [etzah] of the elders will come to an end. (Ez. 7:26)

Priests think in terms of Torah. Prophets have "the word" or "a vision." Elders and the wise have etzah. What does this mean?

Kings and their courts are associated in Judaism with wisdom – chokhmah, etzah and their synonyms. Several books of Tanakh, most conspicuously Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (Mishlei and Kohelet), are books of "wisdom" of which the supreme exemplar was King Solomon. Wisdom in Judaism is the most universal form of knowledge, and the Wisdom literature is the closest the Hebrew Bible comes to the other literature of the ancient Near East, as well as the Hellenistic sages. It is practical, pragmatic, based on experience and observation; it is judicious, prudent. It is a prescription for a life that is safe and sound, without excess or extremes, but hardly dramatic or transformative. That is the voice of wisdom, the virtue of kings.

The prophetic voice is quite different, impassioned, vivid, radical in its critique of the misuse of power and the exploitative pursuit of wealth. The prophet speaks on behalf of the people, the poor, the downtrodden, the abused. He or she thinks of the moral life in terms of relationships: between God and humanity and between human beings themselves. The key terms for the prophet are tzedek (distributive justice), mishpat (retributive justice), chessed (loving kindness) and rachamim (mercy, compassion). The prophet has emotional intelligence, sympathy and empathy, and feels the plight of the lonely and oppressed. Prophecy is never abstract. It doesn't think in terms of universals. It responds to the here and now of time and place. The priest hears the word of God for all time. The prophet hears the word of God for this time.

The ethic of the priest, and of holiness generally, is different again. The key activities of the priest are lehavdil – to discriminate, distinguish and divide – and lehorot – to instruct people in the law, both generally as teachers and in specific instances as judges. The key words of the priest are kodesh and chol (holy and secular), tamei and tahor (impure and pure).

The single most important passage in the Torah that speaks in the priestly voice is Chapter 1 of Bereishit, the narrative of creation. Here too a key verb is lehavdil, to divide, which appears five times. God divides between light and dark, the upper and lower waters, and day and night. Other key words are "bless" – God blesses the animals, humankind, and the seventh day; and "sanctify" (kadesh) – at the end of creation God sanctifies the Shabbat. Overwhelmingly elsewhere in the Torah the verb lehavdil and the root kadosh occur in a priestly context; and it is the priests who bless the people.

The task of the priest, like God at creation, is to bring order out of chaos. The priest establishes boundaries in both time and space. There are holy times and holy places, and each time and place has its own integrity, its own setting in the total scheme of things. The kohen's protest is against the blurring of boundaries so common in pagan religions – between gods and humans, between life and death, between the sexes and so on. A sin, for the kohen, is an act in the wrong place, and its punishment is exile, being cast out of your rightful place. A good society, for the kohen, is one in which everything is in its proper place, and the kohen has special sensitivity toward the stranger, the person who has no place of his or her own.

The strange collection of commands in Kedoshim thus turns out not to be strange at all. The holiness code sees love and justice as part of a total vision of an ordered universe in which each thing, person and act has their rightful place, and it is this order that is threatened when the boundary between different kinds of animals, grain, fabrics is breached; when the human body is lacerated; or when people eat blood, the sign of death, in order to feed life.

In the secular West we are familiar with the voice of wisdom. It is common ground between the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and the great sages from Aristotle to Marcus Aurelius to Montaigne. We know, too, the prophetic voice and what Einstein called its “almost fanatical love of justice.” We are far less familiar with the priestly idea that just as there is a scientific order to nature, so there is a moral order, and it consists in keeping separate the things that are separate, and maintaining the boundaries that respect the integrity of the world God created and seven times pronounced good.

The priestly voice is not marginal to Judaism. It is central, essential. It is the voice of the Torah’s first chapter. It is the voice that defined the Jewish vocation as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” It dominates Vayikra, the central book of the Torah. And whereas the prophetic spirit lives on in aggadah, the priestly voice prevails in halakhah. And the very name Torah – from the verb lehorot – is a priestly word.

Perhaps the idea of ecology, one of the key discoveries of modern times, will allow us to understand better the priestly vision and its code of holiness, both of which see ethics not just as practical wisdom or prophetic justice but also as honouring the deep structure – the sacred ontology – of being. An ordered universe is a moral universe, a world at peace with its Creator and itself.

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