

# Echoes of Eden

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## Parashat Kedoshim 5774

### Creating Holiness

As Parashat Kedoshim begins, Moshe is instructed to assemble the entire community for a public reading of a specific set of laws. The stated purpose of this assembly is to achieve holiness. This exercise should be considered in light of a statement found in the previous parasha which serves as the backdrop or background for what will follow: In order for the enterprise we call “Judaism” to be sustained in the Promised Land, a different standard of decency will be required. Israel is a holy land, and it will not tolerate certain behaviors; its delicate constitution will literally “vomit out” indecency.

The specific laws that are to be read at this public gathering bear a striking similarity to the set of laws which were transmitted publicly, to the entire nation, at the foot of Mount Sinai – laws that came to be known as the Ten Commandments. Traditionally, the Ten Commandments, as a legal corpus, are considered the framework of Judaism’s religious, social and moral system. Far more than ten utterances of specific legislation, they are principles of law – principles that are expanded upon and applied in various ways in Parashat Kedoshim.

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And yet, as important as the Ten Commandments are in defining Jewish mores and practice, there is another set of laws, introduced at the very dawn of creation, known as the Seven Noahide Laws. The existence of this universal corpus explains the seemingly odd fact that Judaism is not, nor has it ever been, a proselytizing religion. The Seven Noahide laws were given to all of mankind as a means to perfect humanity, while the more demanding and arduous strictures and limitations called for by Jewish law were never seen as obligatory for all of mankind.

Careful consideration of the Seven Noahide Laws reveals a fairly obvious correlation to the Ten Commandments. The Noahide Laws include creating a just legal system with a functioning judiciary, and the prohibition of idolatry, murder, theft, sexual immorality, blasphemy and eating the limb of a live animal. With the exception of latter, the “overlap” with the Ten Commandments is unmistakable. What is most striking, though, is what is not included in the Noahide laws: Honoring one’s parents and Shabbat observance.

Although shemirat Shabbat (Sabbath observance) has become a benchmark for the Jewish religious experience, had non-Jews been ordered to commemorate the seventh day, and thus acknowledge God as the Creator of the universe, we would not have been surprised. Similarly, had the commandment to honor one’s parents been bestowed upon all “Noahides,” we would have no trouble grasping the universal importance of this law. Nonetheless, Noah and his descendants were not required to observe the Sabbath or to honor their parents.

Keeping this anomaly in mind, it is surely no coincidence that the very first laws that are to be read publicly at the assembly designed to create holiness in the Jewish polis, the laws that immediately follow the commandment to “be holy,” are precisely the elements of the Ten Commandments that do not bind the Noahide: “Man shall have reverence for his mother and father, and guard my Sabbaths; I am God.”

The context makes it clear: It is these particulars that are the core of holiness. Considered together, we may say that they reflect a perspective that is unique to Judaism: While all the other laws deal with the present, only these elements deal with the past - Shabbat as a testimony to the creation of the universe, and reverence for parents who brought us into the world.

The Torah demands decency of the non-Jew; refraining from not taking another’s life, spouse or physical possessions is basic decency. However, the Torah does not require that the common man cultivate historical consciousness, a sense of where we came from or why we are here, who created us, who brought us into the world and who nurtured us. The laws that are unique to the Ten Commandments require us to keep a constant eye on the past, and this is a uniquely Jewish requirement that creates a uniquely Jewish perspective and experience.

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Modern man, so full of hubris and an exaggerated sense of importance, looks at the past as being quaint, naïve, and barely relevant. Perhaps this is collateral damage of belief in an evolutionary process in which one's ancestors were primates. In contrast, the elements of the Ten Commandments that are uniquely Jewish requirements teach us to look to the past as we move forward. Thus, no matter how sophisticated we become, the Sabbath remains relevant - perhaps even more than ever in a world of constant digital access and stimulation. The Torah teaches us that no matter how smart and important we think we have become, we must respect and cherish the previous generation, especially those who nurtured us, cared for us, gave us their unconditional love – and made our progress possible. The result of this perspective is a life steeped in holiness.

For a more in depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/04/audioessaysvideo-parashat-kedoshim.html>