‘‘In appreciation of Kedoshim’’

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

I happen to love the sidrah Kedoshim, and not just because it’s the Barmitzvah sidrah of my firstborn son. It seems to get to the heart of what Judaism – indeed religion – is about. It arguably conveys more than any other sidrah God’s ethical nature with unsurpassed clarity.

Yes, the Ten Commandments are the kernel of the revelation on Sinai, but they read more like a constitution, a set of quick-fire imperatives— ‘Do this! Don’t do that! — rather than an appeal to the emotions, a plea to respond to God’s will as a filial duty, as a token of love and as a desire to please Him. Perhaps it was the prescriptive, almost dictatorial, nature of the Ten Commandments that prompted our sages to depict God as suspending Mount Sinai over the heads of the Israelites, saying, ‘If you accept the commandments, fine; If you do not, [I’ll drop the mountain over your heads, and] here will be your graves!’

Perhaps there was a reason for that Sinaitic conciseness. While in Egypt, the Israelites had witnessed God purely as a retributive power. They had watched as awed spectators while God wielded His ‘strong hand and outstretched arm’ against the Egyptians. God had dealt exclusively with Moses. Israel was the third party, kept well at a distance, unable to cement any meaningful spiritual relationship. Such a concept of God was akin to what philosophers would later describe as that of transcendence.

This explains why, at Sinai, a mere three months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites were overwhelmed at the prospect of a divine encounter. This is reflected in the fact that, after the second of the Decalogue Commandments, the people cried out to Moses in trepidation, ‘You speak the words and we’ll listen; for if God continues to do so we will assuredly die!’ (Ex. 20:16). This explains why, after the second commandment, the language suddenly switches from the 1st person direct speech— ‘*I* am the Lord, *your* God…Have no other gods before *Me*…For I, the Lord *Your God*, am a jealous God (20:1-6)…— to third person speech as Moses takes over as speaker and refers to

God indirectly— 'For *the Lord* will not hold *him* guiltless that takes *His name* in vain' (7ff).

That trepidation did not abate, even when the law-code of Kedoshim was later communicated to Israel, a body of law no less significant than that of the Decalogue. Indeed, rabbinic tradition— emphasizing the introductory words of the sidrah, 'God told Moses, ''Speak to the entire assembly of the Children of Israel''' (Lev. 19:1-2) — has it that Kedoshim was revealed to Israel in the context of an identical special gathering of the entire nation as that of the Sinaitic Decalogue.

There were, however, several differences:

(i) At Sinai, as we have observed, God made an unsuccessful attempt to address Israel directly; In Kedoshim God communicates through his proxy, Moses.

(ii) the Decalogue was a terse, quick-fire succession of, primarily, 'Thou shalt *not* do' laws. They were clearly intended as a stark warning to Israel against transgressing the very basic ethical and moral principles, and were so concise that the most simple of the rough Israelites – the 3rd and 4th of 'the four sons'— could grasp. Kedoshim, on the other hand, addresses a slightly more sophisticated people that had learnt how to develop relationships and whose horizons were becoming broader.

(iii) At Sinai there is no mention of the nature of God. To make the Israelites aware of His Presence, God had to create an awesome physical manifestation of thunder, lightning, thick cloud and shofar blast (Ex.19:16). Its objective was to create a similarly physical response— 'And all the people in the camp trembled.' They were not yet sufficiently mature for any emotional or spiritual awareness. By the time they received the Kedoshim revelation, on the other hand, they were able to assimilate concepts as abstract as the two contained in Moses opening words: 'Be holy, for I, the Lord Your God, am holy.'

The holiness of God is difficult enough for modern thinkers to grasp, with the benefit of two thousand years of philosophical and theological speculation. The holiness of man is not all that easier to define, let alone achieve!

The sentence's call also appears to be a conceptual *non-sequitur*. It might be understood were man to have been created on a spiritual par with God. But

the way things are, and given our premise that God is infinitely more holy than man (though, in truth, we can have no idea of the comparative levels over which God presides!), He can never possibly serve as a paradigm for man, or even for a role-model! 'For no man can see me and live' (Ex. 33:20). Neither can living man see— or perceive!

(iv) At Sinai the Israelites were told what *not* to do to their neighbour, but not how to build a relationship with him or her. In Kedoshim we have that majestic summons to respect parents (Lev 19:3) and show honour to the aged (v.32); to 'love one's neighbour as oneself' (v.18); to conduct one's affairs with integrity (v.11-12); to respect the dignity of all people, especially the physically and mentally challenged (v.14); to administer justice with total impartiality (v.15); to run to one's neighbour's aid and not stand idly by when (s)he is in trouble (v.16); to pay one's workers' wages promptly and not to subject them to exploitation (v.13); to maintain a high standard of business ethics (35-36); to maintain strict standards of morality (20:10-21) etc., etc.

(v) Sinai spoke in generalities. It gave no encouragement to the desert wanderers regarding their and their offspring's future. It referred to the past, even describing God as the One 'who brought them out of the land of Egypt,' but gave no pointer to their future destiny. Kedoshim, on the other hand, addressed the situation – וכי תבואו אל הארץ — 'when you come into the land'; how to leave the land fallow before enjoying its fruit (v. 23); how to welcome strangers who seek residency in your land and how 'to love them as oneself' (vv. 33-34). It referred to the Promised Land as one 'flowing with milk and honey' (20:24), intensifying the nation's hope, and making that land the context for a spiritual, moral and ethical challenge, that Israel might become a light to the nation.

That is why the Midrash hails the importance of Kedoshim, and explains why it merited a Sinai-like summons to the entire nation to assemble to listen to its contents. Namely, 'because the majority of the Torah's essential elements are included in it' (see *Rashi* on v.1).

Hence my opening assessment of this sidrah as one that gets to the heart of what Judaism – indeed religion – is about, and that it arguably conveys, more than any other sidrah, God's ethical nature with unsurpassed clarity. And that is why *I love the sidrah Kedoshim!*

Keep well,

Shabbat shalom

Jeffrey