



DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

Parshat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim 5772

May 5, 2012

Something's different! This week marks the final installment of an experimental initiative: the Dvar Tzedek Text Study. Periodically over the past several months, our weekly Torah commentary has taken this interactive format. We hope that you'll use this text study to actively engage with the *parshah* and contemporary global justice issues.

Consider using this text study in any of the following ways:

- Learn collectively. Discuss it with friends, family or colleagues. Try using it as a conversation-starter at your Shabbat table.
- Enrich your own learning. Read it as you would a regular Dvar Tzedek and reflect on the questions it raises.
- Teach. Use the ideas and reactions it sparks in you as the basis for your own *dvar Torah*.

Please take two minutes to tell us what you think of this experimental format by completing this [feedback form](#).

Introduction

Parshat Kedoshim—the second half of this week's double *parshah*—opens with this powerful and mystifying statement:

Leviticus 19:1-2

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I—Adonai your God— am holy.

ויקרא יט: א-ב

וַיְדַבֵּר ה', אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. דַּבֵּר אֶל-כָּל-עַדְת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם--קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ: כִּי קְדוֹשׁ, אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

- What does the injunction 'you shall be holy' mean to you?
- What do you believe makes a community holy?

Immediately following this enigmatic commandment to "be holy" is a long list of laws, which include things like sacrificial worship, honoring one's parents and treating elders with respect. From this context, we can understand each of these laws as describing how a person should act in order to 'be holy.' Among them are two laws about responding to the poor:

1) Leviticus 19:9-10

9. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. 10. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I, Adonai, am your God.

ויקרא יט: ט-י

ט. וּבְקַצְרְכֶם אֶת-קְצִיר אֲרָצְכֶם, לֹא תִכְלֶה פְּאֵת שְׂדֵךְ לַקָּצֵר; וְלִקְט קְצִירְךָ, לֹא תִלְקֹט. י. וְכִרְמֶךָ לֹא תַעֲוִלֵל, וּפְרִט כְּרִמְךָ לֹא תִלְקֹט: לְעֹנִי וְלְגֵר תַּעֲזֹב אֹתָם, אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. . .

2) Leviticus 19:15

15. You shall not render an unfair legal decision: do not favor

ויקרא יט: טו

טו. לֹא-תַעֲשׂוּ עֲוֹל, בְּמִשְׁפָּט—לֹא-תִשָּׂא פָּנֶי-דָל,

the poor or show deference to the rich. With justice you shall judge your kinsman.

וְלֹא תִהְיֶה רֵדָה פְּנֵי גְדוֹל בְּצַדִּיק, תִּשְׁפֹּט עִמִּיתְךָ.

- What can we learn about what it means to ‘be holy’ from the requirement to leave behind the produce in the corners of fields and the gleanings for poor people to gather?
- What can we learn about what it means to ‘be holy’ from the requirement to treat poor people and rich people equally and justly before the law?
- What more can we learn about what it means to ‘be holy’ from the inclusion of both of these commandments in the same list?

These laws paint a picture of the biblical ideal of a holy society—one in which we provide support for the vulnerable *and* guarantee them the rights that make it possible for them to overcome that vulnerability.

- In what ways is our own society “holy” according to this definition—or failing to be so?

The need, central to the biblical conception of holiness, for both economic support and legal justice for the poor is beautifully articulated in a modern context by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan:

Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan¹

Even if he can vote to choose his rulers, a young man with AIDS who cannot read or write and lives on the brink of starvation is not truly free. Equally, even if she earns enough to live, a woman who lives in the shadow of daily violence and has no say in how her country is run is not truly free. Larger freedom implies that men and women everywhere have the right to be governed by their own consent, under law, in a society where all individuals can, without discrimination or retribution, speak, worship and associate freely. They must also be free from want—so that the death sentences of extreme poverty and infectious disease are lifted from their lives.

- What do you believe people need from their societies in order to be free?

Annan asserts that in order to be fully free, one must be able to both meet immediate needs such as food, medicine and financial security *and* have access to civil rights such as political participation and protection from violence. Unfortunately, many aid efforts today provide direct support for immediate needs *but don’t* address underlying injustices. Human rights professor Dr. Peter Uvin illustrates why it is important to work on both fronts:

Dr. Peter Uvin²

A few months in to the refugee crises in Zaire that began in the summer of 1994 after the Rwandan genocide, a colleague went to Goma for an assessment of the health and nutritional situation in the [refugee] camps. Upon return, he told me that nutrition intakes in the camp were high, as were vaccination rates and access to health care. As a matter of fact, he proudly told me, these rates were better than they had been *before* people fled their homes... According to the vision of progressive development then in vogue, people in these camps were “more developed” than before. We intuitively feel that this is nonsense, of course. When people are deprived of their freedom... development has emphatically *not* taken place. This story tells us that there is no way to separate human rights from economic and social improvement.

- What is missing from the vision of development that Uvin critiques?
- How might Annan and Uvin’s analyses, and the *parshah’s* vision of holiness, influence your own activism and the causes you support?

¹ “In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security, and Human Rights for All: Report of the Secretary General.” Presented to the 59th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, March 21, 2005. Page 6. Available at <http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/chap1.htm>.

² Peter Uvin, *Human Rights and Development* (Kumarian Press, 2004) 122-123.

Conclusion

The grassroots organizations that AJWS supports strive to strike this holy balance—working for development and human rights together. We challenge you to think deeply about this question in relation to your own *tzedakah* as well: Are you supporting work (in your own community or around the world) that provides direct aid *and* addresses long-term issues of injustice? We encourage you to use [this giving plan](#) to think critically and constructively about balancing immediate need and structural change in your own giving. Together we can assure that people everywhere have access to the resources and rights they need to thrive. Together we can build a holy world.

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