

Being a Good Person is Only Half of the Job

*Parashat
Acharei Mot-Kedoshim*



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This Shabbat we study the weekly Torah portion Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim. In it we learn about Yom Kippur, the holiest and most important day in Judaism.

During this holiday, the entire nation, and in fact, most Jews scattered around the world, join together in fasting and prayer. This is a day of national repentance and forgiveness, in which every person searches out his own life and thinks of who he might have hurt. We ask for forgiveness, and in return, we forgive others who have wronged us.

On Yom Kippur, the priest would enter into the innermost room, the Holy of Holies. Throughout the rest of the year, entrance was forbidden, and only on this particular occasion would the priest enter as part of his service to of God.

A Very Rich Torah Portion

In this portion we also learn about the concept of holiness. The following famous saying appears in our parasha:

“...Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” – Leviticus 19:2b [NIV]

As a result of this holy requirement, we have a rather immense collection of commandments that God requires of us.

A key verse upon which the entire Torah hinges also appears in our parasha:

“...love your neighbor as yourself...” – Leviticus 19:18b [NIV]

Both Yeshua and Paul quoted this verse as a summary of the entire Torah. By the way, this commandment is one of 50 commandments that are part of God's requirement for us to be holy.

In addition, this week, together with all of Israel, we celebrated Israel's 70th year of Independence. When I look at the State of Israel, I am moved by the enormity and intensity of the miracle that God has performed in our time, right before our eyes. God has gathered us from the four corners of the earth and re-established the State of Israel as a fulfillment of all the prophecies.

What are Laws and Decrees, and How Do We Live by Them?

As you can see, our parasha is extremely rich and can be studied again and again, each time providing new insights. However, the verses that caught my attention in particular from this week are the following:

“You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the Lord your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the person who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord.” – Leviticus 18:4,5 [NIV]

In the Bible there are other similar verses with the same meaning, for example:

*“I gave them my decrees and made known to them my laws, by which the person who obeys them will live.” – Ezekiel 20:11
[NIV]*

Today, I want to discuss two questions: What are the decrees and laws that we are to keep and obey? Second, what does it truly mean to live and abide by them?

Two Types of Commandments

Let us begin by discussing what exactly these laws and decrees are. The Jewish Sages interpret them quite interestingly. The terms, “decrees” and “laws” denote two types of commandments in the Bible.

The difference between them is that laws are notions that are described in the Torah. Meaning that their benefits are known and their usefulness is evident. They can be called common sense commandments, and they include civil law and moral precepts, such as the prohibition against murder, bearing false witness, and so forth.

“Decrees,” are the commandments whose rationale is unknown. They include the ritual commandments and the obligations between man and God. This includes commandments that have no point in civil law, such as observing the Sabbath.

These two terms, “decrees and laws,” appear together in the Bible about 20 times. It would be logical to say that these two sets of commandments complement one another, and together deal with the relationship between man and his fellow man, and between man and God.

The laws, which are like civil laws, are intended to introduce moral quality into life, so that we can live correct and proper lives in our society, between man and his fellow man. The laws are intended to grant a person holiness and closeness to God.

Can't I Just be a Good Person?

One of the questions that always arises in every religious discussion is the following: If there's a person who does good, who seeks to help people, isn't that enough? The answer is simple - he only fulfills half of the work.

He keeps the laws, but what about the decrees that sanctify people and bring them closer to God? You cannot separate the two, the decrees and laws go together.

What grants a person sanctification? Our parasha sets forth the requirements for us humans to obey: It is forbidden to steal, to lie, we are required to save a person in danger, one must judge with justice, we are obligated to observe the Sabbath day, as well as 50 additional commandments. Most importantly, we must love our neighbor as ourselves.

How Then Should We Live?

Now, I would like to move on to what it means to live by these decrees and commandments. I found that there are three ways to understand this concept.

Let's remember the verses:

“You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the Lord your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the person who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord.” - Leviticus 18:4,5 [NIV]

The prophet Ezekiel also refers to these verses in Ezekiel 20:11.

The first step in understanding this complex concept, is that a person's life will be according to the word of God. The decrees and the laws, commandments, restrictions, and the requirements of God should be at the top of his priorities.

His life should be based on scripture, and his life conducted around the decrees and laws. More or less, these are the boundaries created by God, and man must live within this framework.

The idea is that nothing can break through these boundaries, this is a legalistic approach.

The second way is to understand that life is the goal behind them. God presents us with the formula for a good, healthy, efficient, and correct life. If a person lives according to the way God presents, he will be considered a good person.

If there are commandments or situations that clash with morality, courtesy, life, or the value of life. Preserving life is above all the commandments, and it is possible and necessary to desecrate all of them in order to save lives.

From this, if there is a clash between “pikuach nefesh” (the preservation of human life) and the commandments, then the sanctity of life is more important, because God's emphasis is that commandments are given to man so that he can live.

The third way to look at this concept is in accordance with its context. God is speaking about the people who lived in the land before the nation of Israel, and they did not maintain a correct and proper lifestyle, on the contrary, they corrupted and defiled the land.

God warns the people, if you want to live in the land, the people, throughout its generations, have to follow these decrees and laws. It is about the continuity of the people and the family, to pass on to future generations, so that they can live on and on in the Land of Israel.

In Conclusion

Today, we are in the middle of the 70th anniversary of the State of Israel, but we must not forget who brought us back here, who blessed us, and thanks to Him this country was established. Further, if we want to live here for generations, we must return and keep the decrees and laws of God.

May we all have a peaceful Shabbat, and a happy birthday to the State of Israel.

**The Teachings of
Messiah Yeshua
*in a Jewish Context***

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