

Dear Community,

In defining Judaism's views on various ideas, to ourselves and to others, we sometimes get mired in the morass of the negative definition. "Judaism's view on the afterlife? Well, it's not the Christian view..." -- and then we grind to a halt. Whether we get stuck due to ignorance of what the Torah actually says, or because the sources suggest something that feels foreign, or because it flies in the face of our assumptions of 'rationality', we run the risk of reductionism.

One prime example is the concept of *kedusha*, or holiness. When confronted with this concept, we're often sorely tempted to grasp the facile dilution of humanitarianism. In polite society, airing our views on seeking closeness to G-d, working on our prayer, working on our morality, or confronting the reality of our sexual drives, is frowned upon. We allow people into every other, horrifyingly private, aspects of our lives: Fit-Bit data, plans for reading this summer, our motivation to 'make a difference,' medical journeys, love letters to our partners... but we shy away publicly from the aspects of our lives that are and should be higher on our hierarchy of values. We are commanded to be holy. The Rambam does not count this as a separate commandment, but writes that this mitzvah underlies all the other commandments.

The Ibn Ezra expounds that it is possible to find all the mitzvot of the Ten Commandments spread throughout Parshas Kedoshim, but in a new order. The second verse of the Parsha commands us to be holy, "for G-d is holy." This verse corresponds to the first of the ten commandments: "I am Hashem, your G-d." The third verse commands us to honoring our parents and the Shabbos. As the verses go on, we find the prohibition of theft, of swearing falsely, and so on.

The Ibn Ezra does not address why the ordering is different. Why would honoring one's parents appear before idol-worship and swearing falsely? In the original Ten Commandments, Shabbat and honoring one's parents were numbers four and five. In addition, it is perplexing why the commandment to be holy gives as motivation "*imitatio dei*," similarity to G-d, as opposed to the intrinsic virtue of holiness?

The S'forno explains the purpose of the pursuit of holiness is to accentuate and develop our divine nature. This enables us to reflect G-dliness, and enables us to engage in the divine work that is our worldly mission. This is the applied form of the First Commandment: acting on our awareness of G-d as the source of existence and purpose.

Thus, it seems that Kedoshim is listing the applications of the Ten Commandments. Therefore, the ordering is different. First, we need to realize what the goal is, that is perfecting ourselves to do work we were sent here to do. But how does one connect with G-d? This is addressed by the commandments to honor our parents and the Shabbos.

Honoring one's parents highlights the model for the relationship that we have with G-d and that G-d has with us. If we can develop the proper attitude towards our parents, that model translates directly to our perception of and relationship with G-d. In fact, social psychology research focuses on the correlation between one's personal relationship with their parents and one's connection to G-d.

The second connection we can form to G-d is through Shabbos, the time of the week that we are to focus on the divinity of creation and our place within it. Shabbos is considered by our sages as one of the central vehicles of exposure and connection to G-d in a visceral, existential way. Therefore, the observance of these two commandments are critical in endowing us with the conception of G-d that shapes our approach to the rest of the commandments.

If we ignore our intrinsic holiness (based on G-d's holiness); if we allow our distorted sense of self, illusions of self-control, ignorance of our motivations, and the glorification of our base instincts; how can we hope to find meaning in any of the rest of morality? And if we allow ourselves to be triggered by the word "holiness" then we are simple Pavlovian creatures, governed by instinct and deprived of our higher selves.

The world of Mussar, Jewish ethics, gives us tools and strategies to engage with ourselves and work towards empowering us to actualize our real potential. Mussar works are widely available and accessible, written in many languages. We should utilize these resources to galvanize our growth.

Good Shabbos,  
Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein