

## Parashat K'doshim

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This *Shabbat* we read a double Torah portion, and the second *Parasha* is called *K'doshim*. It is named after the phrase "*K'doshim tih'yu*", "*You shall be holy*", and it contains a section of our laws known as the **Holiness Code**.

There are three kinds of *Mitzvot* in the **Holiness Code**: ritual, civil, and ethical. The civil laws tend to be practical, while the ethical laws are less concrete. However, I like to combine the civil and ethical categories into an overarching concept of "social justice laws".

An example of these ritual laws is the command to observe Shabbat. An example of practical civil laws is for shopkeepers to have honest weights in their stores. An example of ethical laws is the command to show respect for the elderly.

One ethical law in particular has many implications for our lives. While it has practical aspects, if we dig deeper we can also find other layers inside it which operate in our relationships with each other.

Chapter 19, verse 14 says, "*Do not insult the deaf nor place a stumbling block before the blind.*" On the surface, one can simply view this as practical advice for being nice to handicapped people. However, there is more to this law than that initial simplistic reading.

There are many ways to be deaf and blind besides the obvious physical handicaps. We can be deaf to advice, deaf to common sense, deaf to our own conscience, and deaf to the needs of others. We can be blind to reality, blind to injustices around us, blind to opportunities and dangers, and blind to the needs of others.

Passion and enthusiasm are both good things for motivating us to move through life with vigor, but passion and enthusiasm can also lead to moral deafness and blindness. Ignorance is less of a danger for most of us than is self-delusion, and self-delusion can also lead to moral deafness and blindness.

So what is our role with each other in dealing with this human tendency? When we purposely give someone bad advice, we are placing a stumbling block before their blindness. When we gossip about someone behind their back, we are insulting their deafness.

When we do not give someone the benefit of the doubt but assume that their human frailties are intentional misdeeds, that is a way of insulting their deafness. When we put people into a situation exposing their weakness rather than playing to their strengths, that is placing a stumbling block before their blindness.

When we take actions which result in someone else committing a wrong-doing, or when we *fail to take actions* which could prevent a wrongdoing on the part of someone, that is actively or passively placing a stumbling block before them. When we tease or

ridicule someone who does not understand the niceties of social interactions or who happens to be different, that is a form of insulting their deafness.

We can be both deaf and blind to the needs of others. I have said that most of the laws in the Holiness Code are really about social justice. These laws are almost idealistic in their demand for altruism, and this is our gift to the world - a system of morals and ethics which places value on the life and well-being of everyone, not just the rich and powerful.

When we fail to act on injustices that we could affect, when we fail to hear cries for attention and help, we are acting out our own blindness and deafness. If we not only ignore these social needs ourselves but also do not bring these needs to the attention of others who might be able to help, then we are passively aiding and abetting their deafness and blindness.

Tempting someone to do wrong is a form of actively placing a stumbling block before them, but we can also passively place a stumbling block before moral or spiritual blindness by simply ignoring inequity, and that is far more insidious. As we heard here recently during our Holocaust programs, all it takes is for good people to keep silent in the face of injustice for evil to prevail.

The challenge of this *mitzvah* in today's Torah portion and all the other social justice laws that accompany it is for us to be the most moral and ethical people we can possibly be. This means not only dealing with our own forms of blindness and deafness, but also actively helping others to cope with their perceptions and their needs.