

SIDRA OF THE WEEK: קדושים

1. Although HaShem taught Mosheh the whole Torah when he was on Mount Sinai, Mosheh our Teacher did not teach the Mitzvos to us until he was bidden to do so by HaShem when He commanded him to “speak to the Children of Israel and tell them ...” The usual procedure then was that Mosheh would teach the Mitzvah first to Aharon, then to Aharon’s two sons, Elozzor and Issommor. Then, with Aharon and his sons still present, Mosheh taught it to the seventy Elders (who constituted the first ever “Sanhedrin”) and finally he taught it again to a selected assembly of the Nation who then taught it further to the entire People. If any query would arise, it would be put firstly to those fortunate people who had themselves heard the Mitzvah taught by Mosheh. If these people could not answer, the problem was put to the Sanhedrin (who had heard it twice from Mosheh). If no one of the Sanhedrin could answer, the question was put to Elozzor or Issommor (who had heard it three times). If they could not answer the difficulty, Aharon, who had heard it four times from Mosheh himself, was asked. If he didn’t know how to resolve the difficulty, the problem was put to Mosheh our Teacher himself. Very exceptionally (only four such occasions are mentioned in the Torah) Mosheh our Teacher had to ask for further instructions or clarification from HaShem.
2. Generally, unless our Chachommim, of blessed memory, tell us otherwise, it can be assumed that the order in which the Mitzvos of HaShem were first taught to us is the same as they are set forth in the Torah. Towards the end of our forty years in the Wilderness, Mosheh our Teacher wrote down the whole Torah exactly as HaShem had taught it to him on Mount Sinai. Because the Torah is precisely as HaShem dictated it to Mosheh — down to the last letter and dot — our Chachommim, of blessed memory, are able to discover special significance in every detail, including the special teachings to be derived from the fact that some items were written down out of regular sequence or not in chronological order.
3. This Sidra contains many of the fundamental principles by which HaShem wishes His People to live, and for that reason HaShem told Mosheh to tell us these Mitzvos, not in his usual way, but to teach them directly to the entire Jewish Nation specially assembled for the purpose. The first of these principles is the Mitzvah to be holy to HaShem. This means that we are to exercise self-control in everything we do, even in those things allowed to us, so that we shall always be disciplined and restrained. Thus does the Torah wish us to train ourselves to be obedient to HaShem and worthy of being His servants. For he who is the slave of his instincts and emotions and passions, cannot be a loyal servant to his Master: only that person who can master his own instincts and emotions can be free, to elevate his life to HaShem’s noble ideals. Thus, even those

things that the Torah allows to us, are to be enjoyed with restraint and self-discipline, for without such self-control one can so easily become “a despicable person with the sanction of the Torah,” the very opposite of what the Torah intends.

4. The Torah commands us concerning the stepping-stones to achieving this state of holiness. Firstly, is the command to fear one’s parents: that way is inculcated into each of us the habit of setting aside our own wishes out of obedience to authority. Secondly, the exhortation to keep the Shabbos as HaShem has commanded, here addressed to parent and child alike, is the great educational lesson in the Nation’s obedience to the Law of HaShem. And thirdly, we are to exclude from our thoughts all ideas of power or authority other than HaShem, and our Divine Service in His honour must be as He has commanded.
5. Only that person — only that Nation — can aspire to a high level of holiness who does not forget those who are less fortunate than himself. The Torah dislikes those who would strive for holiness and yet ignore the needs and feelings of others. There follow, therefore, the laws of consideration for the poor and our sacred duty towards them. It is our obedience to these laws of HaShem that leads to our attaining holiness and it is by imitating the merciful ways of HaShem that we can come closer to Him, for one cannot be holy to G-d and yet disdainful of one’s fellow man and his needs. Such is not holiness, teaches the Torah, but a desecration of the Will of HaShem, for HaShem desires that His Nation shall dwell in peace and harmony, each individual caring for the other, and respecting each other. This, teaches the Torah, is a holy Nation.
6. Thus, the first part of this Sidra, starting with the command to “be holy,” includes the whole range of social law and justice, culminating in what has been called the Golden Rule of Mankind, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” The Torah of HaShem does not recognize the artificial distinction that has been invented which differentiates between so-called religious law and social law: all of HaShem’s Law has the same aim: to ennoble, to refine, to elevate. In this same paragraph that begins with HaShem’s exhortation to us to “be holy,” He commands us concerning fearing parents and guarding the Shabbos. The laws concerning Korbonnos are followed by laws concerning the rights of the poor and our duty towards these people, and the Mitzvah to care for the disabled is preceded by the command to be honest in business and fair in trade. Impartiality in judgement and the prohibitions against tale-bearing and against standing idly by when help is needed are placed together, as are the warning not to bear hatred towards one’s fellow in one’s heart and the duty to gently rebuke the wrongdoer and the prohibitions against taking revenge and bearing a grudge. The laws forbidding the mixing of different species, whether plants or animals, and the law which forbids us to wear a garment in which there is wool and linen together, “Shaatznez,” made of fibres derived from the animal world and the plant world, are listed with the procedure for achieving atonement for transgressing the marriage laws of the Torah which forbid unsuitable “mixing” in the Jewish People. It is the observance of these laws, seemingly

so diverse and yet all commanded by HaShem to promote social harmony within the Torah Nation and harmony between the Torah Nation and HaShem's wider world of Nature, it is only through observing these laws that one can aspire to fulfil the command of HaShem: "Be holy!"

7. The theme of self-restraint and holiness is continued in the laws that follow. The Torah commands the Mitzvah of dedication of any newly-planted fruit trees: for the first three years the produce is totally forbidden ("Orlah") while the produce of the fourth year is to be treated as holy, a source of praises to HaShem. Using a general term intended to include a number of things, the Torah exhorts us to exercise self-control in our eating, and indeed in all our actions and undertakings we are to be mindful of HaShem's rule rather than be led by blind superstitions and meaningless omens. In our appearance, too, we are to observe HaShem's law, and by not removing the Payyos of the head (using any method) or the Payyos of the beard (by means of a razor or any blade razor) we are to sanctify our appearance and are to be identified as His People. As the People of HaShem, we are not to scar our bodies with the pagan marks of bereavement or mourning, for to do so betokens submission to blind fate and the imagined power of death. Our bodies belong to HaShem, the Living G-d, and are to be dedicated solely to His Service, and He does not wish any of us to be a monument to death or the netherworld. Such hopeless resignation to the dark forces, which starts with silly superstitions and omens, stands in stark contrast to the wholesome and healthy life of the People who live by the Law of HaShem. Those who would turn away from the Torah sink lower and lower into the inevitable morass of pagan immorality. Therefore, warns the Torah, do not take notice of omens and superstitions: to do so will lead to the Land becoming full of foul perversion. Only those times that HaShem has commanded to be special — in particular, the Shabbos — and that which HaShem has commanded to be revered — in particular, His Mikdash — are we to venerate, because they are of HaShem and are tokens of His Presence. Instead of paying attention to the occult and oracles, which leads to following blindly down the path of moral destruction, we are bidden to respect the good sense of the experienced old man and the Torah wisdom of the scholar: thus are we to revere HaShem from Whom all wisdom and intelligence emanates.
8. To aspire to a state of holiness, however, it is not enough to keep away from unholy things, and even to revere the holy is not sufficient. If we are to fulfil HaShem's instruction to "be holy," then, says the Torah, our everyday activities with one another must be correct and true, and we must show consideration and indiscriminate friendship to the stranger that lives amongst us, too. To aspire to holiness, teaches the Torah, we must observe the laws of social justice no less than the laws of the Sanctuary.

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9. Again and again the Torah warns us not to allow ourselves to be drawn to the idolatrous practices and immoral ways of the heathen nations, for in those abominations lies the path to destruction. Even if circumstances should hinder the Courts of Law from imposing punishment upon such evildoers, the Torah lays the responsibility for maintaining the high moral standard of the Nation upon the people themselves. The Torah reiterates the duty of honouring parents as the guardians and transmitters of the Torah traditions and repeatedly warns us to be on our guard against all forms of immoral relationships, and some of these are listed in this Sidra.
10. We have been favoured with the good and just laws of HaShem and we are to guard them and observe them. Not for us, says the Torah, are the customs of the heathen nations. We are neither to rejoice in their festivities nor to join in their entertainments, for the ways of the heathens are abhorrent to HaShem. “I have separated you from the nations,” says HaShem, “do not defile yourselves by following in their ways.” Only by remaining separate can we be the Torah Nation of HaShem. Only by keeping His Mitzvos — even the ones for which no reason is stated, like the Laws of Kashrus — for no other reason than that HaShem has commanded them, can we be true to our high calling. As HaShem says, “You shall remain holy to Me, for I, HaShem, am holy and I have separated you from the nations to be Mine.”

For the explanation of the Haftarah of Sidra קדושים please go to HAFTORAHS.