

Online Bible Study Discussion Starters
Gleaning from Leviticus, Number 8
June 21, 2007

Leviticus 19:14-18 (NRSV)

14. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

15. You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.

16. You shall not go around as a slanderer {Meaning of the Hebrew uncertain} among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD.

17. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.

18. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

The subject is neighborliness: how are people to be treated? The continual reminder, “I am Yahweh (the LORD),” says the question is to be answered in terms of the covenant community and its God, not in terms of natural inclinations, human judgements, or prejudices.

The natural questions of human relations are such as, “What can that person do for me?” or “Is that person powerful enough to command my respect?” or “Does that person deserve consideration from me?” Such questions and the attitudes toward self and others they express are rejected. That person is a member of the covenant community of Yahweh, and so my attitude toward and treatment of that person must come from my regard for our God.

Verse 14 is embarrassing. What adult is so juvenile and cruel as to find amusement in ranting at or about a deaf person simply because s/he cannot hear it? Is that funny? Who trips a blind person? That’s sick.

But do we not, as a society, regularly make fun of the vulnerable who cannot retaliate? Years ago, I heard that Johnny Carson had stopped making fun of drunk people because he had seen the devastation alcoholism inflicted upon some of his friends. Well and good, but I think we could make a list of safe targets for jokes who are not people in power but rather people without power.

I have to wonder whether this section of Leviticus is not designed to trigger shame in the first of these “neighborliness” commands. Even if that were not the intent, it seems to me to be the effect. First shame is triggered by the image of an adult’s actually ranting at a deaf person or tripping a blind one. Should we not think how shameful that would be? Okay, now we’re in the right frame of mind to see, perhaps, that God’s concern is not with what shames me but with what actions of mine might shame my neighbor and, therefore, should make me ashamed of myself.

Shame has terrible consequences in the human personality and in society. It is a source, maybe even *the source*, of rudeness, hostility, violence, and terrorism of all sorts. But shame is also a necessary aspect of the human personality. What kind of person would I be if I were immune to all shame, no matter what I said or did to anyone? The word “monster” comes to mind.

The key to love for my neighbor is not benevolence, which can be proud and even selfish sometimes, but *empathy*. Does the shaming of my neighbor move me to feel shame, or does it move me to contempt or disgust for my neighbor? We all hate to be humiliated. Good. Now, do we also hate it when our neighbor is humiliated? That, I believe, is the question.

“ . . . but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The issue is not affection but empathy. I am not to carry a grudge or take revenge because I have empathy even for the neighbor who has wronged me. Here Leviticus is calling us to a higher humanity, which Jesus would pick up and elaborate for his disciples.

The Jewish philosopher and teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, said (in his book, *The Prophets*) that we, the human community, do not need more people who extol the virtues of justice; rather we need more who are offended and distressed by the particular injustices done to others. Imagine what our society and our world would be like if we felt shamed by the shaming of others, if no person were fair game for our enjoyment of disgust.

Am I pleased by someone’s distress? Do I take satisfaction in another person’s humiliation? Would I put a stumbling block in the path of a blind person and then laugh when s/he fell over it? I think the very embarrassment at the thought of what is prohibited in verse 14 has a powerful effect that leads us to the famous and profound Verse 18 from which Jesus took the second of the two greatest commandments, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Upon whom do I look with disgust? Of whom do I speak with scorn? I am not suggesting all ideas are valid or all actions should be accepted; we need to be critical of the policies of those in power. Verse 15 warns the covenant people not to be partial to the poor or defer to the great – is there any doubt which is the more likely danger? – which shows Leviticus is not suggesting “anything goes.” Indifference is a powerfully passive form of contempt. But our neighbor is not to be dehumanized. Feeling for someone else as for myself is called empathy, and empathy is the antidote to the evils people do, actively or passively, to each other.