

Parashah Eighty-Nine

Leviticus 18:1-30; Ezekiel 22:1-12; Romans 1:21-32

notes by Tim Hegg

Living by HaShem's Statutes

The text before us is quite straightforward. In fact, it is so straightforward that it may seem a bit offensive to our western minds. In bygone years in America one would have relegated these prohibitions to some ancient time when people lived more like animals than humans. Surely there has always been fornication and adultery, but incest and other abhorrent sexual behavior was considered unthinkable. Not so now. Every manner of deviant behavior is not only thought to be acceptable, but those who might raise an objection are considered deviant themselves! Righteousness and unrighteousness have exchanged places.

Yet we should not lose sight of the clear structure of our *parashah*. It begins with five verses of introduction, and ends with five verses that repeat the theme of this introduction. In this way, the laws given in our *parashah* are given a common purpose. And what is this purpose? That God's people should be sanctified unto Him, and that in so doing they might set His Name apart in all the earth. The fact that obeying God's laws also produces stable families and community ("...by which a man may live if he does them," v. 5), and therefore affords the greatest joy and comfort possible, is actually secondary to the primary motivation of sanctifying the name of God upon the earth. Thus, first and foremost we must order our lives according to God's revealed will in the Torah because we receive the happy obligation of declaring His holy character as our top priority. The reward for such obedience is His hand of blessing upon us as families, and thus as a community.

The two lands singled out at the beginning of our text are Egypt and Canaan, the place where Israel had been enslaved for hundreds of years, and the place to which they were going as the Torah was revealed. Both of these lands incorporated the most base practices, sinking them into the deep darkness of their pagan religion and worship. R. Moshe Feinstein makes this application:

The deeds of the Canaanites and Egyptians were the most abominable of all the nations. The apparent implication is that there is no harm in imitating the foul deeds of nations that are not evil—but this cannot be so. By singling out these two nations, the Torah teaches Jews never to think complacently that as long as they do not commit the vulgar and obscene sins epitomized by Canaan and Egypt, they will not be corrupted by lesser sins. By focusing on the worst nations, the Torah indicates that sin is a progressive process: "Ordinary" transgressions inevitably lead to more serious ones, until the sinner descends to the morass of Canaan and Egypt. Thus, a Jew must scrupulously avoid even the first step on the road to corruption. (from the *Stone Chumash*, p. 649)

It is this very perspective that Yeshua Himself had when He taught in the Sermon on the Mount that the inner desire of lust should be repented of as sin, for it is here that the sin takes root and begins to bear its ugly fruit. And James makes the same assessment: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death." (James 1:13-15).

Thus, the list of the detestable things which are forbidden to Israel, enumerated in our *parashah*, is cast in the framework of those things most common in Egypt and Canaan. Surely all manner of sinful actions that would lead to such base behavior are presumed also to be prohibited and it is within this framework that our text must be understood.

Moreover, it is clear that the pagan nations that surround God's people will have their own "statutes" (תקנים), v. 4. These were the cultural norms acceptable in the pagan society. They were considered "normal"

and “common,” and so it would be easy to rationalize that they were also “okay” for God’s people. But our Master makes it clear that they are not. He has given us His “statutes” (צְוִיּוֹת) and we are to be marked by them, not by the paganism of the culture in which we live. What is more, these accepted “norms” are part of the *zeitgeist*, the “spirit of the times” and will inevitably work their way into our lives if we do not guard against them.

In this regard, note carefully how the Torah is characterized in our opening verses (4-5): “You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am Adonai your God. So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am Adonai.” Life as God intends comes from living according to His statutes and judgments, i.e., making life’s decisions with His teachings (Torah) well in mind, as having them written upon the heart. Thus, living according to God’s statutes is a twofold endeavor: we must guard ourselves against the ever encroaching “norms” of the pagan nations, and we must commit ourselves with increasing fervor to know and apply God’s statutes. It is only in this enterprise that we may expect and enjoy the blessings of life that our Creator promises.

The idea of “living by doing” is neither foreign to the message of Yeshua nor to His Apostles. Neither is it contrary to the message of forgiveness by grace taught everywhere in the Scriptures, from the beginning to the end. God’s grace is the fountain from which flows His mercy and forgiveness. It is His grace and His grace alone that was the motivation for sending His Son, Yeshua, to be the propitiation for our sins. No one deserves His grace, and all who receive it do so as objects of His sovereign love. But the biblical record makes it very clear that those who do receive His grace are changed—they do not stay the same. Their hearts are turned from stone to flesh, and the Torah is written upon them. As such, their perspective is turned from the selfish indulgence of the lustful flesh to the happy privilege of honoring the Creator. Yet it is not as though the battle with the flesh is over—far from it! But the victory is secured because the heart has been changed. Walking in newness of life is the inevitable result of one who has both died with Messiah and risen with Him. Humbly before our Savior, we seek to receive from His hand the daily forgiveness He offers, and to strengthen ourselves both to do His will and stand firm against the decay of sin so prevalent around us.

This is not some “New Testament” teaching, but finds its foundations right here in our text. Israel was to be different, to stand in stark contrast to the paganism they were leaving and would enter as they possessed the Land. They were not to look like the pagans with all of the demonic scarring, body piercing, and tattoos for the dead (cf. Lev 19:28). Rather, they were to give evidence even by their outward appearance of their deep-seated belief that God had created their bodies to manifest His image: that was their happy duty as the redeemed of HaShem. They were to build families in which the sexual relationship between husband and wife reflected the covenant made between HaShem and His wife, Israel (cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34). All of the joy of marital relations that come when abiding in God’s statutes picture the same covenant passion that God Himself has for His people. To deviate from this sacred norm is to negate the very sanctity of God Himself as husband to Israel. Marriage is the only physical picture given to us of God’s covenant love for His people. He therefore becomes very angry when this picture is trampled by debased and animal-like deviancy, and then paraded as acceptable and righteous.

Most interestingly, deviant sexual practice seems most often to be accompanied by overt idolatry. One might scan the pages of ancient history, especially as it is selectively portrayed in the Tanach, and notice that God’s wrath falls upon nations when three things come together: idolatry, sexual deviancy, and child sacrifice. These three, when combined, take mankind below the animal realm into the demonic. The very image of God is so obscured in such instances that mankind has lost his very purpose for existence. That such occurred in the infamous cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is clear, and the results are therefore predictable: God reigns fire and brimstone from heaven and destroys the cities in their entirety. Indeed, even the wrath of God upon the Canaanites, displayed by their defeat at the hands of Israel, was reserved for the time when their sin was fully ripe (Gen 15:16).

And the USA is not far behind this. We wink at overt idolatry; sexual deviancy has become the acceptable norm; and children are being abused, neglected, and murdered because parents have sold themselves as slaves to debilitating substances or have become enslaved to affluence. It is no secret that Islam is one of the fastest growing “religions” in our times, and it is also no secret that young girls (particularly) are abused and misused in this religion and culture. In America we have become so politically correct that we are no longer

able clearly to delineate that which God gives and that which He hates. While we must always guard against prejudice and bigotry, we cannot give up the necessary function of dividing between that which is holy and that which is profane. If ever there were a need for such a clear distinction, it is now.

Many commentators have noted that the word “statutes” (sometimes translated “decrees”), חוק, is derived from the verb חקק, “to engrave” into metal or stone. Thus, the very term itself emphasizes the permanence of God’s decrees, valid for all times, whether or not one is able to rationalize their purpose. The decrees of God are eternally applicable.

The specific decrees given in our *parashah* relate to the very foundation of the community, that is, the family unit. The intimate relations between husband and wife are sacred and not transferable to other relationships. To transgress the sacred bond of the marriage covenant is likewise to demolish the foundation of the family and the community. No community has ever survived intact that went contrary to these statutes. Wherever sexual deviancy has become the acceptable practice, the society eventually crumbles.

While our text outlines the prohibited unions, the parallel text in Lev 20 prescribes the penalty. In each case, the penalty is capital (“they shall be put to death,” though the method is not given). In the instance of illicit relations with both a woman and her daughter, the penalty is death by fire. This should remind us that God does not consider these issues lightly. Being the God of life and not death, to require the life of those who transgress these statutes shows how important they are in God’s overall plan of redemption, salvation, and sanctification. It may well be said that these statutes form the pillars of all God-honoring communities.

The term used throughout our *parashah* to describe illicit relationships is גְּלוּי עֶרְוָה, *gilui ervah*, “the uncovering of nakedness.” It is a long-standing axiom of Jewish commentators that laws governing sexual relationships are the key to community holiness. “Wherever one finds safeguards of chastity, here one finds holiness” (Mid. Rab. Lev 24.6). This very concept is highlighted in the Jewish marriage ceremony when the groom states to the bride, “you are consecrated to me.” The singular and privileged relationship between husband and wife is something that is sacred and consecrated. This relationship belongs to each of them and no one else. Note carefully that throughout our *parashah* illicit relations are prohibited not only because they parallel the pagan nations and are therefore an abomination to HaShem, but also because the privilege of that relationship belongs to husband and wife. Anyone who attempts to enter that privileged relationship is therefore a thief of the worst kind, for he takes something that can never be returned.

Furthermore, the closeness of husband and wife is demonstrated in the fact that relatives of each are forbidden to the other, as though all were related by blood. Moreover, the fact that the term “uncover nakedness” is consistently used shows that sexual relationships between husband and wife are planned and done with a purpose. This distinguishes mankind from the animals who wear no clothing, for they have no moral sphere, not being created in God’s image.

In verse 6 the Sages note the addition of the word “approach,” “any man shall not approach his close relative.” The verb is in the plural and it is implied therefore that this is applicable both to man and woman. One might also note that the use of the word “approach” describes even the desire or the plan to engage in such relations, and thus even those things that might lead to such sin must be avoided.

The repetition in vs. 7-8 which prohibits relations with one’s mother as well as with the wife of one’s father is understood by the Sages to teach that even after the father dies, and thus the mother is no longer a wife, she is still forbidden to the close relatives. In the ancient world, it was not uncommon for a wife of a deceased man to be taken in order to gain access to his wealth or power. Other instances of repetition (which at first reading may seem superfluous), most likely take into consideration the fact that only permissible unions could actually be considered a valid marriage. For instance, in v. 9 the distinction between one who is born “in the house” with one who is born “out of the house” (מולדת בֵּית אִו מולדת חוץ) is understood to be a daughter born in wedlock, that is, after a fully constituted marriage, and one born out of wedlock, that is, before the vow of marriage was properly enacted. In either case, the closeness of family relations is maintained.

In each case presented, the emphasis is upon close, family relations, and the fact that within these confines sexual relations are prohibited. It is on the basis of this text that the definitions of incest are derived. Specifically prohibited are: mother, father’s wife (even if she is not one’s mother), half-sister, granddaughter, stepsister, paternal aunt, maternal aunt, aunt who is the wife of father’s brother, daughter-in-law, brother’s wife and by extension, the opposite sex of each (e.g., where the half-sister is mentioned, the half-brother is

implied and *visa versa*) as well as the wives or husbands of each. Since the aunt and uncle are prohibited, it is reasoned that their children are also near of kin and are therefore prohibited, but this is a matter of extension, not something specifically stated in the text.

The penalty for having relations both with a woman and her daughter is severe: burning (cf. 20:14). Such promiscuity results in the immediate demise of the family and the clan. Such actions were therefore dealt with in the severest of measures. It may also be implied that such activity was connected with base idolatrous practices, as was the case in Egypt and Canaan.

The matter of clear separation between acceptable and prohibited relationships moves next to matters within the immediate family unit itself. The husband and wife are not to have relations during her monthly cycle. Since marital relations are viewed as the means of conception, to mix this with death (symbolized by the flow of blood) is to mix things that essentially differ. God is the God of life, not death. This basic premise is woven throughout the life of Israel as the chosen nation who is to live out the statutes of HaShem..

Adultery is strictly forbidden and is naturally included here in the list of forbidden sexual relations, forming the conclusion of the list of male/female relationships. Interestingly, the very next prohibition (v. 21) involves child sacrifice, a practice of the pagan Molech cult. In chapter 20 this is put first, indicating (as I think it does here by way of summation) that all forbidden sexual relations have a connection with idolatry. The hideous and demonic aspects of Canaanite religion came to its lowest point in the offering of children to their gods. And once again, the motivation is reiterated: “you shall not profane the Name of your God. I am Adonai.” The sanctification of the Name (“may Your Name be sanctified... on earth as it is in heaven”) is therefore the over arching purpose of these statutes for all of God’s people in all eras.

Finally the sins of homosexuality and bestiality are condemned. To argue that the text does not mention lesbianism and it therefore does not fall under the same penalty is entirely to miss the point. The Egyptians and Canaanites were well known for this kind of debauchery, and this whole *parashah* is written to warn God’s people not to be like the pagan nations. Paul follows the same line of reasoning as our text: since the purpose of all created things is to glorify their Creator, to turn His creative order (in this case, the procreation of the race through the union of man and woman) into something contrary is not only to worship the creation rather than the Creator (Who is blessed forever) but also to become objects of His wrath (Romans 1).

The final exhortation uses the word “contaminate” (טָמַא, from which the noun “unclean” טָמֵא is derived): “do not become contaminated through any of these ...” (NASB, “do not become defiled ...”). This reminds us that association with those who practice these abominations could result in “contamination,” not that we must cloister ourselves away in some kind of remote conclave, complete with walls and gates. That is not the point. Rather, God’s community, wherever it may exist, must guard itself from these kinds of immorality, whether they come from without or within. This is the unified message of the Scriptures, from the Torah through the Apostolic Writings. While this offends the politically correct sensitivities of our day, it is the only true path for God’s blessings as we seek to live out our life of faith in the footsteps of the Messiah.

When the author to the Hebrews writes: “Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Heb 13:4), he has summed up the whole story in a clear and succinct way. How then will we stem the tide of our decaying society, and how will we both obey and guard the statutes of God?

We must first model the statutes of HaShem by living them out before our children. Humbly serving our wives and submitting to our husbands; keeping our hearts pure in a world that has gone sick with immorality; loving what is pure and hating what is not; understanding that modesty is the foundation of all genuine holiness—this must be our life both in public and especially in private. Never before has immorality been marketed with such finesse! Candy coated to look and taste appealing, our young people are vulnerable to Satan’s schemes unless they see and experience the life of holiness in our homes and community.

Second, we must maintain a strong stand against all forms of immorality, and not yield to the constant call to lower our standards in a society that already has none. While we must be loving and caring for those who have fallen and who genuinely desire to walk the road of *teshuvah* (repentance), we cannot, in the name of “love,” retain those who act immorally and refuse to repent of their sinful ways.

Third, we must be careful not to give mixed messages. To take a strong stand for holiness in line with God’s statutes, and then to spend hours of our time engaging in media entertainment that both portrays and

extols that which our Lord describes as an abomination will diminish our message and bring confusion.

Finally, we must live out a life of gratitude for the grace and forgiveness we have received at the hand of Yeshua, and never think that we have “arrived” at the point where we are the judges of all the others. Our desire to sanctify God’s Name comes from His sovereign work in our hearts. We must long for Him to do that in the lives of others, and be willing to be His humble servants both to live out as well as to proclaim the message of God’s grace in Yeshua before a watching world.