

Be Holy
Leviticus 19:1-18, 33-37
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This summer we have been telling stories. Ancient stories, of the people of Israel and Judah as they experienced domination, conquest, and exile. We have not told the story from any one book of scripture. Rather, every week we've been in a different Old Testament book, because this is a story that deeply shaped the entire canon of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Last week we left off with the Book of Lamentations, a series of poems written in the wake of the final destruction of the city of Jerusalem.

Today we read a passage from the Book of Leviticus, which presents itself as part of the ancient law code, but it too took shape in the time of exile and provides us a way to respond to trauma. For our immediate concern in telling these stories is to see what we might learn from them that we can apply to our situations. How can the ways the ancient Jews developed holy resilience help us to do so as well?

So, hear now, a Word of the Lord from the Book of Leviticus.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord your God. Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am the Lord your God. When you offer a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord, offer it in such a way that it is acceptable on your behalf. It shall be eaten on the same day you offer it, or on the next day; and anything left over until the third day shall be consumed in fire. If it is eaten at all on the third day, it is an abomination; it will not be acceptable. All who eat it shall be subject to punishment, because they have profaned what is holy to the Lord; and any such person shall be cut off from the people. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. 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. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. You

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

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity. You shall have honest balances, honest weights, an honest ephah, and an honest hin: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them: I am the Lord.

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

In 2007, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum wrote a book entitled *The Clash Within*. The book's idea subverted the common understanding of geopolitics as a clash between civilizations. Her immediate topic was the rise of Hindu fundamentalism as a force in Indian politics in a way that threatened the pluralistic vision of Mahatma Gandhi. But she identified a universal human struggle over how we treat the other.

Nussbaum wrote, "the real 'clash of civilization' is the clash within every modern society between those who are prepared to live with people who differ, on terms of equal respect, and those who seek the comfort of a single 'pure' ethno-religious ideology."

This clash within societies has become even more obvious in recent years as Europe struggles with its refugee crisis and politics in the United States has become sharply divided on just this issue.

But Nussbaum does not only think that every modern society wrestles with this issue, she thought every human being does as well. She wrote, "At a deeper level, the 'clash' is internal to each human being, as fear and aggression contend against compassion and respect." In another place she said, "the real clash of civilisations is inside the human heart because in all of us, there are urges to dominate and to face the inconvenient challenge posed by people who are different, and then there are also instincts of compassion and respect." She continues, "It is here, within each person, as we oscillate uneasily between self-protective aggression and the ability to live in the world with others."

The great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann thinks highly of Nussbaum's analysis. He writes that this clash "is inescapable. What matters is how we manage it; it will be managed in more healthy ways when it is named and processed in honest ways."

So, do we have any advice from Leviticus on how to name and manage this clash within between viewing "the other as neighbor or the other as threat"?

Well, you can imagine that for the ancient Jews the experience of conquest and living as exile among foreign empires must have shaped the way they think about the other. Indeed it did. And the Book of Leviticus is a prime example.

While living in exile in Babylon, the scribes of ancient Israel turned to ancient stories and texts in order to help them make sense of their world, including the question of why they had survived.

The scholar David Carr writes in his book *Holy Resilience* that one way they answered that question was through the idea of ‘chosenness’—they had been chosen by God from among the nations and set apart for a special mission.

Now, Carr is clear that if you read the Bible, the Jewish self-understanding was not that they were chosen because they were better than anybody else. Indeed, time and again the stories reveal them to be a stiff-necked, rebellious, and stubborn people. Yet, God persists with them, through covenant loyalty and steadfast love. This is grace, not merit.

Carr writes, “No one could conquer or burn their chosenness like one could burn a city.” And so for the ancient Jews living in isolated ghettos of Babylon their separated existence from the wider culture became part of their virtue.

And one way they lived into this idea was to take the strict rules that had previously been applied only to priests and apply those rules to all the people. Here is where you get the idea of a ‘priestly nation.’ And so the Holiness Code takes shape, this long list of rules for life and ritual contained within the Book of Leviticus, which we’ve only read part of today. “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”

David Carr credits this self-understanding with helping to give the ancient Jews the power of resilience to survive. But he also points out that there is a self-blame in this story, the sort of self-blame that is common in trauma victims. We encountered self-blame back at the beginning of this series and it has recurred often in the texts. It is the idea that what has happened to the people is because of their bad behavior, so in response they must behave differently. In this case, they must live according to a strict moral code so that they might be a holy people.

This is a powerful idea. It can and does give a people the resilience to survive. But it is also a very unhealthy and damaging way to respond to trauma. It can lead to evil things.

A good example comes from the Bible itself. When the Jews finally returned from exile and began to establish a new society in the ruins of Jerusalem, one of their leaders was the scribe Ezra and Ezra, who may have had a hand in shaping this Leviticus text, advocated a very strict observance of the moral code for the sake of purity. And that included purifying the people. In his most barbaric act, he forced Jews to divorce their Gentile spouses and disown their mixed-race children.

This is one of the dangers of a Holiness Code. As Walter Brueggemann writes, “There is ample evidence . . . that holiness requires careful avoidance of the *other* because the other will defile and contaminate.”

But that was not the only perspective among the ancient Jews. There were those who represented the other side of the clash within, who wanted to welcome the stranger. These

included the historians of the Deuteronomic tradition, prophets like Isaiah, the author the story of Jonah, and most importantly for us, a guy named Jesus. So, our scriptural canon contains both sides in this ancient social debate—fear and inclusion of the other.

So, should we just reject Leviticus as representing the unhealthy side in this debate? Well, I'm all for recognizing that Leviticus contains some dangerous words and dangerous tendencies. But Leviticus is important precisely because it helps us wrestle with this universal human clash within and it does so through a long reflection on what precisely holiness means. Is there a form of holiness that doesn't lead to racial supremacy like Ezra? Walter Brueggemann says there is. Right here in Leviticus 19 the idea of holiness embraces an ethic of neighborliness.

First, we have to remind ourselves that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. We need a "healthy sense of self." For a toxic sense of self can lead to violence against the other. Martha Nussbaum points this out. She says, that often "when violence breaks out, it's all about men in particular, being eager to show their manliness by showing that they can bash others." She holds up Gandhi instead as an example of a real man, who stands naked except for his inherent human dignity and withstands the bashings given him by others.

Brueggemann points out that in Leviticus 19, the love of neighbor initially meant those people who were part of the community and did exclude foreigners. But the very concept posed a question "Who is my neighbor?" It's even the question that Jesus asks. It is an idea that over time expands to include everyone we encounter.

Brueggemann also points out that the initial idea is powerful in a different way—it "envisions a neighborhood for the common good." We are required by God to live in a way that contributes to the common good of others. We can't take only for ourselves. We can't exploit. We must give others what they deserve because of their inherent human dignity. So our society must provide sustenance for everyone. To do anything less is unjust and a sin against God.

Brueggemann writes, "Thus engagement with the neighbor is a way to 'take time to be holy.'" So, just think of all those things you do to be kind to your neighbors and strengthen the common good. When you do those, you are being holy as God is holy.

Beyond the neighbor, Leviticus 19 already contains an expansion of the circle of concern—"the poor have a special claim on the community." This becomes the repeated idea in our tradition that true holiness, true obedience to God is to take care of the widows, the orphans, and the strangers.

So, notice verse 34. Even here in Leviticus 19 we read, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

Brueggemann concludes, "Holiness means embrace of the other who is not a member of 'our tribe.'"

Jesus, of course, will take this trajectory further and teach us that holiness also includes love of the enemy.

Does Leviticus have anything to teach us about how to deal with the issues of immigrants and refugees currently facing our nation? Do the experiences of the ancient Jews help us to better understand our own 'clash within' between fear and compassion?

Indeed, they do. To be holy, as God is holy, is to be neighborly. To overcome our fear and treat everyone with respect and compassion.