

Parashat Aharei Mot/Kedoshim: Boundary Dilemmas

Rabbi Joshua Rabin, Astoria Center of Israel, Astoria, New York¹

Vayikra 18:5	
וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֲתֶם הָאָדָם וְחַי בָּהֶם אֲנִי יְהוָה:	You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which humans shall live: I am GOD.

1. Like a High Priest? Or Liable for Death?

Bavli Bava Kamma 38a	
וְלֹא?! וְהִתְנַיָּא, רַבִּי מֵאִיר אָמַר: מִנֵּין שְׁאִפִּילוּ גוֹי וְעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה – שֶׁהוּא כְּכֹהֵן גָּדוֹל? תַּלְמוּד לֹא מֵאִיר: "אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֲתֶם הָאָדָם, וְחַי בָּהֶם" – "כֹּהֲנִים וְלִוִּים וְיִשְׂרָאֵלִים" לֹא נֶאֱמַר, אֲלָא "אָדָם"; הָא לְמַדְתָּ, שְׁאִפִּילוּ גוֹי וְעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה – הֵרִי הוּא כְּכֹהֵן גָּדוֹל!	The Gemara asks: But do they not receive reward for fulfilling those mitzvot? But isn't it taught in a <i>baraita</i> that Rabbi Meir says: From where is it derived that even a person of a faith other than Judaism who engages in Torah is considered like a High Priest? The verse states with regard to the mitzvot: " Which if a person does, he shall live by them " (Leviticus 18:5). It is not stated : Which if priests and Levites and Israelites do, they shall live by them, but rather: A person , indicating that all people are included. You have therefore learned that even a person of a faith other than Judaism who engages in Torah study is considered like a High Priest.

Bavli Sanhedrin 59a	
וְאָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: גוֹי שֶׁעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה חַיִּיב מִיתָה, שְׁנֵאמַר: "תּוֹרָה צִוָּה לָנוּ מֹשֶׁה מִרְשָׁה", לָנוּ מִרְשָׁה וְלֹא לָהֶם...	And Rabbi Yohanan says: A person of a faith other than Judaism who engages in Torah study is liable to receive the death penalty; as it is stated: "Moses commanded us a law [torah], an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob" (Deuteronomy 33:4), indicating that it is an inheritance for us, and not for them...
מִי־יִתְּבִי, הִיָּה רַבִּי מֵאִיר אָמַר: מִנֵּין שְׁאִפִּילוּ גוֹי וְעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה שֶׁהוּא כְּכֹהֵן גָּדוֹל? שְׁנֵאמַר: "אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֲתֶם הָאָדָם וְחַי בָּהֶם". "כֹּהֲנִים וְלִוִּים וְיִשְׂרָאֵלִים" לֹא נֶאֱמַר, אֲלָא "הָאָדָם". הָא לְמַדְתָּ שְׁאִפִּילוּ גוֹי וְעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה הֵרִי הוּא כְּכֹהֵן גָּדוֹל.	The Gemara raises an objection to Rabbi Yohanan's statement from a <i>baraita</i> : Rabbi Meir would say: From where is it derived that even someone who is not Jewish who engages in Torah study is considered like a High Priest? It is derived from that which is stated : "You shall therefore keep My statutes and My ordinances, which if a man does he shall live by them " (Leviticus 18:5). The phrase: Which if priests, Levites, and Israelites do they shall live by them, is not stated , but rather: "A person," which indicates humanity in general. You have therefore learned that even a person of a faith other than Judaism who engages in Torah study is like a High Priest.

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

התם, בשבע מצות דידיהו.	The Gemara answers: There , in the <i>baraita</i> , the reference is to a person of a faith other than Judaism who engages in the study of their seven mitzvot [of the descendants of Noah].
Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Melakhim v'Milkhamot 10:9	
<p>עכו"ם ששקט בתורה חייב מיתה. לא יעסק אלא בשבע מצות שלהן בלבד. וכן עכו"ם ששבת אפלו ביום מימות החל אם עשאהו לעצמו כמו שבת חייב מיתה. ואין צריך לומר אם עשה מועד לעצמו. כללו של דבר אין מניחין אותן לחדש דת ולעשות מצות לעצמן מדעתן. אלא או יהיה גר צדק ויקבל כל המצות. או יעמד בתורתו ולא יוסיף ולא יגרע. ואם עסק בתורה או שבת או חדש דבר. מכין אותו ועונשין אותו ומודיעין אותו שהוא חייב מיתה על זה. אבל אינו נהרג:</p>	<p>A person of a faith other than Judaism who studies the Torah is obligated to die. They should only be involved in the study of their seven mitzvot. Similarly, a person of a faith other than Judaism who rests, even on a weekday, observing that day as a Sabbath, is obligated to die. Needless to say, he is obligated for that punishment if he creates a festival for himself. The general principle governing these matters is: They are not to be allowed to originate a new religion or create mitzvot for themselves based on their own decisions. They may either become righteous converts and accept all the mitzvot or retain their statutes without adding or detracting from them. If a person of a faith other than Judaism studies the Torah, makes a Sabbath, or creates a religious practice, a Jewish court should beat him, punish him, and inform him that he is obligated to die. However, he is not to be executed.</p>

2. New Boundaries, New Questions

Rabbi David Novak et al, <i>Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity</i> (2000)	
<p>In recent years, there has been a dramatic and unprecedented shift in Jewish and Christian relations..We believe these changes merit a thoughtful Jewish response. Speaking only for ourselves — an interdenominational group of Jewish scholars — we believe it is time for Jews to learn about the efforts of Christians to honor Judaism. We believe it is time for Jews to reflect on what Judaism may now say about Christianity. As a first step, we offer eight brief statements about how Jews and Christians may relate to one another.</p>	
<p>Jews and Christians worship the same God. Before the rise of Christianity, Jews were the only worshippers of the God of Israel. But Christians also worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; creator of heaven and earth. While Christian worship is not a viable religious choice for Jews, as Jewish theologians we rejoice that, through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel.</p>	
<p>Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book — the Bible (what Jews call “Tanakh” and Christians call the “Old Testament”). Turning to it for religious orientation, spiritual enrichment, and communal education, we each take away similar lessons: God created and sustains the universe; God established a covenant with the people Israel, God’s revealed word guides Israel to a life of righteousness; and God will ultimately redeem Israel and the whole world. Yet, Jews and Christians interpret the Bible differently on many points. Such differences must always be respected....</p>	
<p>A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice. An improved relationship will not accelerate the cultural and religious assimilation that Jews rightly fear. It will not change traditional Jewish forms of worship, nor increase intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, nor persuade more Jews to convert to Christianity, nor create a false blending of Judaism and Christianity. We respect Christianity as a faith that originated within Judaism and that still has significant contacts with it. We do not see it as an extension of Judaism. Only if we cherish our own traditions can we pursue this relationship with integrity.</p>	
<p>Big Question: What is at stake in these texts? Do they surprise you? Which ones do you feel most reflect your relationship to people of faiths other than Judaism?</p>	