The Gleaners (*Des glaneuses*) (1857)
Jean-François Millet

The Torah pushes the financially secure to be aware of those on the margins—to feel a responsibility to provide a portion for them. Millet takes it a step further, raising the question of whether their allotment is sufficient to lead a life of dignity. Who are our gleaners? Who is making sure that the privileged of our time truly see them? Is our society brave enough to ask itself whether leftover scraps are really enough?

View the image in high-definition at www.jtsa.edu/leftover-scraps

TORAH FROM JTS

Aharei Mot-Kedoshim 5777 **אחרי מות-קדשים תשע"ז**

Separation and Union: The Poles of Holiness

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These combined parashiyot are complex in their structure and content, yet a careful examination of these chapters reveals a striking and powerful theological insight. In terms of Bible scholarship, they extend across a major divide in the priestly literature: Leviticus 16 describes the detailed rites of yearly atonement that eliminated the taint of sinfulness from the priesthood, shrine, and people. In essence, it is a kind of re-creation of the initial state of purity of the Tabernacle on the day it was dedicated, as described in Leviticus 9-10. The link between atonement and dedication is made subtly, by the reference at the beginning of Leviticus 16 to the tragic deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, at the dedication of the Tabernacle, as recounted in Leviticus 10. The first part of the parashah therefore should be read as a continuation of the first half of Leviticus, chapters 1-15, which describe the establishment of sacrifice and cult. The dominant themes are purity and forgiveness, which are given as the purpose of all the types of sacrifice.

The next part of the parashah, Leviticus 17, belongs to what scholars term the "Holiness Code," which extends to chapter 25. This section, too, is complex. Chapter 17 deals with the requirement of treating all meat as sacrificial offerings to be offered at the shrine. This connects to Genesis 9, where meat eating is reluctantly allowed by God so long as the blood is not consumed, as it contains the "*nefesh*," the life-force of the animal.

Leviticus 18-20, the last section of the parashiyot, is in effect a long definition of holiness. It focuses on one main theme, strict separation through the maintenance of boundaries—above all, sexual boundaries,

which form the main topic in chapters 18 and 20. Included also are such things as the prohibition of offering children to the Canaanite deity Molech and engaging in various acts of divination. It is likely that the sacrificed children were viewed as messengers to the pagan deity (probably a form of Baal), since they are said to be made "to cross over" to him. Divination also involved the crossing of a boundary between the divine and the human, which the Bible views as illegitimate.

There are many things going on in these parashiyot. But if one steps back from the mass of detail, the two sections described above revolve around two dominant concepts, atonement and separation, the latter identified with holiness. A larger view shows that in religious terms, we are dealing with two contrasting ideas that are in fact complementary, together forming a complete—and compelling—theological mandate.

On the one hand, true holiness is viewed as deriving from the vigilant maintenance of differences, represented by separations: of Israel from the nations, of illicit from licit relations, of the human from the divine, and of permitted from forbidden foods. This is a narrow, guarded, negative, and even gloomy view of holiness, as befits a text that begins with a reminder of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, who also crossed over the legitimate boundaries of the cult by offering "strange fire" to God in Lev. 10:1.

But countering this narrowness is the focus in Leviticus 16 on atonement, literally "at-one-ment" (in English—the Hebrew *kapparah* has a different origin and association), i.e., the reconciliation of humanity with God. This represents a religious aspiration to join and cohere, not separate. The idea appears in a different form in the most famous injunctions in Kedoshim, to "love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18) and "love the stranger as yourself" (19:34). What is implied is an empathetic merging with others, an internalization of their needs and feelings. The thrust seems to be a demand for outward separation but inner sympathy, even union, in the emotion of love.

In effect, this represents a complementary theological dichotomy of difference and similarity. Difference alone leads to brittle and sterile isolation—from God and from other peoples. Similarity alone leads to untrammeled merging and, ultimately, the elimination of any

recognizable meaning. Similarity and difference are the poles of covenant itself, a uniting of God with Israel, which involves the unique separation of the people from other nations. Yet the covenant is also a pact of love, of the demand that Israel respond to God by loving the deity—and also, Leviticus adds, by loving each other.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (*z"l*) and Harold Hassenfeld (*z"l*).

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

Leftover Scraps

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The Torah exhorts us in this week's parashah: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest…you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger" (Lev. 19:9-10). This mitzvah plays out in beautiful narrative form in the Book of Ruth, read on the upcoming holiday of Shavuot. But Ruth is the exception; she is rescued from her destitute state by Boaz, the owner of the field where she gleans, who marries her. What of all those who remained gleaners—whose survival depended on the daily toil of gathering other people's leftovers?

Jean-François Millet cast an unexpected light on these disadvantaged members of society in this painting [overleaf]. A work of social critique, *The Gleaners* depicts three poor women, bent over, gathering meager scraps of wheat, against the backdrop of an abundant harvest. The isolated needy are foregrounded and painted in great detail, in contrast to the impressionistic and distant background of community and plenty—forcing the privileged viewer to notice them. Millet painted *The Gleaners* on a large canvas (33" x 44")—a size normally reserved for grand subjects such as religion—exacerbating the discomfort of his upper-class audience. The painting sold for far less than Millet's asking price. It wasn't until years after Millet's death that the artistry and social criticism of *The Gleaners* was finally truly appreciated.