

Oy! Our readings still have us squarely within the realm of separation, cleanliness, and restraint – familiar injunctions during this pandemic. But, as we read in our Parashiot this week, they are, as always, all for our own good.

Leaving Acharei Mot and the beginning of Kedoshim aside (We'll get to much of that on Yom Kippur!), let's look at the end of the reading, Chapters 19 and 20, which begins with a curious decree: You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy. *Be holy*. Our sages have always argued over what that means, but they all agree on one thing: Aleinu! – It's up to us. The Talmud, Megillah 25a puts it thus, "Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for the fear (awe) of Heaven."

The Earth was given to us humans to dwell in and to use. We are all-powerful here in our own realm, but what we do on Earth has far-reaching consequences. The Torah gives us concrete laws, statutes and decrees to show us how to maintain healthy balance. To this end, all aspects of our lives are governed by boundaries, restrictions put in place to ensure our own health and the health and wellbeing of our world. COVID-19 is teaching us an important lesson about boundaries as they are narrowed to keep the pandemic at bay.

God's part of our eternal covenant is the unceasing act of creation, a continuous outpouring of cosmic energy that keeps the entire universe alive and in balance. Our human part of the covenant is to reflect God's actions here in our earthly realm. This is called *imitatio dei* – imitating God. Now we can understand what is meant by "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." If we understand God to be merciful, gracious, slow to anger, plenteous in kindness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and pardoning – to paraphrase the 13 attributes we recite so often during Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur – we must do our part, and imitate these attributes in our dealings with our fellow humans, as well as with the entire Earth and all that dwells on Earth. *Imitatio dei* is a mitzvah. That is why "I am the Lord, your God" follows nearly every directive given in Chapters 19 and 20. These rules expand and further define the 10 Commandments.

Chapter 19, verse 18 contains one of the most quoted passages in the entire Bible: Love your neighbor as yourself. And it is elaborated in verse 34: The stranger who sojourns with you shall be as a native from among you, and *you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt*. In the spirit of *imitatio dei*, this means: God gives us His creation in love; therefore, we must love His creation. God is merciful and gracious; therefore, we must do likewise and be merciful and gracious in our interactions. God delivered us from oppression in Egypt; therefore, we must remember what it is like to be oppressed and refrain from oppressing others.

In this time of uncertainty, when our world has narrowed, when we are so bombarded with news and opinions that we don't know what to believe, and when fear is palpable, it is important to step back and remember: "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." If we look at the new restrictions and challenges in this light, we may find it easier to accept them and not be afraid. Leaving part of our fields and vineyards for the poor and the stranger might today mean going shopping for someone who is housebound, sewing and donating some masks, or simply making a few phone calls to check up on friends and acquaintances. Not lying or swearing falsely might be refraining from sharing rumors and gossip pertaining to the crisis. Not cursing a deaf person or placing a stumbling block before a blind person could translate into empathizing with and gently trying to guide people who are paralyzed with fear from internalizing all the horror stories they hear on social media. Not oppressing or robbing could be not misusing the programs put in place to help those who have suffered financially during the crisis. And loving our neighbor as ourselves is simply realizing that we are all in this together, and that we all must do our part to not only stay out of danger ourselves, but to ensure that we do not endanger others.

"You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." Today, there is a whole new set of possibilities to do our part in upholding this mitzvah – and because we have an eternal covenant with the Creator of All Things, we can do it!

Shabbat shalom!