

Leviticus is all about holiness, but until Chapter 19, it has only dealt with holy places, holy offerings, and holy people, i.e., the priestly caste. Now, for the first and only time in Leviticus, HaShem commands Moses, “Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them,. ‘You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.’” Holiness is no longer confined to places, things, and a certain elite group of individuals; it now encompasses the entire nation, and is manifested in how the people should dress, plant and harvest their crops, pay their workers, run their courts of law, conduct their business, and – most importantly – how they treat others, especially the most vulnerable. The operative word, which appears only in the second half of Verse 18, is love – in that most familiar of quotes, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love must prevail over anger, resentment and revenge, a radical idea, both because it goes against the predominant norm, and because it is required of and pertains to everyone, not just a favored few. This lofty ideal can only be achieved by adopting an equally radical set of rules governing our interpersonal relationships. For example, the injunction against bloodshed in Verse 16 obligates us to save one whose life is in danger (Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 73a), and rather than nursing a grudge, we are to “rebuke” the person who has acted unjustly towards us (Verse 17), but in private so as not to embarrass him, as Midrash Torah Kohanim teaches. The Ramban (Nachmanides) elaborates on Verses 17 and 18, extending the commandment to rebuke outward from personal harm to witnessing harm being done to others. In both cases, resentment and hatred toward the perpetrator is futile and potentially dangerous. In his discussion he even includes those in subordinate positions, citing Tractate Shevuot 39a (“The entire Jewish people are guarantors for one another”) and Tractate Bava Metzia 31a (“How do we know that [rebuke] applies even to a disciple reproving his master? From the phrase *hocheach tochiach* [a verb form of emphasis], implying, under all circumstances.”). The very nature of the Talmud is debate, which occasionally becomes bitter and intense. But Tractate Kiddushin 30b teaches “Even a father and his son, or a rabbi and his student, who are engaged in Torah together in one gate become enemies with each other due to the intensity of their studies. But they do not leave there until they love each other ...” In other words, challenging authority is a healthy practice as long as it is guided by respect for seniority and position; and all, regardless of rank, must be receptive to constructive criticism. Love is always a two-way street. It is noteworthy that the first holiness commandment in Chapter 19 begins with, “Every man shall fear his mother and his father ...”. There are two basic words for fear in Hebrew: פחד (to be anxious, fearful) and ירא (to hold in awe, to respect). The latter is used here, as well as in countless directives concerning our relationship with HaShem. It is related to כבד (to honor, to respect). the word used for honoring one’s parents in both versions of the Ten Commandments This is productive fear that teaches us boundaries and also implies that parents, with very few exceptions, are deeply committed to the welfare of their offspring and dedicated to teaching them right from wrong. Of course, parents do make mistakes, and wise parents have the capacity to acknowledge their shortcomings and learn from their children. Our parents are our first mentors, and unlike the mentors we are advised to appoint for ourselves, we cannot choose them. The very fact that they gave us life is reason enough to respect them. But what if parents misbehave? Tragically, some parents do engage in physical or mental abuse, or act in other egregious ways. Our sages teach that we are not obligated to respect such parents until they repent. Now, let’s look at Verse 3 in its entirety: “Every man shall fear his mother and his father, and you shall observe My Sabbaths. I am the Lord, your God.” This is a very interesting juxtaposition with a multitude of implications. Tractate Niddah 31a teaches that there are three partners in creating a life: HaShem, father, and mother. Ideally, Shabbat is family time, with the potential to forge deep ties and beautiful memories; therefore, respect for parents and honoring Shabbat are intrinsically related. How fortunate are the children whose parents model the tenets of Judaism and discuss them in age-appropriate fashion during Shabbat family time, making learning both natural and fun. But what if a parent desecrates the Sabbath, or tells a child to do so? This, of course, is a prime example of the child’s being absolved from honoring that parent. Respect and love both have boundaries, and these boundaries are defined by our commandments. Embedded in every blessing we say is the formula *asher kid’shanu b’mitzvotav* – who made us holy through His commandments. In other words, we are not intrinsically holy; we have the potential to become holy by observing the commandments. Our commandments are predicated upon love and respect tempered by discernment. Observing them does not mean blind obedience; it means constantly striving to understand and apply their underlying principles so that we are not only able to teach them to our children, but are also able to recognize wrongdoing and engage in constructive intervention. Holiness is not an inherited privilege; it is a way of life, difficult but achievable, and available to us all.

Shabbat shalom!