

Leviticus is all about holiness, but until Chapter 19, it has only discussed 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.” According to Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 24, the departure from the usual “speak to the children of Israel” is meant to illustrate that: “This portion was stated in an assembly because most of the essential principles of the Ten Commandments are included in it.” However, here it does not begin with HaShem, but rather, “Every man shall fear his mother and his father, and you shall observe My Sabbaths.” (19.3) This juxtaposition makes it clear that although interpersonal relationships are the focal point of the entire parashah, HaShem is always present. Understanding the often reiterated directive, “you shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy,” hinges on one small word: While the Fifth Commandment reads honor (*kabed*) your father and your mother (Exodus 20:12), the word used here is fear, in the connotation of awe/reverence (*yirah*), the same word used for the countless directives concerning our relationship with HaShem. Talmud Tractate Kiddushin 30b, which deals with legal provisions for engagement and marriage, teaches, “There are three partners in forming a person: The Holy One of Blessing, Who provides the soul, and his father and his mother. When a person honors his father and his mother, the Holy One of Blessing says, I ascribe credit to them as if I dwelt between them and they honor Me as well.” Of course the sages notice that unlike the Fifth Commandment, here the mother is mentioned first: “... a son honors his mother more than his father, because she persuades him with statements of encouragement and does not treat him harshly. ... a son fears his father more than his mother, because his father teaches him Torah and is consequently strict with him. Therefore ... the Holy One of Blessing preceded the mention of fear of the mother before fear of the father.” Characteristically, they all end up agreeing that, if both parents ask for water, “Set aside the honor of your mother, and perform the honor of your father, as you and your mother are both obligated in the honor of your father.” However, there are limits, as Tractate Bava Metzia 32a explains: “If his father said to him, become impure, or do not return it [a lost animal to its rightful owner], he may not listen, as one may not violate Torah law to honor his father.” In other words, when we accepted HaShem by receiving and agreeing to the Ten Commandments, we assumed responsibility for fulfilling their inherent laws and principles, which are now being defined. Before we reach that seemingly eclectic summary of laws governing how people should dress, plant and harvest their crops, pay their workers, conduct their law courts, handle their business affairs, and treat the most vulnerable, we take one more highly significant look at sacrificial offerings. “When you slaughter a peace offering to the Lord, you shall slaughter it for your acceptance. It may be eaten on the day you slaughter it, and on the following day, but anything left over until the third day shall be burnt in fire. And if it would be eaten on the third day, it is abominable; it shall not be accepted. And whoever eats it shall bear his sin, because he has profaned what is holy to the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from his people.” (19:5-8) Today we might associate this with the danger of eating spoiled food, or at least remember that illness was once regarded as the result of having sinned, but let us remember that this section not only follows the death of Aaron’s two eldest sons while they were offering unbidden sacrifices, it also reiterates the beginning of the Ten Commandments. “You shall not turn to worthless idols, nor shall you make molten deities for yourselves. I am the Lord, your God.” (19:4) This, not the technicalities of sacrificial offerings that follow, is what is important. As the prophets remind us much later in our history, the sacrificial system was not intended to be an entity unto itself; it was simply a tool, a set of parameters within which our ancestors expressed their relationship to, and awe of, HaShem. However, we human beings have the pernicious tendency to overdo and overinterpret, often losing sight of the original intention in the process. The holiness we are to emulate is not predicated upon sacrifices, but rather, on how we reflect HaShem’s actions here on earth through our behavior toward our fellow humans, toward animals, and toward all of creation. The act of *imitatio dei* – imitating HaShem, is itself a commandment, a *mitzvah*. That is why “I am the Lord, your God” follows nearly every directive in Chapters 19 and 20, but not 19:5-8. HaShem does not need sacrifices! We did at one time, to demonstrate our awe and reverence, but with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE the sacrificial system ended and we do this now through studying our Torah and observing its teachings in our daily life. Part of every blessing we say are the words *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, which are based on love and respect tempered by discernment and self-discipline. Observing them does not mean blind obedience; it means constantly striving to understand and apply their underlying principles, and in doing so, instill them in our children through our words and actions so that they will do the same. This is why we have endured for millennia *ledor vador*, from generation to generation. Holiness is not an inherited privilege; it is a way of life, sometimes difficult, but always achievable, and available to us all.

Shabbat shalom!