

Although leap years offer an opportunity to study these parashiot separately, reading them together illustrates how Parashah Kedoshim reacts to all that has transpired since the Exodus and points the way forward by continually repeating the most important reason for observing the seemingly unconnected flurry of rules it contains: “You must become holy, for I, God, your God, am holy.” (19:1) It is noteworthy that the first iteration of these words appeared after the dietary laws had been presented (11:45). There, the reason precedes them: “For I am the Lord Who has brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God. Thus, you shall be holy, because I am holy.” As I mentioned in my commentary two weeks ago, our sages viewed the deviation from the usual “Who took you out of Egypt” as the spiritual elevation imparted by the dietary laws. Indeed, because the Israelites have been thus “elevated,” they must observe an entire body of laws designed to enable them to achieve and maintain this unique status. In other words, they are to become holy by imitating HaShem to the best of their human abilities. Holiness will no longer be confined to places, things, and an elite group of individuals. Now it includes the entire nation, and is manifested in how the people should dress, plant and harvest their crops, pay their workers, conduct their courts of law, operate 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 – the often quoted, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love must override anger, resentment and revenge, a radical idea that departs from the predominant norm and is required of, and pertains to, everyone and not just a favored few. This lofty ideal can only be achieved through an equally radical set of rules governing interpersonal relationships. For example, the injunction against bloodshed in Verse 16 obligates us to save someone whose life is in danger. Citing this verse, Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 73a explains, “One who sees another drowning in a river, or being dragged away by a wild animal, or being attacked by bandits, is obligated to save him.” And rather than nursing a grudge, we are to “rebuke” the person who has acted unjustly towards us (Verse 17), but in private to avoid embarrassing him, as Midrash Torah Kohanim teaches. Elaborating on Verses 17 and 18, the Ramban (Nachmanides) advises rebuking people doing harm to others. This sort of courageous behavior is unfortunately still all too rare. But before any of this can be presented, Parashah Acharei Mot (after the death – of Avihu and Nadav) must first establish a vital prerequisite: Rules for enacting and receiving atonement. In their first year of freedom, these former slaves have had to learn some hard lessons about themselves and about their newfound freedom. Descended from generations of slaves, they can’t begin to fathom the concept of autonomy. Consequently, they have already made some serious mistakes, and their ability to repent and learn from them has thus far been superficial. In short, they still have no idea how to fulfill the Commandments to which they so enthusiastically committed themselves on that momentous day at Sinai. After the tragic incident with Avihu and Nadav it becomes evident that the entire population will need simple, explicit rules and clear boundaries. And to ensure that they will comply, they need to understand why these laws and restrictions exist, which means they must know unequivocally who they are, and Whose, they are. Because we are imperfect creatures, we will always make mistakes, both inadvertently and willfully. As partners in our eternal covenant, it is up to us to acknowledge our shortcomings individually as well as collectively, to make amends, and most importantly, to withstand the temptation to repeat them. As Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z”l so wisely taught, ideally, we should do this this daily before we go to sleep, weekly before Shabbat, monthly before Rosh Chodesh, and finally, from the beginning of the month of Elul through Yom Kippur, the Day (*yom*) of Atonement (*kippur*). Chapter 16 defines the intricate atonement rituals performed by the High Priest, which we reenact in the *Avodah* at the end of the Yom Kippur Musaf service. On that day everyone, from the High Priest to the new convert and the lowliest servant must seek atonement. Verses 33-34 establish Yom Kippur as “an eternal statute.” Then, Chapter 17 explains how we are to deal with blood. Long before we discovered its composition and function, we realized intrinsically that blood is the essential life force, and as such, belongs solely to HaShem. Therefore, blood was the primary source of ritual purification, and we are still prohibited from consuming it. Although we have long since replaced Temple rites with prayer, the symbolism of blood remains in the ceremony of *brit milah* (circumcision). Chapter 18, the final chapter of Parashah Acharei Mot, lays out rules for ethical sexual conduct and reinforces the uniqueness of our covenantal relationship with HaShem. With all of this in place, the Israelites are ready for this next crucial step. Now, for the first and only time in Leviticus, HaShem commands Moses, “Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel ...” (19:1) According to Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 24, the departure from the usual “speak to the children of Israel” means that: “This portion was stated in an assembly because most of the essential principles of the Ten Commandments are included in it.” As Tractate Shevuot 39a teaches, “The entire Jewish people are guarantors for one another.” We know all too well that the misbehavior of one Jew implicates us all. There are times when we must intervene, but we should always do this holy work in love.

Shabbat shalom!