The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them:

You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.

The Pursuit of Holiness (continued)

LAWS OF HOLINESS (19:1–37)

This chapter, which echoes the Decalogue, states the duties incumbent on the Israelites as a people.

CHAPTER 19

This parashah, one of the richest and most exalted in the Torah, begins with the words “you shall be holy” (k’doshim tihyu). What is holiness? The term can be applied to God, to good people, to a book, to a period of time, or to an animal offered as a sacrifice. To be holy is to be different, to be “set apart from the ordinary.” “Ordinary” (bol) is often used as the opposite of “holy” in rabbinic discourse. To be holy is to rise to partake in some measure of the special qualities of God, the source of holiness. Holiness is the highest level of human behavior, human beings at their most Godlike. Hirsch defines holiness as occurring “when a morally free human being has complete dominion over one’s own energies and inclinations and the temptations associated with them, and places them at the service of God’s will.” For Buber, holiness is found not in rising above the level of one’s neighbors but in relationships, in human beings recognizing the latent divinity of other people, even as God recognizes the latent divinity in each of us. God can make things holy, as in the case of Shabbat (Gen. 2:3). As human beings, we can be Godlike by exercising our power to sanctify moments and objects in our lives.

Time can be sanctified when it is used to draw closer to God. Objects can become holy when they help people rise toward God. The Torah is holy not only because it comes from God but because it leads to God.

It should also be noted that the mitzvot of Lev. 19, the laws of holiness, cut across all categories of life. They deal with ritual, with business ethics, with proper behavior toward the poor and the afflicted, and with family relations. The modern distinction between “religious” and “secular” is unknown to the Torah. Everything we do has the potential of being holy. Buber wrote that Judaism does not divide life into the holy and the profane, but into the holy and the not-yet-holy. Similarly, Finkelstein writes: “Judaism is a way of life that endeavors to transform virtually every human action into a means of communion with God.”

The Talmud (BT Yev. 20a) enunciates the important principle of “achieve holiness within the realm of the permitted” (kadesh et atzmi’kha ba-muttar l’kha). Go beyond obeying the letter of the law and refraining from what is forbidden by finding ways of sanctifying every moment of your life. We can be as holy as we allow ourselves to be. Ramban warns against the person who manages to lead an unworthy life without technically breaking any of the Torah’s rules. Such a person is called naval birshut ha-Torah, “a scoundrel within the bounds of Torah.”

2. You shall be holy

In Hebrew, this summons is phrased in the plural, implying that the capability for holiness is not restricted to spiritually gifted people; anyone may attain holiness. God does not demand the impossible. The plural phrasing suggests further that holiness is most easily achieved in the context of a community. It is difficult for a person to live a life of holiness without others. Noah wasn’t able to do it; even Abraham lapsed into unworthy behavior when surrounded by people who were not striving for holiness as he was (cf. Gen. 12, 20). When a community dedicates itself to the pursuit of holiness, its members sup-
You shall each revere his mother and his father, and keep My sabbaths; I the Lord am your God.

Do not turn to idols or make molten gods for yourselves: I the Lord am your God.

When you sacrifice an offering of well-being to the Lord, sacrifice it so that it may be accepted on your behalf. It shall be eaten on the day you sacrifice it, or on the day following; but what is left by the third day must be consumed in fire. If it should be eaten on the third day, it is an offensive thing, it will not be acceptable.

And he who eats of it shall bear his guilt, for it is an offensive thing, it will not be acceptable.

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your

3. mother and . . . father In the Fifth Commandment, father precedes mother. The two statements, when combined, amount to an equitable estimation of both parents.

port and reinforce each other. Historically, when Jewish communities have been at their best, the whole became greater than the sum of its parts. Ordinary people achieved an extraordinary measure of sanctity in their daily lives. "You shall be holy" has been understood by some not as a command but as a promise: Live by these rules and your life will become special in the process. Your fundamental need for significance, for the assurance that your life has meaning, will be met thereby [Hatam Sofer].

For Heschel, "Judaism is an attempt to prove that in order to be a man, you have to be more than a man, that in order to be a people, you have to be more than a people. Israel was made to be a holy people."

A person need not obey a parent's directive to violate the Torah. However, if it is found necessary to disobey parents in this way, it must be done with respect and reverence (Sifra). The fifth commandment of the Decalogue tells us to "honour your father and mother." This verse calls on us to "revere [one's] mother and father." Rashi suggests that the natural instinct is to revere (i.e., fear) one's father and to honor (i.e., love) one's mother. The Torah would have us regard each of our parents equally with reverence and love and would have each parent represent both discipline and forgiveness in the child's mind.

5-8. These verses are addressed primarily to the individual Israelites who donated sh'mim sacrifices to God.

9-10. These verses require that some pro-
34. **LEVITICUS 19:10** K’DOSHIM

*You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another.*

**HALAKHAY L’MA-ASEH**

**19:10, for the poor and the stranger** See Comments to Lev. 25:25,35.


**19:14. stumbling block before the blind** The Sages understand this as a prohibition against creating conditions that might tempt another person to transgress the Commandments, including those governing rituals (e.g., BT Pes. 22b), moral interactions (e.g., BT MK 17b), and commercial matters (e.g., BT BM 75a). It also forbids knowingly giving bad advice (Sifra).
You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly. 16 Do not deal basely with your countrymen. Do not profit by the blood of your fellow: I am the LORD.

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt.

17 You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt.

15. Do not favor the poor
16. Do not deal basely

You shall fear your God. Whenever this phrase is used, it refers to something entrusted to the conscience of the individual, to those acts that are beyond the jurisdiction of an earthly court. Only the individual conscience can know whether or not an act was committed in good faith. If we have one another’s confidence, we are free to deal with each other in a spirit of honesty and trust. Do not allow your kinsfolk in your heart. You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. The literal meaning of “your kinsfolk” is “your brother.” The following verse speaks of loving one’s neighbor, and this verse prohibits hating one’s brother. Hirsch suggests that though we can lose the status of being a friend or a neighbor (by quarreling, by moving away), we can never stop being related to a brother, even if he hurts us. Therefore, we are forbidden to hate him. This is one of the rare instances when the Torah seems to command feelings rather than behavior.

Reprove your kinsman. The Sages forbid carrying reproach to the point of embarrassing someone, thus incurring guilt because of that exchange, something that is forbidden by the Torah. The obligation to reprove is limited to cases in which one has reason to believe the reproof will bring about a change in behavior. It should always be a loving rebuke, never an occasion to belittle another for errant behavior.

Do not profit by the blood of your fellow. This has been interpreted in various ways. The rendering that best fits the context is: Do not pursue one’s livelihood in a way that endangers another or at the expense of another’s well-being.

17. You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Do not allow ill feelings to fester.

Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him. In other words, admonish your neighbor for his or her wrongdoing so that you will not incur guilt on your neighbor’s account.

15. Do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich. In the pursuit of justice there can be no bias, even toward those for whom we have innate sympathy and who otherwise deserve our aid.

16. Do not deal basely with your countrymen. Literally, “Do not act as a merchant toward your own kinsmen.” A traveling merchant has fairly easy access to secret information and gossip. Here, no one should traffic in such information.

15. Do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich. Once again, as in Exod. 23:3, the Torah emphasizes that the poor are better served by justice uncompromised by emotion. Hirsch sees this verse as directed to judges and verse 16 (“do not deal basely”) directed to the community at large. Judges must adhere to the law and not favor the poor, and others are obliged to reach out to the poor in charity. Love and compassion can supplement the rule of law, but cannot replace it.

17. You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. The Torah understands this verse to prohibit “standing by the blood of your fellow,” ruling it an obligation to help someone in distress, for example, a person drowning (BT Sanh. 73a). Based on this precedent, CJLS has ruled that Jews should donate blood regularly and arrange to have one’s organs donated for transplant after death.
because of him. "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the LORD.

19 You shall observe My laws. You shall not let your cattle mate with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; you shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two kinds of material.

18. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge. You must not keep alive the memory of another's offense against you.

Love your fellow as yourself. The great sage Akiva referred to this as "a basic principle in the Torah."

19. You shall observe My laws. This statement introduces the specific laws that follow.

a different kind Hebrew: kilayim, which has been explained on the basis of other Semitic languages as meaning "two kinds (together)." The term is used of animals, plants, grain, and cloth.

18. take vengeance . . . bear a grudge. Vengeance has been defined as saying, "I will not lend you my hammer because you broke my saw," and bearing a grudge as saying, "I will lend you my hammer even though you broke my saw." It has been recalled that the Eastern European sage Saul Katzenellenbogen had such a prodigious memory that he never forgot anything he read or heard. Invariably, however, he would forget when someone offended him.

Love your fellow as yourself. When Hillel was asked by a gentile to summarize the Torah in one sentence, he offered a version of this: "What is distasteful to you, don't do to another person. The rest is commentary; now go study the commentary" (BT Shab. 31a). Love your neighbor because he or she is like yourself, subject to the same temptations that you are. Just as we excuse our own behavior by seeing it in context, claiming that we were tired, angry, or misinformed and, therefore, guilty of nothing worse than poor judgment, we should be prepared to judge the behavior of others charitably.

Buber understood this commandment as being connected to the preceding one, "you shall not take vengeance." Because all human beings are part of the same body, to hurt another person in an effort to get even is to hurt part of oneself. He compares it to a person whose hand slips while holding a knife and he stabs himself. Should he stab the offending hand that slipped, to get even with it for hurting him? He will only hurt himself a second time. So it is when we, in anger, hurt another person, not understanding that we are all connected. Anger and a thirst for vengeance corrode the soul.

This verse contains three prohibitions on mixing categories, something the Torah often forbids as a way of tampering with the divinely
20. If a man has carnal relations with a woman who is a slave and has been designated for another man, but has not been redeemed or given her freedom, there shall be an indemnity; they shall not, however, be put to death, since she has not been freed. But he must bring to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, as his reparation offering to the LORD, a ram of reparation offering. With the ram of reparation offering the priest shall make expiation for him before the LORD for the sin that he committed; and the sin that he committed will be forgiven him.

21. When you enter the land and plant any tree for food, you shall regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden for you, not to be eaten. In the fourth year all its fruit shall be set aside for jubilation before the LORD; and in the fifth year all its fruit shall be holy to the LORD. In the sixth year you shall plant all its fruit; you shall eat its produce, set aside for jubilation. This is in imitation of the sounds made during a time of joy.
only in the fifth year may you use its fruit—that its yield to you may be increased: I the Lord am your God.

26 You shall not eat anything with its blood. You shall not practice divination or soothsaying. 27 You shall not round off the side-growth on your head, or destroy the side-growth of your beard. 28 You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead, or incise any marks on yourselves: I am the Lord.

29 Do not degrade your daughter and make her a harlot, lest the land fall into harlotry and the land be filled with depravity. 30 You shall keep My sabbaths and venerate My sanctuary: I am the Lord.

31 Do not turn to ghosts and do not inquire of them. These verses contain prohibitions that forbid practices characteristic of the pagan Canaanites and other idolaters.

destroy the side-growth of your beard. Tearing out the hair of one’s beard, as well as of the head, was a custom associated with mourning over the dead.

gashes in your flesh. Pagan priests gashed themselves as they called upon their gods to answer their prayers (see 1 Kings 18:28).

26-28. These verses contain prohibitions that forbid practices characteristic of the pagan Canaanites and other idolaters.

incise any marks. The reference is to some form of tattoo.

29. a harlot. Harlotry was a violation of holiness that resulted in a status similar to that of defiled sacred objects.

land...land. In biblical Hebrew, the word for “land” (erets, here ha-erets) may also connote the people on the land, which is the intent in this verse.

31. This refers to spiritualist communication of the dead. Judaism teaches us to express this grief by tearing our garments rather than by wounding ourselves. Again we are taught that the quest for holiness includes respect for one’s body, rather than a concentration on the spiritual at the body’s expense.

HALAKHAH L’MA’ASEH
19:27. round off. The Sages restricted this prohibition to shaving the sideburns and beard with a straight-edged razor (BT Mak. 21a). Scissors and many electric shavers are permitted because they cut facial hair in permissible ways.

19:28. incise any marks. It is prohibited to inscribe a permanent tattoo on one’s body (M Mak. 3:6). Nevertheless, a Jew who is tattooed may be buried in a Jewish cemetery, like any other Jew. The CJLS permits body piercing (e.g., for earrings) as long as it does not compromise a person’s health and would not lead to exposing parts of the body that usually are covered in public.
You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the LORD am your God.

You shall not falsify measures of length, weight, or capacity. You shall have an honest balance, honest weights, an honest ephah, and an honest hin.

I the LORD am your God who freed you from the land of Egypt. You shall faithfully observe all My laws and all My rules: I am the LORD.

36. honest balance  Ancient scales had an upright, on which two cups or plates were balanced. In one was a stone or iron weight, and the other held the goods to be weighed.

32. show deference to the old  “What we owe the old is reverence, but all they ask for is consideration, attention, not to be discarded and forgotten. What they deserve is preference, yet we do not even grant them equality” (Heschel). Act in such a manner that you do not embarrass the old person you will one day become, by your behavior today. The Midrash tells of a king who would rise to honor an elderly commoner, saying, “God has chosen to reward him (with long life); how can I not do the same?” (Lev. R. 25:5).

34. for you were strangers in the land of Egypt  Remembering our Egyptian experience, we might wish to be like the Egyptians when we have the opportunity, oppressing the powerless in our midst. Therefore, the Torah warns us to use the memory of slavery in Egypt to learn empathy for the oppressed.
And the Lord spoke to Moses: ‘Say further to the Israelite people:
Anyone among the Israelites, or among the strangers residing in Israel, who gives any of his offspring to Molech, shall be put to death; the people of the land shall pelt him with stones.
And I will set My face against that man and will cut him off from among his people, because he gave of his offspring to Molech and so defiled My sanctuary and profaned My holy name.
4 And if the people of the land should shut their eyes to that man when he gives of his offspring to Molech, and should not put him to death, I Myself will set My face against that man and his kin, and will cut off from among their people both him and all who follow him in going astray after Molech. 6 And if any person turns to ghosts and familiar spirits and goes astray after them, I will set My face against that person and cut him off from among his people.
7 You shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I the Lord am your God. 8 You shall faithfully observe My laws: I the Lord make you holy.

The family in religious context (20:1–27)
The laws in this chapter assume a connection between pagan worship and sexual degeneracy. Both are regarded as causes of exile.
2. Among the strangers residing in Israel
The worship of gods was forbidden to all who resided in the land of Israel, whether they were Israelites or not.
3. Any object involved in pagan worship placed in or near the sanctuary rendered the sanctuary impure. Furthermore, the very act of disobedience to God by members of the community effectively defiled the sanctuary, which stood within the settlement.
5. Kin Hebrew: mishpahab (kin, clan), which refers to the basic sociologic unit in ancient Israelite society. The clan tended to act together in matters of worship, following the way of its leaders.
6. The word translated as “going astray” (liznot) has the meaning of betraying one’s marriage vows. The Torah uses this word in connection with worshipping idols and consulting ghosts, because the covenant between God and Israel is not a business contract but a relationship of love and loyalty. Violating this covenant is seen not as default but as betrayal.
9. if anyone insults his father or his mother, he shall be put to death; he has insulted his father and his mother—his bloodguilt is upon him.

10. if a man commits adultery with a married woman, committing adultery with another man's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. 11. if a man lies with his father's wife, it is the nakedness of his father and his bloodguilt is upon him.

12. If a man lies with his father, he shall be put to death. 13. if a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall be put to death; they have committed incest—their bloodguilt is upon them.

14. if a man lies with a female one lies with a woman, the two of them have done an abhorrent thing; they shall be put to the fire, that there be no depravity upon them. 15. if a man marries his sister, the daughter of his father or his mother, and lays with her, he shall be put to death; and you shall kill the woman and the beast; they shall be put to death—their bloodguilt is upon them.

16. if a woman approaches any beast and lays with it, you shall kill the beast and its owner, they shall be put to death—their bloodguilt is upon them. The Hebrew word for “blood” (dam) and its plural (damim) often connote infractions punished by the death penalty.

17. If a man marries his sister, the daughter of his father or his mother, he shall be put to death; he has insulted his father and his mother—his bloodguilt is upon him.

Derived from the Israelite notion that animals, like humans, possess a moral sense and, therefore, also bear guilt.

17. marries Hebrew: הָנָלָה (to acquire [as a wife]); a legal term for marriage.

According to Hoffman, the laws of incest are repeated here to emphasize that they apply to all people, not only to Israelites. God demands a basic level of sexual morality from all human beings, and then summons Israel to a higher level of holiness in their sexual behavior and other aspects of life.
either his father or his mother, so that he sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace; they shall be excommunicated in the sight of their kinsfolk. He has uncovered the nakedness of his sister, he shall bear his guilt. 18 If a man lies with a woman in her infirmity and uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow and she has exposed her blood flow; both of them shall be cut off from among their people. 19 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother’s sister or of your father’s sister, for that is laying bare one’s own flesh; they shall bear their guilt. 20 If a man lies with his uncle’s wife, it is his uncle’s nakedness that he has uncovered. They shall bear their guilt: they shall die childless. 21 If a man marries the wife of his brother, it is indecency. It is the nakedness of his brother that he has uncovered; they shall remain childless.

22 You shall faithfully observe all My laws and all My regulations, lest the land to which I bring you to settle in spew you out. 23 You shall not follow the practices of the nation that I am driving out before you. For it is because they did all these things that I abhorred them and said to you: You shall possess their land, for I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey.

**disgrace** Hebrew: besed, like the Aramaic word basda (ignominy, disgrace). It should not be confused with its Hebrew homonym, which means “love, kindness.”

**they shall be excommunicated in the sight of their kinsfolk** This is a way of expressing banishment.

18. **in her infirmity** While menstruating.

**POSSSESSION OF THE LAND (vv. 22–27)**

22. **You shall faithfully observe all My laws**

This statement introduces the closing admonition of this section.

24. **flowing with milk and honey** A well-known characterization of the land in biblical literature. It is depicted as abounding in milk-producing herds, flocks, and fruit trees, especially the date palm. The Hebrew word for “honey” (d’vash) usually refers to the nectar of trees. The word translated as “flowing” also means “oozing,” which links this section with the verses concerned about bodily discharge.

24-25. **You shall possess their land, for I will give it to you** The literal meaning of “for” here is “and.” One commentator took these words to mean, first you must claim the land, and only then will I, God, confirm it as yours. God’s gifts are given permanently only to those who make the effort to claim them.
and honey. I the LORD am your God who has set you apart from other peoples. So you shall set apart the pure beast from the impure, the pure bird from the pure. You shall not draw abomination upon yourselves through beast or bird or any thing with which the ground is alive, which I have set apart for you to treat as impure.

26 You shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine. A man or a woman who has a ghost or a familiar spirit shall be put to death; they shall be pelted with stones—their bloodguilt shall be upon them.

who has set you apart from other peoples. So you shall set apart the pure beast from the impure. The people Israel, by bringing the dimension of holiness not only into its ritual life but also into its ways of eating, dress, and sexual mores, will be a model for all humanity of how people can refine and transcend their animal nature and achieve holiness. 26. You shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy. The parashah concludes [in this penultimate verse] as it began.

HALAKHAH L’MA’ASEH

20:26. be holy ... I have set you apart ... to be Mine. Beyond the specifics of Jewish law, we are obligated to act in a way that reflects well on God, the Jewish people, and our traditions (kiddush ha-Shem) and to refrain from acting in a way that would bring dishonor to God, our people, and its traditions (hillul ha-Shem) (MT Foundations of the Torah 5:1,10–11).

his bloodguilt is upon him. The Hebrew phrase, לֹויָיָה לֹויָיָה, "bloodguilt is upon him," is often connected to the idea of a person acting against something that is sacred. In this passage, it refers to the act of treating as impure the pure beast or bird. The phrase "bloodguilt" is used in the Talmud and rabbinic literature to refer to a person who fails to act in a way that reflects well on God or the community.