

Dear Chavraya,

One of the greatest challenges the Torah places before us is in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Acharei Mot-K'doshim*, one of the double portions that can be separated in a leap year to insure there are enough portions to go around. The challenge comes right at the beginning of the *parasha* and gives the portion its name: *K'doshim t'hiyu ki kadosh ani hashem elokeychem/You shall be holy, for I, God, your God, am holy.* *K'doshim* is a noun, referring to holy people. The reference is not to any special class of people, not to the *Kohanim*, not to Moses and Aaron, not to other leaders or to people of unique piety. It is God's hope that it shall refer to all of us, ordinary people who live and work with each other to make a better world. The way of holiness that God calls us to can only be found among people. To retreat from the world in pursuit of holiness is to fail the challenge.

Of one who would "flee to the forest" to escape the evils of the world, while it may be a first step to preserve goodness, the *Ma'or Vashemesh*, a nineteenth century Chassidic rebbe said: *But this only serves to save one from the things that impede Godly service, but one does not merit to attain higher holiness until joining with others who truly serve God and participates together with them in the great work.* Not offering its challenge in a vacuum, the Torah offers a way to that "higher holiness." *You shall be holy* is followed immediately by a lengthy list of mitzvot. Of these holy deeds, the great majority of them are *mitzvot bein adam l'chaveyro/commandments that are between one person and another*, those that mediate interpersonal relationships. Toward creating a just and peaceful society, a corner of every field is not to be harvested by its owner, but left for the poor and the stranger. Toward social harmony, *You shall not steal..., and you shall not tell lies one against the other.* That we not be guilty of oppression and robbery, the wages of a day laborer shall be paid immediately, and *not remain overnight with you until the morning.* Against gossip and slander that causes so much hurt, *Do not go about as a talebearer among your people.* That we not avert our eyes to the pain of others, *Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.* The essence of all of these commandments, their beginning and their end, comes with the crescendo, the most familiar and the most difficult of these commandments, *v'ahavta l'rey'acha kamocho/and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

Each of these commandments or grouping of similar commandments ends with the signature: *ani hashem/I God*, or *ani hashem elokeychem/I, God, your God*. What is the reason for this signature, the rabbis ask, and they answer with a rhetorical question: *Would you love the sages and hate their students? Would you love the students and hate the common people?* Each one having been created by God, the way of our relationship to others is the way of our relationship to God. The way to holiness is here among us, in the markets and in the parks, in our homes and our communities, and on the streets where we encounter the ones we are to love.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor