

Parashah Ninety

Leviticus 19:1–20:27; Amos 9:7–15; Ephesians 4:17–24

notes by Tim Hegg

Be Holy, For I, the Lord am Holy

Leviticus Rabba 24 records how the sages saw the obvious parallel between our Torah section and the Ten Words (Commandments). Here, in our text, we have the basic elements of God’s Torah reiterated and, in some cases, expanded. But there is a very interesting and important lesson to be learned first of all from the arrangement of these chapters.

Notice first how the opening section (chapter 19) deals with relationships between members of the community: children to parents, parents to children, community to the alien, man to his neighbor, each toward the deaf and blind, etc. This opening section prohibits impartial judgment, slander, hating fellow-countrymen, being judgmental, bearing a grudge, and sexual misconduct. It commands loving one’s neighbor, respecting the station-in-life of others in the community, and giving equal advantage to the foreigner who dwells in the community.

After an emphasis upon “loving one’s neighbor,” then follows the section prohibiting Molech worship, spiritism, and sexual impurities of all kinds.

The point is this: in a society governed by the dividing mark of God’s Torah, it could become easy, indeed, a way of life, to foster a hard, judgmental spirit. If one only has an eye to justice without first having a heart governed by compassion, the heart will inevitably become hard, and the Torah, which has as its primary function to reveal the love of a Father to His children, becomes a flogging stick in the hand of the self-righteous. This is not God’s design. He intends that His people, those who are marked by keeping His laws and statutes, be equally known as compassionate, forgiving, merciful, and kind-hearted. Knowing how to love each other is an integral step in learning to love God. It is with this in mind that Yeshua’s words as recorded in John 13:35 are best understood. Yeshua taught elsewhere (Matt 5:17ff) that keeping the commandments, i.e., being holy, would be the mark of God’s children. In John, however, He teaches that loving each other would be the sign of true discipleship. The two aspects are obviously combined: as we practice God’s Torah in the direction of loving each other, we hone our spiritual ability to love God. In other words, there is circle of obedience here. Loving God’s Torah leads us to love each other. And, loving each other (as God’s Torah teaches) helps us to understand how we are to love God—and the circle begins again.

It is interesting that our section begins this “circle” with the first relationship of love, i.e., between a child and his parents. “Every one of you shall reverence his mother and his father....” But note what is connected with this commandment: “... and you shall keep My Sabbaths....” At first glance this appears unconnected. How is keeping the Lord’s Sabbaths related to reverencing one’s parents?

The answer is clear and simple: if a child is taught from the beginning to reverence (the Hebrew word is **אָרָא**, “to fear”) his parents, he learns the all important lesson of submission to authority. In that vital lesson he also takes his first step toward understanding his need to submit to God’s authority as his Father, the out-working of which will be to submit to God’s control of his time, and thus the willingness to keep God’s Sabbaths. So here it is in simple illustration: the relationship of love between each other (in this case, between the child and parent) advances us in our abilities to love God.

Of course, we might also reason in the opposite direction. If we have developed a pattern of bitterness and hatred toward our fellow man, then it is logical to assume that we will be hampered in our attempts to love God as He ought to be loved. This is reasonable since all bitterness and hatred flows, in the final analysis, from a fountain of self-interest and its accompanying hatred is often triggered by personal hurt and pain, the fact remains that a life characterized by bitterness and a judgmental spirit is a life turned inward.

The Torah not only teaches against this, but prohibits it out-right. We are to love our neighbor as our self. In all of our attempts to nurture our own souls and care for our own physical well being, we must never lose sight of the Torah's emphasis upon caring for our neighbor out of a heart of compassion and understanding. If God's Torah prescribes a penalty for sinful action, then it must be administered. But even in the enactment of justice, our hearts are pained for the community member who, rather than experiencing the solace and peace of the Torah, is rather smarting under its loving discipline. We long, rather, to see each person rejoicing in the service of God which flows freely from a heart overtaken by the joy of being holy as He is holy. And there is no better example of such a life than that of Yeshua Himself, who in every detail obeyed God and kept the Torah, and who thus loved others with a compassion unparalleled in humankind.

But the arrangement of our Torah section makes yet another emphasis. This love and compassion for my neighbor is not found in disregarding God's laws in favor of my own feelings and perspectives. We cannot lower the standard of God's justice to accommodate our notions of "love." We must, rather, combine a gentle, caring, non-judgmental spirit with an unflinching resolve to maintain God's standards of righteousness, whether in our personal relationships or in the larger, corporate interactions of the community. Society in general, and our society in particular, cries out for caring, compassion, for a sense that someone actually is concerned about the torn sinews of the soul entombed in the sin-laden body of modern man. Yet if all we are able to do, as followers of Yeshua, is apply the Torah of a loving God with resounding thunder of a judge's gavel, we have missed a great deal of what the Torah teaches us. We must learn how to tell our worldly neighbors and work-mates that the God Who has eternal standards (which we all have broken) is still the God Who wants to heal and mend the broken soul, and turn it upon the path of holiness. We must be able to speak these truths with the actions of our lives, and to reach out to those who, lost in the maze of sin, need desperately to see the joy and freedom that comes from loving God (i.e., keeping His commandments).

But it is clear that if we cannot bring ourselves to obey God in loving each other, we will have to put on deceptive masks of "religion" to "love" our unbelieving neighbors and work-mates. From bitterness we will inevitably sooth our consciences by hiding behind the strict code of the Torah, and proclaiming with judgmental tones the debauchery of the people who "dirty" our communities.

How different the response of Yeshua, who, without any compromise as to the Torah's decisive judgment upon sin, nevertheless wept over rebellious Jerusalem with a heart broken for people who, created in the image of God, ought to be enjoying the bliss of walking with Him in holiness.

True holiness knows what it means to confront, to rebuke, even to punish, but it also knows what it means to care, to hurt for and with, and to do all in its power to let mercy shine through. "Love covers a multitude of sins."

19:5-8 The issue must revolve around the need to set the sacrifices apart as special in light of merely slaughtering for food. The idea that one could both offer a sacrifice while at the same time prepare meat for the family would detract from the sacrifice being primarily given to God as an offering. Thus, the meat eaten by the worshiper and his clan/friends could be consumed only for two days. On the third day the meat was no longer to be eaten. The severe penalty attached (being cut off) emphasizes the point the God intends His worship to be entirely set apart to Him.

19:9-10 The poor (עני) and the foreigner [non-Israelite] (גר) are put together as those in need. This was because both were not land owners, though the poor could be if their economic status changed. The foreigner, however, could never own land permanently. What is more, the foreigner is connected with the poor because apart from marriage into the clan, he had no family ties that would guarantee support. Unless the community as a whole made provision (by leaving the gleanings and being generous), both the poor and the stranger would suffer. That this law is set forth in the Torah shows that it was always God's purpose that the foreigner be included as part of the larger community.

19:11-15 Stealing and lying, which is connected with swearing falsely (since, as those who worship HaShem day and night, we know that He attends to every word we speak), actually desecrates the Name. Stealing and lying or swearing falsely are connected in this way: not only is the one who actually is a thief guilty, but also all those who aid or abet the thief by covering his sin, or by accepting items that he has stolen even though it is known that they are not rightfully his to sell. No community can survive that allows deceit to remain as normative.

Stealing is not only when one overtly robs another of his property, but also when one fails to pay what one owes. Workers who exchange their time for compensation are robbed if that compensation is not forth-coming. The Torah expects that workers should be paid immediately after they have performed the work—their payment cannot be delayed. If it is delayed, it is a form of thievery.

Interestingly, the law regarding the deaf and blind is also put in this section. Like the poor, the stranger, and the worker, someone may easily take advantage of the deaf and the blind since they are vulnerable. The disadvantaged are to be cared for with special consideration, and thus the deaf and the blind are listed as the most obviously disadvantaged persons of a society. Since our American society was founded upon the Torah, we have always made provision for the deaf and blind. In societies that have no connection to the Torah, the deaf and blind are often left to a life of abject poverty.

19:15 After commanding that the poor and disadvantaged are to be treated with special care, the Torah reminds us that they are not to receive special handling when it comes to matters of justice. All within the Israelite society came under the same laws of conduct and ethics.

19:16-18 Loving one's neighbor as oneself, a Torah commandment, means that one is not to be a gossip, nor is one allowed to stand idly by while observing his fellow being hurt. That these two are linked might indicate that both a physical and a non-physical aspect is intended. Since gossip

is often construed metaphorically with words of murder, to listen to gossip is similar to watching one's neighbor being physically assaulted and doing nothing about it.

Furthermore, loving one's neighbor as oneself means that one must be willing to resolve conflicts within the context of justice. One may not take one's own vengeance against one's fellow. Thus, submitting to justice is a form of loving one's neighbor.

19:19 Mixing of things is prohibited because our daily living is to remind us in every way how we are set apart to our God within the eternal covenant He has made with us. The mixing of cloth is specifically detailed in Deut 22:11 to be restricted to wool and linen. This may be because the High Priest's garments had this mixture, and thus the common man was to be distinguished from the High Priest even in the clothes he wore.

19:20-22 This section is difficult to interpret because it uses words that are rare or even used only here. The situation is specific and most likely rare. It involves a woman who is a slave, but who has been betrothed to a man other than her owner. If the owner was the betrothed man, the Hebrew would doubtlessly be in the construct (as is the case throughout chapter 18). As a betrothed woman, she then has sexual relations with a man other than the one to whom she is betrothed. We know this must be the case since: 1) if the situation involved rape, the penalty would be death (Deut 22:23); 2) if she were not betrothed, she could be forced to marry the man (Deut 22:28). But there is a further complication: the woman is owned by another man, and his rights of ownership cannot be dismissed by her having sinned against her betrothal. Thus, where we might expect a monetary penalty and forced marriage, since this is not possible, that which remains is to bring a sacrifice. Why a guilt offering? Remember that the *asham* offering is prescribed where God's *sanctum* has been defiled. In this case, since the betrothal involved an oath (and thus brought God forward as a witness to the oath), the breaking of the oath of betrothal is an offense against the holiness of God. Thus a guilt offering is required. Though our text does not state it in particular, the rabbinic ruling in this case was that the man who was betrothed to the woman may break the betrothal upon finding that she has had relations with the other man. If she were not the slave of her owner, she would be put to death along with the man with whom she had relations.

19:23-25 Fruit trees were to be given three years without harvesting the crop. The fourth year's crop was to be given to HaShem as a tithe like the tithe given to the priests. Historically it was ruled that the fruit of the fourth year had to be eaten in Jerusalem, and if it was too far for such a celebration, the fruit was to be sold and the money taken to Jerusalem where food could be purchased for the fourth year celebration. The promise that is given is clear: if one gives to HaShem the first of the crops (in this case the first four years), the remaining years will more than make up for what might at first appear as a loss. The principle: obeying God is the best way to experience increase.

19:26-28 This section deals with matters related to sorcery. The opening line is "you shall not eat over blood" (לֹא תֹאכְלוּ עַל־הַדָּם). It was common for sorcerers to use blood as part of their incantations and their attempts to cast spells, etc. From this the Sages derived: 1) the butcher could not eat in the place where he was preparing meat, 2) sacrificial meat could not be eaten until after the pouring of the blood was completed, 3) a *bet din* must fast on the day that they enact capital punishment.

The prohibition against all kinds of sorcery includes “believing in lucky times” (Stone Chumash) which means believing in the pagan superstitions: like knocking on wood, not walking under a ladder, carrying a rabbit’s foot, etc. Obviously, horoscopes and fortune telling are included in these prohibitions. That rounding the edge of the scalp and destroying the edge of the beard is included in this section shows that such practice was connected with sorcery. It is in this connection that it is prohibited. The pagans would scar the forehead and the sides of the scalp in their pagan rituals.

19:29 Parents are to protect and guard the purity of their children, not encourage or force them into a life of immorality. Lacking such protection and guardianship, the society falls inevitably into debauchery, and the whole land is polluted. Of course, by extension those who employ the services of a harlot are equally guilty.

19:30-31 The worship of HaShem is not to be mixed with pagan worship. Since in paganism those who engage in necromancy are often viewed as “priests” or “priestesses” of the demonic cult, prohibition of this sort of thing is put in contrast to the true worship of God in His sanctuary, on His appointed days, including the weekly Sabbath. Contamination of soul arises from participation in the demonic deception of necromancy.

19:32-37 General kindness and respect is to mark the life of the Torah community. This includes special reverence given to the aged, for their wisdom is to be sought after. The “elder” (“sage,” Stone Chumash) is one who has learned the lessons of life and whose counsel, therefore, is invaluable. To give honor to the seniors of the community is thus to honor HaShem.

Likewise, the foreigner (improperly translated as “proselyte” Stone Chumash) is to be treated with respect, welcomed, and appreciated within the community. This is not a proselyte, for the Torah gives no provision for becoming a proselyte. Rather, in ancient Israel, the foreigner was a foreshadowing of the eventual ingathering of the nations to Israel.

Correct measures and weights indicates the need for integrity in all commercial and economic dealings. Cheating one’s neighbor in matters of commerce is to fail to love him as the Torah commands.

20:1-8 The worship of Molech, which included child sacrifice, was considered the height of idolatry. The community was to purge such a thing from their midst (by stoning the one engaged in the idolatry). If the community fails to do this, however, the text indicates that God Himself will bring the person to an early death. The fact that the text turns immediately to a person who curses his father and mother may indicate that such action is connected to the idolatry of Molech. Perhaps there was a renouncing of father and mother within the cult as well, something that often accompanies demonic worship.

20:1-21 The penalties for illicit relations are now given (the specifics of these relations were given in chapter 18). Since the penalties were most likely by stoning (except the one death by fire, v. 14), the whole community was engaged in exacting the punishment. Thus they are placed after the section outlining the commandments dealing with community relationships. If a community is not strongly knit together along the lines of the statutes given in chapter 19, they will be unable to exact the necessary penalties prescribed in chapter 20.

20:22-27 The conclusion reiterates the need to live by God's statutes and decrees. All of them, even the separation of clean and unclean, is important in order to maintain the community in which HaShem's statutes may be maintained and lived out.

The primary, repeated strains throughout our Torah section are twofold: be holy because I am holy, and I am Adonai your God. Our life of Torah observance ought to enact a metamorphosis within us, changing us into the image of our Creator. And if we understand the Torah correctly we will see that it reveals to us One who is infinitely compassionate and merciful, while being infinitely just and holy. As we mature spiritually and grow to be more and more like our Creator, conforming to His image (cf. Rom 8:29), we are enabled to walk the delicate course between justice and mercy without compromising either. May the life of Torah for which we strive conform us to this image by the power of the Ruach HaKodesh.