Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary

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Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary
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The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew too close to the presence of the Lord. The Lord said to Moses:

Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come at will into the Shrine behind the curtain, in front of the cover that is upon the ark, lest he die; for I appear in the cloud over the cover.

Thus only shall Aaron enter the Shrine: with a bull of the herd for a purificati

The primary objective of these expiatory rites is to maintain a pure sanctuary. An impure, or defiled, sanctuary would induce God to withdraw His Presence from the Israelite community.

Verses 1–2 introduce the rites by referring to the untimely deaths of Nadab and Abihu, the two sons of Aaron who suffered because they impropri

PREPARATIONS FOR PURIFICATION

The main officiant in the purification of the sanctuary was the High Priest. Although he was assisted at certain points in the proceedings, the efficacy of the entire ritual depended primarily on him.

4. For the rites described here, the High Priest donned unadorned white linen vestments that were fashioned especially for the occasion. so much the public observance of Yom Kippur. Their focus is the priestly responsibility to cleanse and purify the sanctuary so that it will be a fit place for the atonement rituals. (Aharei Mot is read in the spring, six months before and after Yom Kippur, as if to suggest that any season is an appropriate time for self-scrutiny and atonemen

3–5. For the Midrash (Lev. R. 21:11), the bull recalls the merit of Abraham’s offering in Gen. 18:7, the ram is a reminder of Isaac’s readiness to be sacrificed in Gen. 22:13, and the two
breeches next to his flesh, and be girt with a linen sash, and he shall wear a linen turban. They are sacral vestments; he shall bathe his body in water and then put them on.—5And from the Israelite community he shall take two he-goats for a purification offering and a ram for a burnt offering.

6Aaron is to offer his own bull of purification offering, to make expiation for himself and for his household. 7Aaron shall take the two he-goats and let them stand before the Lord at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; 8and he shall place lots upon the two goats, one marked for the Lord and the other marked for Azazel. 9Aaron shall bring forward the goat designated by lot for the Lord, which he is to offer as a purification offering; 10while the goat designated by lot for Azazel shall be left standing alive because the goat selected for Azazel was not slaughtered for a sacrifice, as was the other goat, but served as a different means of obtaining expiation.

5. from the Israelite community . . . two he-goats Purification offerings on behalf of the entire community usually consisted of large cattle; those offered by individual Israelites were usually from the flocks, as in 4:22f. The Yom Kippur ritual was an exception. He-goats from the flocks served as purifications for the entire people.

7. The two he-goats were stationed near the altar so that one could be chosen by lot as a sacrifice and the other one could be selected as the scapegoat.

8. one marked for the Lord and the other marked for Azazel One lot bore the inscription “for the Lord” (l’YHVH) and the other bore the inscription “for Azazel” (la-azazel). The precise meaning of the Hebrew azazel, found nowhere else in the Bible, has been disputed since antiquity and remains uncertain.

9. offer as a purification offering He designates it as a purification offering. Assigning an animal as a sacrifice was a formal act accompanied by a declaration.

10. left standing alive The he-goat selected for Azazel was not slaughtered for a sacrifice, as was the other goat, but served as a different means of obtaining expiation.

goats [v. 5] symbolize the meal Jacob prepared for his father to receive his father’s blessing [Gen. 27:9]. The four linen garments [v. 4] represent Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. On Yom Kippur, we come before God armed not only with our own merit but also with that of our ancestors, extending through the generations.

6. The ritual of the High Priest that leads to atonement is rooted in the premise that the sanctuary, which represents the presence of God, is also a human institution, subject to the flaws and imperfections of any human institution. Religious leaders, however pious and devoted, are human beings. Thus Aaron begins the purgation process by bringing an offering on his own behalf and on behalf of his fellow kohanim for whatever they may have done wrong. The Midrash takes the words “for himself and his household” to mean that the High Priest must be married. He comes before God, not as a pious individual but as the representative of a flawed community aspiring to holiness. How could he bear their prayers and hopes unless he had learned to care for and share the hopes and dreams of another person?

8. one marked for the Lord and the other marked for Azazel A Hasidic comment interprets these words to teach us that we should spend as much time, money, and energy on God’s purposes as we do on earthly pleasures.

10. If Azazel is taken to be the name of a demon, either the demon that entices people
before the Lord, to make expiation with it and to send it off to the wilderness for Azazel.

11Aaron shall then offer his bull of purification offering, to make expiation for himself and his household. He shall slaughter his bull of purification offering, and he shall take a panful of glowing coals scooped from the altar before the Lord, and two handfuls of finely ground aromatic incense, and bring this behind the curtain. He shall put the incense on the alters and bring this behind the curtain, and two handfuls of glowing coals scooped from the altar before the Lord, lest he die. He shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger over the cover on the east side; and in front of the cover he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times. He shall then slaughter the people’s goat of purification offering on the sanctuary courtyard, because only it had a perpetual fire burning, allowing the High Priest to bring the coals from there into the sanctuary.

11. Nothing was placed on the altar at this point. The actual sacrifice is described in verse 25.

12. the altar before the Lord This designation must refer to the altar of burnt offerings in the sanctuary courtyard, because only it had a perpetual fire burning, allowing the High Priest to bring the coals from there into the sanctuary.

finely ground aromatic incense The prescription for blending this incense is provided in Exod. 30:34–38.

13. the Pact The Ark is referred to in this way because the tablets of “the Pact” (ha-Edut), the covenant between God and Israel, were deposited in it (Exod. 40:20).

14. lest be die The incense cloud served to protect the High Priest while he stood in the immediate area of God’s Presence.

to sin or the malignant power that testifies against them on the Day of Atonement, then the scapegoat is cast into the wilderness (or in later interpretations, thrown off a cliff) rather than sacrificed in the usual manner, to avoid violating the ban against offering sacrifices to demons [Ibn Ezra]. A midrash sees Israel offering the scapegoat to Azazel as a bribe to persuade him not to testify against Israel or as a distraction to keep him from his evil work [PdRE].

What can we see as the meaning of the scapegoat if we do not accept the Azazel-as-demon theory? It may be a symbol of the evil impulse itself, the tendency to be led astray by the animal part of our nature, by lust or appetite. It may have been believed that words alone were not enough to rid the Israelites of the inclination to do wrong; something physical had to be expelled from their communal midst. Hirsch interprets the two goats homiletically: “We can follow our sensual instincts into the wilderness, leading to self-destruction, or we can sacrifice our instincts to the service of God.”

13. The Talmud suggests that the offering of incense, which has scent but no physical presence, atones for sins of gossip and slander, which are also without physical reality but can be carried far and wide with serious consequences. There are more sins relating to improper speech in the Yom Kippur confessional than any other category of wrongdoing [BT Yoma 44a].
ing, bring its blood behind the curtain, and do with its blood as he has done with the blood of the bull: he shall sprinkle it over the cover and in front of the cover.

16Thus he shall purify the Shrine of the impurity and transgression of the Israelites, whatever their sins; and he shall do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which abides with them in the midst of their impurity. 17When he goes in to make expiation in the Shrine, nobody else shall be in the Tent of Meeting until he comes out. When he has made expiation for himself and his household, and for the whole congregation of Israel, 18he shall go out to the altar that is before the LORD and purge it: he shall take some of the blood of the bull and of the goat and apply it to each of the horns of the altar; 19and the rest of the blood he shall sprinkle on it with his finger seven times. Thus he shall purify it of the impurity of the Israelites and consecrate it.

20When he has finished purging the Shrine, the Tent of Meeting, and the altar, the live goat shall be brought forward. 21Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat

DISPATCH OF THE SCAPEGOAT  (vv. 20–22)

After completing the purification of the sanctuary by means of the blood rites, the High Priest turned his attention to the second mode of purification, the rite of riddance that involved the scapegoat. (The name, from “escape goat,” first appeared in Tyndale’s English translation of the Bible in 1530.)

20. brought forward The scapegoat was brought near to the altar of burnt offerings and stood facing the entrance of the courtyard, from which it would depart.

21. confess over it The confessional enumerated the various sins to bring them out into the open. Once isolated in this way, the sins could be exorcised. Sinfulness, like impurity, was

21. iniquities and transgressions . . . their sins These three categories of wrongdoing are defined in the Talmud as follows: Avon (iniquity), “twisting,” is a deviation from the straight path due to temptation. Pesha (transgression), “rebellion,” is a rejection of the law and of the right of God to direct one’s behavior. Het (sin), “missing the mark,” is a transgres-
and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated man. 22. Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

23. And Aaron shall go into the Tent of Meeting, take off the linen vestments that he put on when he entered the Shrine, and leave them there. 24. He shall bathe his body in water in the holy precinct and put on his vestments; then he shall come out and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people, making expiation for himself and for the people. 25. The fat of the purification offering he shall turn into smoke on the altar.

26. He who set the Azazel-goat free shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water; after that he may reenter the camp.

27. The bull of purification offering and the goat of purification offering whose blood was brought in to purge the Shrine shall be taken outside the camp; and their hides, flesh, and dung shall be consumed in fire. 28. He who thought to be an external force that clings to people; it was necessary, therefore, to “drive out,” or detach, sins.

22. The Bible does not provide any information on what was done with the scapegoat in the wilderness.

AFTER THE SCAPEGOAT’S DISPATCH (vv. 23–28)

23. Aaron shall go into the Tent of Meeting

Aaron was to approach the tent. It is hardly conceivable that he would enter the tent and disrobe inside, because Exod. 20:23 specifically forbids the exposure of a priest’s nakedness near the altar. After dispatching the scapegoat, the High Priest was standing in the courtyard near the altar of burnt offerings. He proceeded to a screened area, adjacent to the tent, where he disrobed, bathed, and donned his golden vestments.

24. he shall come out

From the screened area.

25. The fatty portions of the two purification offerings—the bull and the he-goat—were burned on the altar. The rest was burned outside the camp.

26. bathe

Before re-entering the camp.
burned them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water; after that he may re-enter the camp.

29 And this shall be to you a law for all time: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall practice self-denial; and you shall do no manner of work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you. 30 For on this day expiation shall be made for you to purify you of all your sins; you shall be pure before the LORD. 31 It shall be a sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall practice self-denial; it is you shall practice self-denial In biblical literature “innah nefesh,” the idiom for the practice of self-denial, almost always connotes fasting.
you shall do no manner of work This includes the alien, for if resident aliens, such as merchants and craftsmen, were to continue their daily pursuits, the Israelite community would be affected. Aliens were not, however, expected to practice self-denial, only to honor the day by abstaining from work.

AN ANNUAL EXPIATION DAY (vv. 29–34)

Once the sanctuary was in operation, periodic purification was necessary. The laws in this section, addressed to the entire people not only to the priesthood, ordain an annual Day of Atonement.

29. a law for all time What is ordained here is to be practiced in all future generations.

the seventh month According to Exod. 12:2, the month of Passah was to be counted as the first month of the year. According to a Babylonian calendrical reckoning, also, the year began in the spring. The Mishnah (RH 1:1) refers to Tishrei as the month from which the years are to be reckoned, which is our practice today. When exactly this was instituted, we do not know.

29. the alien who resides among you Each of us carries a “stranger” inside us, a part of us that is alien to our essential self. Each of us must confront this “stranger” as we examine ourselves on Yom Kippur.

30. expiation . . . purify Soloveitchik distinguishes between “atonement” (expiation), restoring our relationship to God, and “purification,” removing the stain of sin from our personality. Atonement relies on God’s readiness to love and to accept imperfect people. Purification involves the capacity of those imperfect people to improve. This verse is prominent in the Yom Kippur liturgy.

31. you shall practice self-denial This is the basis for the obligation to fast and to abstain on Yom Kippur from bathing, sexual activity, and wearing leather. Earlier translations rendered the verse as “you shall afflict your souls,” conveying the idea that the purpose of the Yom Kippur fast is to punish ourselves, to make us uncomfortable, making up for the self-indulgence of the rest of the year. The translation used here teaches the purpose of the fast not as punishment but as a proclamation of our humanity.

Human beings are the only creatures who can control their appetites, who can be hungry and choose not to eat. By fasting on Yom Kippur, we proclaim that we are masters of our appetites, not slaves to them. In addition, fasting is meant to free us to focus on the spiritual

HALAKHAH L’MA’ASEH

16:31. self-denial Jewish law requires those who are ill or infirm to follow doctor’s orders to eat, drink, and take medicine even on Yom Kippur. Even in the absence of doctor’s orders, the infirm and ill are allowed on fast days to eat and drink if they feel the necessity (BT Yoma 83a).
a law for all time. 32. The priest who has been anointed and ordained to serve as priest in place of his father shall make expiation. He shall put on the linen vestments, the sacral vestments. 33. He shall purge the innermost Shrine; he shall purge the Tent of Meeting and the altar; and he shall make expiation for the priests and for all the people of the congregation.

34. This shall be to you a law for all time: to make expiation for the Israelites for all their sins once a year.

And Moses did as the LORD had commanded him.

17 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

2. Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelite people and say to them:

This is what the LORD has commanded: 3. if anyone of the house of Israel slaughters an ox or sheep or goat

The Pursuit of Holiness (17:1–26:46)

Chapters 17–26 form a distinct unit; its central idea is that the entire people Israel bears the responsibility of seeking to achieve holiness. For that reason, this section has come to be known as the Holiness Code.

PROLOGUE: PROPER WORSHIP (17:1–16)

2. to all the Israelite people  God addresses these ordinances to the people as a whole not just to the leaders and the priesthood.

3. the house of Israel  The delineation of the Israelite people as “the house of Israel” expresses the close relationship and common descent of all Israelites.

slaughters an ox or sheep or goat  The Hebrew verb translated as “slaughter” (טָוֵת) can re-

32. to serve as priest in place of his father  “Every generation has its own particular complex of sins to which it is vulnerable. Therefore, every generation needs its own spiritual guide to show it the way to atonement and reconciliation” (Salanter).

33. purge the innermost Shrine  The primary sense of the Hebrew for “purge” (קִיפֶּר) is “to wipe off, cleanse,” as in cleansing with detergents. In the biblical conception, expiation was not the automatic result of performing certain acts. Purification resulted when God accepted the acts of the priests and of the people and granted expiation.
or sheep or goat in the camp, or does so outside the camp, and does not bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to present it as an offering to the Lord, before the Lord’s Tabernacle, bloodguilt shall be imputed to that man: he has shed blood; that man shall be cut off from among his people. This is in order that the Israelites may bring the sacrifices which they have been making in the open—that they may bring them before the Lord, to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and offer them as sacrifices of well-being to the Lord; that the priest may dash the blood against the altar of the Lord at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and turn the fat into smoke as a pleasing odor to the Lord; and that they may offer their sacrifices no more to the goat-demons after whom they stray. This shall be to them a law for all time, throughout the ages.

4. before the Lord’s Tabernacle The place of sacrifice is to be restricted to the tabernacle altar.

has shed blood The Hebrew idiom for shedding blood (shafakh dam) usually refers to intentional murder. Its use here dramatizes the extreme seriousness of improper sacrifice.

5. in the open Formerly, the Israelites had offered their sacrifices outside the camp as well as within it.

bring them before the Lord, to the priest Sacrifices should be offered by a proper priest at the sole legitimate altar.

6. the priest may dash the blood Concern for the proper use of sacrificial blood is basic to the regulations of chapter 17. The designation of the tabernacle altar as “the altar of the Lord” is based on the view that there is only one legitimate altar at which the God of Israel may be worshiped.

7. offer their sacrifices no more to the goat-demons The law is intended to uproot prior religious customs and to enforce strict adherence to the monotheistic religion of Israel.

These rules about bringing animals to the central altar to be dispatched rest on the premise that slaughtering animals for food should never be a callous or a casual act. The Torah inculcates in us a horror of shedding blood, even the blood of animals. It would seem that, for the Torah, vegetarianism is the human ideal [see Gen. 1:30, 9:1–7], and that eating meat, taking the life of a living creature for our dinner, is a concession to human appetite. These rules extend the Jewish dietary laws to forbid not only prohibited species but even permitted species that have been killed by other beasts or have died of natural causes. They also prohibit ingesting the blood even of properly slaughtered animals.
8 Say to them further: If anyone of the house of Israel or of the strangers who reside among them offers a burnt offering or a sacrifice, and does not bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to offer it to the Lord, that person shall be cut off from his people.

10 And if anyone of the house of Israel or of the strangers who reside among them partakes of any blood, I will set My face against the person who partakes of the blood, and I will cut him off from among his kin. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation for your lives upon the altar; it is the blood, as life, that effects expiation.

12 Therefore I say to the Israelite people: No person among you shall partake of blood, nor shall the stranger who resides among you partake of blood.

13 And if any Israelite or any stranger who resides among them hunts down an animal or a bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. For the life of all flesh—its blood is its life. Therefore I say to the Israelite people: You shall not partake of the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Anyone who partakes of it shall be cut off.

15 Any person, whether citizen or stranger, who eats what has died or has been torn by wild beasts shall be cut off from among his kin.

8–9. Sacrifices are to be outlawed everywhere except at the tabernacle altar.

10. The blood is to be dashed against the altar.

11. For the life of the flesh is in the blood.

This is repeated in verse 14. Similar formulations occur in Gen. 9:4 and Deut. 12:23.

12. It is the blood, as life, that effects expiation.

Blood represents life; living beings cannot exist without blood. Thus the blood of the sacrifice offered on the altar is the “life” of the sacrifice. God accepts it in place of human life and grants expiation or refrains from wrath.

12. This is a restatement of the blood prohibition, for emphasis.

13. Animals and fowl could be hunted for sustenance, not sport. Their blood, however, had to be drained before the meat could be eaten.

15. Eating flesh of carcasses or torn animals is forbidden. Tactile contact with carcasses renders one impure and requires purificatory ablutions.

HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH

17:10. PARTAKES OF ANY BLOOD Blood must be removed from meat before it is fit for eating. This is done through a special method of slaughtering (sh’hitah); removing certain prohibited parts of the animal; and salting, soaking, and rinsing the meat. Kosher butchers usually salt and soak the meat, a procedure once performed at home. If meat is broiled, salting and soaking are unnecessary, and liver must be broiled to be kosher.

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beasts shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain impure until evening; then he shall be pure. 16 But if he does not wash [his clothes] and bathe his body, he shall bear his guilt.

18 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:
2 Speak to the Israelite people and say to them:
I the Lord am your God. 3 You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws. 4 My rules alone shall you observe, and

DEFINITION OF THE FAMILY (18:1–30)

2. the Israelite people The regulations of this chapter are meant to govern the conduct of the entire people.
I the Lord am your God The commandments come directly from God and are to be obeyed with utmost strictness.
3. At certain periods in the history of ancient Egypt, it was the custom among the royal class to encourage brother-sister marriages. Other prohibited acts found in this chapter, such as homosexuality and bestiality, at times were apparently practiced in Canaanite culture.
4. faithfully follow My laws The Hebrew for “follow” (שָׁלַל) means “to go, walk.” It often explain the anomaly in the text (18:12–14) that a woman may marry her uncle (indeed that was often a preferred match) although a man could not marry his aunt. The family relationship is the same, but presumably the unmarried aunt might live in the same household while the unmarried uncle would have his own home elsewhere.

3. nor shall you follow their laws One senses here the Torah’s revulsion at the erotic component of pagan society. Some commentators take these words to mean that we may not imitate the gentile nations even in innocuous matters, such as the clothing we wear (S’fat Emet). Hirsch, on the other hand, maintains: “We may imitate the nations among whom we live in things that are based on reason but not on things relating to religion or superstition.” The Sages of the Talmud make it clear that Jews are to obey the civil laws of the lands in which they live (“the law of the [gentile] government is binding,” dina d’malkhuta dina, BT Git. 10b), even as we are to separate ourselves from their religious ways.
faithfully follow My laws: I the Lord am your God.

5 You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live: I am the Lord.

6 None of you shall come near anyone of his own flesh to uncover nakedness: I am the Lord.

7 Your father’s nakedness, that is, the nakedness of your mother, you shall not uncover; she is your mother—you shall not uncover her nakedness.

8 Do not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is the nakedness of your father.

9 The nakedness of your sister—your father’s daughter or your mother’s, whether born into your household or outside

is used to connote adherence to God’s commandments.

7. This verse forbids sexual relations with one’s natural mother (Ramban).

8. the nakedness of your father’s wife This refers to one who has sexual relations with a wife of his father who is not his natural mother.

5. by the pursuit of which man shall live

This important verse later became the basis for defining the limits of martyrdom (BT Yoma 85b). Only in cases of murder, incest, adultery, or idolatry must a Jew give up his or her life rather than violate the commandments. In all other cases, one must violate the Torah to spare one’s life—in order to live by the Torah afterward.

Maimonides gives the words a deeper meaning: The wicked are considered as dead even in their lifetimes because they are not fulfilling their innate mission to live by God’s laws. They do not understand what it means to be truly alive. A 19th-century Hasidic master understood the words homiletically to mean, “Keep God’s laws while you are young and vigorous. Do not wait to become pious when you are old and the urge to sin has fled.”

6. In the Torah, “to uncover the nakedness” is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. It may also serve to imply that, in a society where people dressed modestly, seeing a person undressed would inevitably lead to sexual contact. Nakedness, and the uncovering of nakedness, is a category that applies only to human beings. Only humans wear clothing, because only human beings have a sense of shame, of being judged (cf. Gen. 3). Judaism traditionally calls for modesty in dress, not only to avoid temptation but as a statement about the holiness of the body and at the same time a rejection of the pagan worship of the naked human form. Only human beings are motivated to cover certain parts of their bodies out of reverence for the power of those organs to create and sustain life. Similarly, only human beings can think in terms of “suitable marriage partners.”

HALAKHAH L’MA’ASEH
185. by the pursuit of which man shall live

Except for the prohibitions against murder, incest and adultery, and idolatry, any commandment must be set aside for *pikku‘ah nefesh*, to save a human life (BT Sanh. 74a). Thus one may violate *Shabbat* to take someone to the hospital in an emergency, and doctors must not hesitate to violate the laws of *Shabbat* to save a life. Israel’s armed forces rely on this principle to defend Israel from attack on *Shabbat* and holy days. See Comment to Exod. 22:1.

189. your sister This verse is understood to prohibit relations with all siblings. The CJLS has ruled that sexual relations and marriages between adopted children raised in the same family are also prohibited.
the household or outside—do not uncover their nakedness.

10. The nakedness of your son’s daughter, or of your daughter’s daughter—do not uncover their nakedness; for their nakedness is yours.

11. The nakedness of your father’s wife’s daughter, who was born into your father’s household—she is your sister; do not uncover her nakedness.

12. Do not uncover the nakedness of your father’s sister; she is your father’s flesh.

13. Do not uncover the nakedness of your mother’s sister; for she is your mother’s flesh.

14. Do not uncover the nakedness of your father’s brother: do not approach his wife; she is your aunt.

15. Do not uncover the nakedness of your son’s wife: she is your son’s wife; you shall not uncover her nakedness.

16. Do not uncover the nakedness of your brother’s wife; it is the nakedness of your brother.

17. Do not uncover the nakedness of a woman and her daughter; nor shall you marry her son’s daughter or her daughter’s daughter and uncover her nakedness: they are kindred; it is depravity.

18. Do not marry a woman as a rival to her sister and uncover her nakedness in the other’s lifetime.

19. Do not come near a woman during her period of impurity to uncover her nakedness.

household, whereas your mother’s daughter was born outside of it at a time when your mother was not part of your father’s household.

10. It is not clear why the prohibition of union with one’s own daughter was not made explicit, but for the Sages it was obvious that such a union would be incestuous.

11. your father’s wife’s daughter A half-sister with whom one shares a common father but not the same mother.

15. daughter-in-law The basic meaning of the Hebrew word kallah is “daughter-in-law.” Usage, however, was fluid. Viewed from the perspective of the son’s generation, kallah is “bride,” just as the masculine counterpart hatan means both “son-in-law” and “bridegroom.”

18. a woman as a rival to her sister In polygamous marriages, the interests of the several wives inevitably came into conflict.

19. her period of impurity This refers to her menstrual period.
20. Do not have carnal relations with your neighbor’s wife and defile yourself with her.

21. Do not allow any of your offspring to be offered up to Molech, and do not profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.

22. Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence.

23. Do not have carnal relations with any beast and defile yourself thereby; and let no woman lend herself to a beast to mate with it; it is perversion.

24. Do not defile yourselves in any of those ways, for it is by such that the nations that I am casting out before you defiled themselves.

25. Thus the land became defiled; and I called it

21. offered up to Molech Molech is the name given to a deity worshiped by some of Israel’s ancient neighbors. Some scholars believe that this is intended to prohibit the sacrifice of children to the God of Israel.

22. Aside from this verse and its parallel in 20:13, the Bible mentions homosexuality only in the context of rape (Gen. 19:5, Judg. 19:22) and apparently with regard to prostitution (Deut. 23:18–19). In its condemnation here, the Torah uses the word to-eivah, which appears more than one hundred times in the Bible to describe an object or act as repulsive.

23. let no woman The only instance in this chapter where women are the subject of the commandment.

perversion Hebrew: tevel, derived from the root בַּלע (to mix), implying that sex with beasts is a forbidden “mixture” of species.

24. perversion Hebrew: tevel, derived from the root בַּלע (to mix), implying that sex with beasts is a forbidden “mixture” of species.

25. the land became defiled Those who violate the code of family life commit an outrage that defiles the land; and the angry land may, in turn, spew them out.

21. For Hirsch, Molech represents a vision of God as blind fate, a god who does not represent or demand righteousness but wants only obedience. We might take this prohibition as a warning against sacrificing the integrity of our children on the altars of fame or material success.

HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH

18:22. Do not lie with a male Many biblical scholars understand this verse to forbid only male anal sex, but the Sages expanded the prohibition to include other forms of male homosexual sex and female homosexual sex as well (Sifra Aharei Mot 9:8). These prohibitions have engendered considerable debate within the CJLS and the movement as a whole. Some rabbis and congregants believe that these prohibitions should stand as they are, while others say that they should be narrowed to prohibit only what the Torah does, and still others hold that they should be abrogated altogether. Despite such varied views on homosexuality per se, the CJLS is wholly in accord with Conservative Movement resolutions that deplore violence against gay and lesbian persons, that endorse full equality for gays and lesbians in civil law, and that call on congregations to welcome gay and lesbian Jews in all aspects of synagogue life.
to account for its iniquity, and the land spewed out its inhabitants. 26 But you must keep My laws and My rules, and you must not do any of those abhorrent things, neither the citizen nor the stranger who resides among you; 27 for all those abhorrent things were done by the people who were in the land before you, and the land became defiled. 28 So let not the land spew you out for defiling it, as it spewed out the nation that came before you. 29 All who do any of those abhorrent things—such persons shall be cut off from their people. 30 You shall keep My charge not to engage in any of the abhorrent practices that were carried on before you, and you shall not defile yourselves through them: I the Lord am your God.

26. neither the citizen nor the stranger who resides among you The objective of establishing a holy community requires that all who live within it, both Israelites and aliens, uphold a standard of proper sexual behavior.

30. You shall keep My charge The Hebrew verb for “keep” can also be translated “guard/protect.” That dimension of the command led the Sages to the concept of “making a fence around the Torah,” expanding the domain of the prohibited to protect the Torah from inadvertent violation.

The theme of Leviticus has been the striving of human beings to come into God’s presence in a state of holiness, through animal offerings, through the avoidance of contact with defiling substances or behavior associated with the pagan world. This focus on holiness reaches its peak in the next parashah, K’doshim.

* For the haftarah for this Torah portion, see selections starting on p. 705.
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.

2. You shall be holy

The Hebrew is quite emphatic: “You must be holy!”

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” (hol) 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 atzm’khah 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 capacity 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-
3. You shall each revere his mother and his father, and keep My sabbaths: I the LORD am your God.

4. 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. 6. 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. 7. 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 he has profaned what is sacred to the LORD; that person shall be cut off from his kin.

9. 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.

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

9–10. These verses require that some portion 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.”

3. 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 “honor 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.

5–10. The command to consume the sh’lamim (offering of well-being) within two days is meant to encourage the donor to invite the poor to share in the meal. Similarly, the subsequent command to leave the corner of the field and the fallen fruit is motivated by the desire to have us share our bounty with the poor. Even a poor person, owner of a small field, must leave a corner of the harvest for others. The biblical story of Ruth, read on Shavuot, turns on Ruth’s right to glean in the fields of her affluent neighbors. “To care for the poor, who are fashioned in God’s image, is a form of worship” [Hoffman].
You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the Lord am your God.

11You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another. 12You shall not swear falsely by My name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord.

13You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning.

14You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

duce from the harvest of field and vineyard be reserved for the poor and the stranger. Four types of gifts are specified: two from the grain harvest and two from the vineyards.

your vineyard Underdeveloped clusters of grapes must be left unpicked until they mature. At that time, only the poor and the stranger may pick them. Fruit that falls to the ground during picking is to be left ungathered.

11. You shall not steal This parallels the Eighth Commandment.

12. You shall not swear falsely by My name This parallels the Third Commandment.


14. You shall not insult the deaf Speaking ill of the deaf is especially blameworthy because it involves taking unfair advantage of another’s disability.

11. The words “you shall not steal” follow directly after the laws of leaving part of the harvest for the poor. Does this teach that keeping everything for ourselves is a form of stealing [Ibn Ezra]? Or are we commanded to help the poor find enough to eat so that they will not be driven to steal [Kara]?

12–13. Hoffman notes that sometimes within a single verse, some verbs will be in the singular and others in the plural. He suggests that it is the obligation of the community as a whole to create a moral climate that will make it easier for an individual to do what is right and make it less socially acceptable for an individual to sin. The law can only forbid and punish; the knowledge that one’s neighbors will disapprove may be a more effective deterrent.

14. You shall not insult the deaf Speaking ill of the deaf is especially blameworthy because it involves taking unfair advantage of another’s disability.

stumbling block before the blind “The term ‘blind’ refers not only to one who is phys-
15. **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.

17. **You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart.** Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt in the exchange, something that is forbidden by the Torah (Sifra). 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.

**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.

**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” (N. Leibowitz, based on Rashi and Sifra).

**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.

**Do not profit by the blood of your fellow**

The Talmud 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. 18 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: kil·ayim, 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.

19. The Sages understand hukkim [translated here as “laws”] as referring to rules for which there seems to be no rational explanation. We follow them, not because they make sense (as do laws prohibiting murder or commanding rest on Shabbat) but as opportunities to do God’s will. When a Jew follows God’s command without understanding the reason for it, we can understand the relationship in one of three ways: (a) as that of slave to master, with obedience compelled; (b) as that of pupil to teacher, in which the pupil assumes that the teacher knows what is right and necessary even if the pupil cannot see the point of it, although the pupil may hope one day to understand it; or (c) as that of people in love, in which one takes pleasure in knowing what he or she can do to please the beloved. Conservative Judaism tends to give the tradition the benefit of the doubt when it baffles us but does not morally offend us. When the tradition asks us to do something that does offend us morally, Conservative Judaism claims the right to challenge and, if necessary, change the tradition, not because we see our judgment as superior to that of the Torah but because our judgment has been shaped by the values of the Torah and we are in effect calling the Torah to judge itself. “We affirm that the halakhic process has striven to embody the highest moral principles. Where changing conditions produce what seem to be immoral consequences and human anguish, varying approaches exist within our community to rectify the situation” (Emet Ve-Emunah).

This verse contains three prohibitions on mixing categories, something the Torah often forbids as a way of tampering with the divinely
20. Carnal relations with a woman who is a slave

The law of verses 20–22 is topically related to the Seventh Commandment because it hinges on the legalities of adultery, even though adultery is not directly involved here.

Designated for another man

That is, she has been pledged by her master, before her redemption, to another man.

An indemnity

A payment is imposed on the responsible party because the girl, no longer a virgin, would be less desirable as a wife and the prospective husband would undoubtedly cancel the marriage.

21. A reparation offering (asham) is required here in addition to the indemnity because an act of defilement has been committed: a violation of holiness. The woman had been promised to another, and even though the act was strictly speaking not adulterous, it was more than simply an act of seduction.

22. 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.

23. 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 the produce of the set aside year shall be holy to the LORD.

24. After the jubilation year, you shall eat the yield of that year.
only in the fifth year may you use its fruit—that its yield to you may be increased: I the Lord am your God.  
26You shall not eat anything with its blood. You shall not practice divination or soothsaying. 27You shall not round off the side-growth on your head, or destroy the side-growth of your beard. 28You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead, or incise any marks on yourselves: I am the Lord. 29Do not degrade your daughter and make her a harlot, lest the land fall into harlotry and the land be filled with depravity. 30You shall keep My sabbaths and venerate My sanctuary: I am the Lord. 31Do not turn to ghosts and do not inquire

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

destroy the side-growth of your beard Tear 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. You shall not eat anything with its blood The verse may simply be a repetition of the prohibition in 17:10–14. Or, given the rest of this verse, it may refer to a Canaanite practice of divining the future by examining the bloody entrails of an animal (Hoffman). The Talmud derives from this verse the moral lesson that judges should fast on the day they sentence a criminal to death [BT Sanh. 63a].
divination or soothsaying These idolatrous practices are rooted in the idea that the future has already been determined and we can compel God to reveal it to us. Judaism insists that the course of the future is not set until human beings make free decisions about their behavior, determining their fate and the fate of the people around them.

28. gashes in your flesh for 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.

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” (eretz, here ha-aretz) may also connote the people on the land, which is the intent in this verse.

31. This refers to spiritualist communication.
of familiar spirits, to be defiled by them: I the Lord am your God.  

32You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.  

33When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. 34The 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.  

35You shall not falsify measures of length, weight, or capacity. 36You 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. 37You shall faithfully observe all My laws and all My rules: I am the Lord.

with the dead in the netherworld through oracular inquiry or augury.  

33. a stranger  The “stranger” (ger) referred to in the Bible was most often a foreign merchant, craftsman, or mercenary soldier. The term never refers to the prior inhabitants of the land, who are identified by ethnologic groupings, such as Canaanites and Amorites, or by other specific terms of reference.  

35. You shall not falsify measures  “You shall not commit an injustice.”

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.  

ephah  See Comment to Exod. 16:36.  

hin  See Comment to Exod. 29:40.  

I the Lord am your God who freed you from the land of Egypt  In its emphasis on the liberation from Egypt this statement resembles the First Commandment.

HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH  

19:36. honest weights  Jewish law bans fraud and deception (see Exod. 23:7; Lev. 19:13) in both business and personal interactions. Jewish communities historically appointed inspectors to ensure that the weights and measures of Jewish merchants were honest (S.A. Ḥ.M. 231:2).
20 And the Lord spoke to Moses: 2 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.

3 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,

5 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: mishpahah (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 worshiping 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. his bloodguilt is upon him  The Hebrew word for “blood” (dam) and its plural (damim) often connote infractions punished by the death penalty.

FORBIDDEN SEXUAL UNIONS  (vv. 10–21)

15. you shall kill the beast  The punishment derives from the Israelite notion that animals, like humans, possess a moral sense and, therefore, also bear guilt.

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

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9. insults  Hebrew: קָלָל, literally “to treat lightly”—that is, to not take seriously [from kal, meaning “lightweight”). It is the opposite of the verb used in the Fifth Commandment, kabbed [from a root meaning heavy in weight, translated as “honor”). The words and values of one’s parents are weighty; they must be taken seriously even when one disagrees with them.

10ff. 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.

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HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH
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 24 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. This statement introduces the closing admonition of this section.

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.

disgrace Hebrew: ḥesed, like the Aramaic word hasda (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.
and honey. I the LORD am your God who has set you apart from other peoples. 25So you shall set apart the pure beast from the impure, the impure bird from the pure. You shall not draw abomination upon yourselves through beast or bird or anything with which the ground is alive, which I have set apart for you to treat as impure. 26You shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine.

27A 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).
HAFTARAH 1 FOR AḤAREI MOT / K’DOSHIM

AMOS 9:7–15 (Ashk’nazim)

(Instructions for Ashk’nazim: When Aḥarei Mot and K’doshim are read separately and no occasions coincide that have a special haftarah of their own [see below], some traditions recite this haftarah with Aḥarei Mot and the following haftarah with K’doshim; others reverse the order of these haftarot.

When Aḥarei Mot and K’doshim are combined, recite this haftarah.

When Aḥarei Mot is read separately on Shabbat ha-Gadol or on Erev Rosh Ḥodesh, recite this haftarah with K’doshim. When K’doshim will be read separately on Rosh Ḥodesh, recite this haftarah with Aḥarei Mot.)

The prophet Amos is among the earliest of the classical prophets, flourishing in the reigns of King Jeroboam II of Israel (784–748 B.C.E.) and King Uzziah of Judah (769–733 B.C.E.). Speaking against Judah (in the south), but especially against the northern kingdom of Israel, Amos severely criticizes the people for cultic sins and moral insensitivity. His words are all doom and dire prediction, except for his final words, which constitute the last two verses of this haftarah. After opening with a judgment speech against sinful nations, his own people included, Amos promises hope and restoration to Israel and Judah in days to come.

Amos’s final words of hope constitute a striking reversal of his opening speech to the northern kingdom of Israel, when, years earlier, he spoke God’s word “Concerning the whole family that I [God] brought up from the land of Egypt: / You alone have I singled out / Of all the families of the earth— / That is why I call you to account / For all your iniquities” (3:1–2). Even this uniqueness seems to be neutralized in the haftarah, as the people are told that God will judge them because they are no different from the other nations (like the Philistines and the Arameans) whom the Lord delivered from other lands (9:7–8). Thus doom will befall Israel, although not because God holds it to special account or because of unique favor shown it in the past.

These new remarks were certainly designed to unsettle the listener and to undermine any false sense of trust or advantage. Indeed, for Amos, historical redemption is not the basis for the divine election of Israel, or for its survival. God’s will and grace are the independent factors determining Israelite destiny. Israel always remains accountable to the Covenant. Only obedience or the humble acceptance of divine judgment is in the hands of the people; all else depends on God.

The special favor that God accords Israel is marked by the decision to save a remnant of the northern nation and to scatter them in foreign exile. This mitigated judgment is presented as an expression of divine favor, although unmerited; for the sins of the people should have led to their doom, as was the case for the other nations. To announce God’s act, the prophet uses the image of a sieve that scatters some particles while catching others in the grating. The strewn elements are apparently the people who are saved, in contrast distinction to the sinners who remain in the instrument and do not escape its mesh (vv. 8–9). In terms of the prophet’s rhetoric, the survivors are simply those who do not boastfully deny divine judgment, not individuals who deserve acquittal for any other reason (cf. v. 10). For later readers, Amos’s pronouncement seems to forecast the dispersion of the northern tribes, an event that still lay in the future (722–721 B.C.E.). However, the imminent aggression of the Assyrian Empire and its expansion are never explicitly mentioned by the prophet.

More perplexing is the ensuing forecast that God “will set up again the fallen booth of David” (v. 11). The obscurity of this image and the en-
suing references to widespread ruins have long perplexed readers of Amos, not least because the destruction of the Temple and of Judea lay nearly two centuries ahead (587–586 B.C.E.). At any rate, readers of these words are given hope to anticipate a restoration of the Davidic era, when expansion was at a height and national unity a reality. The dooms forecast against Judea will be wholly assuaged by an anticipation of a renewal of the “days of old” (see 2:4–5, 9:11). In those times, Judea dominated Edom. So it will again.

The restoration of Israel is the fitting complement to these hopes. Here, too, ancient messages of doom against the north will be reversed through a miraculous regeneration of life (9:13–15). The cycle of nature will be so bountiful as to overlap itself repeatedly; scarcely will the older harvests be gathered when the times for new planting will fall due. Even the people will partake of this revival. In a dramatic image, Amos speaks of the planters planted in the earth, nevermore to be uprooted from their homeland. As a sign of this new era, Israel will again be called “My people” (v. 14).

RELATION OF THE HAFTarah TO THE PARASHAH

Both Aharei Mot and this haftarah emphasize that God will judge all peoples for their iniquities. Furthermore, divine acts of national liberation are no guarantee against punishment for sin.

Meanwhile, these words of Amos contrast dramatically with K’doshim. For its part, K’doshim concludes boldly with a challenging proclamation: “You shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine (li-hyot li)” (Lev. 20:26). Action is a responsibility for both parties to the Covenant. Two distinct acts are portrayed. God has made a unilateral choice of Israel to be His special people. Israel is called on to react by faithfully observing the covenantal laws and regulations to realize the divine call to be holy.

This haftarah stands in tension with such a teaching. The prophet’s divine assertion that “To Me (li), O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians” (Amos 9:7) denies Israel’s uniqueness and asserts a fixed reality. No divine election is proclaimed here and no special destiny is awaiting fulfillment. Israel is a nation among the nations, and its history is similar to that of its neighbors. This does not erase national memory, however, or the path of piety that is uniquely Israel’s. It only means that Israel may not rely on divine grace shown it in the past as a guarantee of mercy in the present or in the future. Thus Israel must reflect deeply on its destiny and discover just how its unique covenantal path shapes its national-religious character. Then will it transform the triumphal assertion of uniqueness found in K’doshim into a new awareness of distinction and duty.

Kept separate, K’doshim and this haftarah’s lessons cancel each other’s truth concerning election; brought together, they revise one another reciprocally and suggest a more inward and humble theology of chosenness.

To Me, O Israelites, you are
Just like the Ethiopians
—declares the Lord.

True, I brought Israel up
From the land of Egypt,
But also the Philistines from Caphtor
And the Arameans from Kir.

Amos 9:7. To Me, O Israelites In Hebrew grammar, this assertion is a question: “Are you not just like the Ethiopians to Me, O Israelites?”

Caphtor Most likely identified with Crete (see Jer. 47:4).

Kir In Amos 1:5, the people will be exiled
Behold, the Lord God has His eye
Upon the sinful kingdom:
I will wipe it off
The face of the earth!

But, I will not wholly wipe out
The House of Jacob
—declares the LORD.

For I will give the order
And shake the House of Israel—
Through all the nations—
As one shakes [sand] in a sieve,
And not a pebble falls to the ground.

All the sinners of My people
Shall perish by the sword,
Who boast,
“Never shall the evil
Overtake us or come near us.”

In that day,
I will set up again the fallen booth of David:
I will mend its breaches and set up its ruins anew.
I will build it firm as in the days of old,
So that they shall possess the rest of Edom
And all the nations once attached to My name
—declares the LORD who will bring this to pass.

A time is coming
—declares the LORD—

back to Kir. Cf. 2 Kings 16:9, which reports that the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III took Damascus “captive to Kir” (ca. 734 B.C.E.).

8. the Lord God has His eye Literally, “the eyes of the Lord God.” Use of this idiom dramatizes the investigative character of divine justice (cf. Zech. 4:10). The image apparently derives from the older Near Eastern identification of royal investigators with the eyes of the king.

9. sieve Hebrew: k’varah. Apparently a coarse sieve, used to strain straw and stones.

10. Never shall the evil . . . A quotation exemplifying the boastful disdain of the people.

11. booth This image is unclear. Some commentators have interpreted the metaphor in terms of the fallen state of the Davidic (United) Monarchy (Rashi, Radak).

12. once attached to My name Hebrew: asher nikra sh’mi aleihem; literally, “upon whom My name is called.” This idiom signifies ownership.
When the plowman shall meet the reaper,
And the treader of grapes
Him who holds the [bag of] seed;
When the mountains shall drip wine
And all the hills shall wave [with grain].

14 I will restore My people Israel.
They shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit them;
They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine;
They shall till gardens and eat their fruits.

15 And I will plant them upon their soil,
Nevermore to be uprooted
From the soil I have given them
—said the Lord your God.

13. the plowman shall meet the reaper  This image, and the subsequent image of the “treader of grapes” meeting the sower, both dramatize the physical bounty anticipated. The produce will be so munificent as to extend into the ensuing planting season (Rashi, Radak).

15. I will plant them  Like a firmly rooted tree, not to be moved. Compare Exod. 15:17.
HAFTARAH 2 FOR AHAREI MOT / K’DOSHIM

EZEKIEL 22:1–19 (Ashk’nazim)

EZEKIEL 22:1–16 (S’fardim)

(For instructions for Ashk’nazim, see the introduction to the previous haftarah. S’fardim recite this haftarah with Aharei Mot, and the next haftarah with K’doshim.)

In this haftarah the prophet Ezekiel addresses the city Jerusalem as “the city of bloodshed,” accusing Jerusalem for “all her abhorrent deeds” (v. 2). These sins, listed in clusters, focus on moral and sexual crimes in family and society, with special emphasis on the oppression of socially dependent and powerless individuals. The prophet also charges the city with desecrating Shabbat and the sacral offices. For Ezekiel, the city symbolizes the outrages committed by all the people, judging them as a whole. This passage is dated sometime after Ezekiel’s deportation to Babylon in 597 b.c.e. and before 587–586, when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the general population was exiled to Babylon.

In his role as God’s prosecutor, Ezekiel accuses the people of crimes specified in the Torah, showing familiarity with a wide range of rules from the Covenant Code (Exod. 21–23), and especially from the Holiness Code (Lev. 18–20), as well as various laws from Deuteronomy. Thus the prophet’s speech testifies to formulations of the laws of the Torah from the early 6th century B.C.E. This was long before Ezra’s return from the exile and the beginning of the canonization of the Torah in the 5th century B.C.E.

The detailed list of sins reinforces the prophet’s assertion that the people were utterly deserving of divine punishment. This accounts for Ezekiel’s specification of moral misdemeanors from the legal collections cited above. Alongside these faults the prophet specifies violations drawn from earlier priestly traditions, including contempt for Shabbat and the holy offerings, and improper sexual relations.

Undoubtedly there was a basis for these accusations. But their comprehensive and schematic character should be taken into account in any assessment of the religious and moral state of the nation at the time. Ezekiel does not limit his critique to issues of ritual impurity, but absolutely condemns immoral and inconsiderate uses of power as well.

For such actions, the people are condemned to exile, where in due course their suffering and “dishonor” will “consume the impurity” from them (15–16). The polluting effect of idolatry and sexual misconduct is found elsewhere in Ezekiel (see 5:11, 20:7,18,31). The prophet’s inclusion of moral and civil behavior in his judgment of impurity is also found in priestly sources (Num. 35:33–34). Nevertheless, Ezekiel’s comprehensive emphasis is noteworthy, as is his view of the punishment of exile as purification through suffering. On this note of judgment (22:16) the haftarah concludes according to Sephardic tradition.

Ashk’nazim traditionally add three more verses to conclude the haftarah with a message of hope (22:17–19). Ezekiel here extends the imagery of purification found in verse 15, offering the good news of restoration to the homeland. This message of the haftarah represents a remarkable and radical transformation of scripture by the Sages, for 22:17–22 constitutes an outright oracle of doom, in which God condemns Israel as “dross” and announces that He will gather them together in Jerusalem and melt them in the fire of His fury. The Sages, determining which verses would constitute the haftarah, decided to stop the prophecy of doom at verse 19. Their truncated passage gives the impression that God will transform the sinful dross of His people in exile, to restore them to Jerusalem in their new and purified state. It is this positive word that prevailed when rabbinic tradition radically transformed the teaching of God’s
The instruction in *Aharei Mot*, stressing the point that observing the laws of the Covenant is something one lives in and through (Lev. 18:5), raises living by the laws of the Torah into a spiritual principle. This *haftarah*, in contrast, teaches that immorality vitiates and perverts the life and spirit of the perpetrator and of the victim, by emphasizing the point that maltreatment of the poor and needy is an act of bloodshed.

By presenting sin as an act of defilement, both this *haftarah* and the two *parashiyot* present the Covenant as a means of purity or sanctification, for the earth and for its inhabitants. In this way, all actions prescribed by the Covenant constitute a kind of priestly service, transforming the mere natural into acts of holiness and the mere human into spiritual life.

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**Ezekiel 22:2. arraign, arraign** In Hebrew, this is literally a question: "Will you arraign?" A verb repeated at the outset of a prophetic speech (see also Ezek. 20:4) gives it emphatic force, yielding the meaning here: "Surely you will arraign!"

**3. fetishes** Hebrew: *gillumim*, meaning "idols." Abravanel suggests that this is a metaphor for "all the other sins" besides bloodshed that the people have committed.

**become impure** Ezekiel’s priestly orientation transforms Israel’s civil-legal crimes into ritual, polluting ones (cf. vv. 3–5,10,15). In this he was particularly indebted to older priestly traditions that treated illicit sexual relations with relatives as impurity (see Lev. 18:7–20,24–25). Ezekiel includes bloodshed and economic oppression in his list.

**5. O besmirched of name** Alternatively, this phrase is the derogatory epithet spoken against them by the surrounding gentiles (Rashi).
midst used his strength for the shedding of blood. 7Fathers and mothers have been humiliated within you; strangers have been cheated in your midst; orphans and widows have been wronged within you. 8You have despised My holy things and profaned My sabbaths.

9Base men in your midst were intent on shedding blood; in you they have eaten upon the mountains; and they have practiced depravity in your midst. 10In you they have uncovered their fathers’ nakedness; in you they have ravished women during their menstrual impurity. 11They have committed abhorrent acts with other men’s wives; in their depravity they have defiled their own daughters-in-law; in you they have ravished their own sisters, daughters of their fathers. 12They have taken bribes within you to shed blood. You have taken advance and accrued interest; you have defrauded your countrymen to your profit. You have forgotten Me—declares the Lord God.

13Lo, I will strike My hands over the ill-gotten gains that you have amassed, and over the bloodshed that has been committed in your midst. 14Will your courage endure, will your hands remain firm in the days when I deal with you? I the Lord have spoken and I will act. 15I will scatter you among the nations and disperse you through the lands; I will consume the impurity out of you. 16You shall be dishonored in the sight of nations, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

17The word of the Lord came to me: 18O mortal, the House of Israel has become dross to Me; they are all copper, tin, iron, and lead. But in

10–11. The prophet details various sexual offenses (incest, adultery, and cohabitation with a menstruating woman). In terms of both its technical vocabulary and its use of the third person, this legal cluster follows Lev. 20:10–18.

14. I the Lord have spoken and I will act Promise and fulfillment are linked. Alternatively, “I am YHVH; what I have spoken I will do!” (Greenberg).

16. you shall be dishonored Hebrew: v’nihalt bakh; a term linked to ritual desecration (see v. 8, and Lev. 18:21, 19:8).

18. dross Hebrew: sig, meaning unclear. Possibly it refers to an alloy of lead and silver. In this
a crucible, the dross shall turn into silver. 19Assuredly, thus said the Lord God: Because you have all become dross, I will gather you into Jerusalem.

figurative expression, the people who are “dross” will be refined in fire as a punishment. (In reality, dross is the scum that forms on the surface of molten metal during the process of liquefying.) For Ezekiel, the melting fire is both a proving of the people’s guilt and their punishment.
The verses of this haftarah (from 591 B.C.E.) are part of a long sermonic retrospective on Israel’s sinful past and present that concludes with prophecies of restoration.

God commands Ezekiel to call the people to account: “Arraign, arraign them” (v. 4). In Hebrew, this command is in the form of a double question—“Will you arraign them, will you arraign?”—which has the effect of an urgent direct request to “arraign” them. In calling them to account, the prophet is commanded to declare to them (literally, “make known” to them) the details of their sins as a people in the past (v. 4). To counterpoint this derogatory information, the prophet uses the same verb to indicate God’s past favor in having made Himself “known” to the Israelites and to the Egyptians (vv. 5,9). As a further expression of beneficence, God also “made known” His law to the nation (v. 11) and even gave them the holy Shabbat so that they might “know” Him (vv. 12,20). By such linguistic emphasis Ezekiel drives home the point that Israel has been a historical ingrate and that the stress on their sins is appropriate because of their ongoing apostasy.

The prophet shows himself to be well versed in Torah traditions. For example, Ezekiel recalls the Israelite rebellion in the wilderness and God’s subsequent decision not to “make an end of them” (l’khallotam, v. 13) so that His name would “not be profaned” (hebel) among the nations (v. 14). This, too, recalls a passage in the Torah: The sin of the Golden Calf and God’s initial statement that “I may destroy them” (va-akhallem) in the wilderness, although He subsequently relented owing to Moses’ entreaty (va-y’hal) for forgiveness (Exod. 32:10–12). Significantly, Ezekiel does not refer to Moses’ intervention here or to Moses’ response to God’s decision to destroy the people after their lack of faith in His ability to bring them to the Land. In his sermon, Ezekiel repeatedly and solely portrays mercy as a unilateral divine act.

Yet the people deserve punishment for their continuous sin and rebellion in the past, as pointed out in vv. 7–8 and 11–13. Ezekiel, in his closing exhortation, refers to a second divine appeal to the nation in the wilderness—urging a new generation to reject the ways of their ancestors and to observe God’s laws and sanctify Shabbat (vv. 18–20). Here, again, the choice is between the defilement of idolatry and rebelliousness versus the sanctifying power of divine instruction.

This conclusion produces a new teaching. In its original setting, Ezek. 20:18–20 is but another exhortation, urging the people to obey the laws before presenting another account of their rebellion and sin. The ancient Sages decided not to include in this haftarah the people’s negative response found in subsequent verses. With this decision they transformed Ezekiel’s historical arraignment into a divine instruction for all generations, not limited to the people of biblical times. Thus Ezekiel’s prophetic word is transformed from an old lawsuit into an ever-new summons to heed and obey the Covenant.

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

Like Moses, Ezekiel emphasizes the centrality of God’s law and the divine sanctification of the people by and through it. At the outset of the parashah, Moses speaks for God in calling on the people to “be holy” and to “keep My sabbaths” (Lev. 19:2–3). Thereupon a pattern of behavior is specified as leading to holiness in God’s sight. This theme recurs at the end of the parashah, when God instructs the people: “You shall faithfully observe My laws; I the LORD make you holy” (Lev. 20:8). Ezekiel, correspondingly, repeats God’s instruction that the people “Follow My laws and be careful to observe My rules” (Ezek. 20:19, cf. v. 11). They are further told that “I gave them My
The phrase that associates life with following God's laws stresses that one will attain the blessings of earthly life by means of the laws. Generations of postbiblical readers, however, have understood the true reward of following God's laws to be in the spiritual life such piety engenders, be that in and through a life of sanctity in this world, or in a blissful afterlife (see Targ. and Ibn Ezra on Lev. 18:5, and MT Sacrilege 8:8).

Ezekiel 20:2–3. Ezekiel was approached by a delegation of elders who wanted an oracular consultation with God. The prophet thus acts as a medium (“and the word of the Lord came to me”) who provides the divine response (vv. 3,31, cf. 14:3,7). This use of the verb “inquire” (adarash) has roots in oracular functions (cf. Gen. 25:22), often performed by Israelite and foreign prophets (1 Sam. 9:9; 1 Kings 22:5–8; 2 Kings 1:3,6). It is also found in connection with Jeremiah, Ezekiel’s contemporary (Jer. 21:2).

5–7. The references to divine self-revelation in Egypt and the divine oath to bring the people to the Promised Land are drawn directly from Exod. 6:2–8. In Ezekiel’s discourse, however, the revelation is to all the people (not just to Moses), and the divine oath to redeem the people is given to the nation in Egypt (not only to the patriarchs).
upon them, to vent all My anger upon them there, in the land of Egypt. 9But I acted for the sake of My name, that it might not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they were. For it was before their eyes that I had made Myself known to Israel to bring them out of the land of Egypt.

10I brought them out of the land of Egypt and I led them into the wilderness. 11I gave them My laws and taught them My rules, by the pursuit of which a man shall live. 12Moreover, I gave them My sabbaths to serve as a sign between Me and them, that they might know that it is I the LORD who sanctify them. 13But the House of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness; they did not follow My laws and they rejected My rules—by the pursuit of which a man shall live—and they grossly desecrated My sabbaths. Then I thought to pour out My fury upon them in the wilderness and to make an end of them; 14but I acted for the sake of My name, that it might not be profaned in the sight of the nations before whose eyes I had led them out. 15However, I swore to them in the wilderness that I would not bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, the fairest of all lands, which I had assigned [to them], 16for they had rejected My rules, disobeyed My laws, and desecrated My sabbaths; their hearts followed after their fetishes. 17But I had pity on them and did not destroy them; I did not make an end of them in the wilderness.

18I warned their children in the wilderness: Do not follow the practices of your fathers, do

Moreover, the references to Israelite idolatry in Egypt and to a divine warning to desist are traditions virtually unique to Ezekiel.

9. I acted for the sake of My name This motivation for divine restraint is that the name of God not be profaned among the nations (see also vv. 14,22). It has a parallel in Moses’ intercessory appeal to God’s self-interest in Exod. 32:11–13. 12. I gave them My sabbaths Shabbat is repeatedly singled out among the covenantal laws (see also vv. 16,20,21,24). This emphasis is a characteristic of late, postexilic biblical literature (see Isa. 56:2–6). Desecration of Shabbat came to be regarded as the archetypal sin that caused the exile (Neh. 13:18; cf. Jer. 17:19–27). It is I the LORD who sanctify them The idea that Shabbat is a sign between God and Israel, so that the people may know that the Lord sanctifies them, is derived from Exod. 31:13.
not keep their ways, and do not defile yourselves with their fetishes. 19 I the Lord am your God: Follow My laws and be careful to observe My rules. 20 And hallow My sabbaths, that they may be a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I the Lord am your God.