D’var Torah for Erev Shabbat May 1, 2020 (Acharey-Kedoshim)

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“General Holiness”

It is the way of the Jewish people to argue with God, even as we embrace the gift of Godly instructions and observances. We are, after all, “Yisrael,” the people that “wrestles with God.”

We say thank you for the mitzvah of honoring and revering our parents. *Ish imo v’aviv tira’u*. “Let each person show awe toward their mother and father.” Such a mitzvah pushes us to develop a respect for elders that simply does not come naturally.

But we also ask if such reverence is possible toward an abusive parent, an absent parent, a violent parent. And a discussion ensues. A wrestling match with God and Torah.

We say thank you for the mitzvah of leaving the corners of our field for the poor, as well as the gleanings and unpicked stalks of our harvest. Such a mitzvah radicalizes our thinking about the structure of our entire economic order, not merely the suffering of the poor in our midst.

But we also ask if this fixed practice doesn’t sometimes habituate the “have nots” toward dependence, and if it doesn’t also let us “haves” off the hook in terms of fixing a system that allows poverty and neglect in the first place. Yet again, a wrestling match with God and Torah over the fine points of our precious commandments.

Our second of two portions for this Shabbat, *Kedoshim Tih’yu*, “you shall be holy,” presents both of these mitzvot and numerous more. The stumbling block before the blind; the cursing of the deaf; the rejection of idolatry; the reproving of one’s fellow for wrongdoing; the avoidance of bearing a grudge or taking vengeance; the protection of the Sabbath. All coming under the general category, “be holy.” *Kedoshim tih’yu.*

But in giving us detailed instructions about how to exhibit holiness, the Torah leaves itself open to abuse. We might reason – as many do – that since the Torah prohibits x but not y, then y is not prohibited, and therefore permitted. Since the Torah is so specific about what we may and may not do, then by all logic it must not “care” if we permit ourselves behaviors which we know in our hearts are wrong, but about which the Torah is silent.

This is precisely NOT what our tradition means by “wrestling with Torah” or “wrestling with God.” Wrestling with Torah means arguing not about how to get out of our obligations, but rather how to perform our obligations in the most meaningful, fulfilling, effective, productive, honest, truthful way. It means admitting that if we tell ourselves the truth, we already know what we should and should not be doing to achieve a state of *general* holiness, *kedushah.* We appreciate the prompting we get from the Torah, but truth be told, we didn’t need the Torah to teach us how to be a mensch. That knowledge is already embedded in the spiritual DNA of everyone who carries the image of God, i.e., every living person.

And this is why every life matters. This is why we are doing whatever it takes in these days of confinement and precautions to assure that no one, no matter how old, how poor, how hungry, how tempest-toss’d by society, loses their life because we valued them less than someone else.

*V’ahavta l’reyacha kamocha*. That’s how our Torah portion sums up this sobering lesson for us: “Love your fellow as yourself.” As yourself? Yes. As if your fellow *were* yourself. As if you understood that at some mysterious level, your fellow *is* yourself. As if you grasped the *sod hasodot*, the secret of all secrets, that all life is connected. That all life is one. That all life comes from, and is responsible to, the one who is *Chayei Olam*, the Life of All Worlds and all Time. The one *with* whom we wrestle, but *to* whom we are accountable, and *after* whom we model our own striving for general holiness each and every day.