Yasher koach…

Lucy, you looked at the first part of this double portion, *Acharei Mot*, and focused on the scapegoat of the ancient Yom Kippur ritual. You drew us to consider the irony that the notion we birthed into the world wound up being precisely how the world treated our people over the course of our history. More importantly, you argued, meaningfully, that if we dig a little deeper into the Torah ritual of the scapegoat, we learn that in fact the point is, in your words, "to acknowledge your wrongdoings and find a way to make things better, because only then can you stop letting them define who you are." Halevai that this were easier for humankind. All around us we see vulnerable groups receiving blame for problems they did not create, and we worry that that blame will only get louder and more violent.

And Jacob, you focused on the second portion in this week's double parsha, *Kedoshim*. Wondering why there are so many laws in this parsha, you wound up explaining that the laws serve to help us live out holiness in daily life. And specifically, as the parsha itself insists, you taught that the *ikar* of these rules, the whole point of them…is to teach us to find holiness in ethical behavior. Some of the Torah's greatest hits are right here: love your neighbor as yourself, do not hate your neighbor, be fair and kind in judgment. And with all that in mind, you taught that famous line from Rabbi Hillel: "what is hateful to you, do not do to others. All the rest is commentary."

I should add that even though we often end the Talmudic quotation there, the text actually ends by saying, "*zil gamur*," meaning, "go and learn." And so each of you must, Lucy and Jacob. Though you culminated years of study as you were called to the Torah today, now you must go and learn as Jewish adults. Taking on the mantle of what it means to be mature members of this people for the rest of your lives.

Your teachings – about not scapegoating others, and indeed acting ethically and kindly toward others – are lessons we need to shout from the rooftop of our synagogue. Because increasingly, these values are in short supply today in America, in Israel, and around the world. We'll come back to that point, but first let's be as clear as possible about the centrality of these lessons in Jewish tradition.

Parashat Kedoshim begins with the words, "God spoke to Moses saying, "*Daber el kol adat b'nai Yisrael*, speak to the entire community of Israel, *v'amarta aleihem, k'doshim tihyu*, and say to them, you shall be holy." Scholars call these chapters the Holiness Code, because the premise of this section of Torah is to give us instructions for *how* to be *holy*. And Rashi points out that this is directed "el kol adat b'nai Yisrael," toward the

whole of the collective of Israel, because in his words, *rov gufei Torah, talu'yin bah*. Because most of the fundamental teachings of the Torah are contained within it.[1]

This is a pretty big statement. Let's face it, Jews over the course of history have argued over the centrality of one verse over another, usually privileging whatever verse bolsters their overarching thesis. But *this* week, a luminary none other than Rashi, arguably the greatest Torah commentator of all time, comes in with a mic drop to say, whatever other verses you thought were important, and despite the fact that *all* mitzvot are important: *these* ones are the *most* essential.

Now we're talking. Cutting through the noise and getting to the core of what really matters in Judaism. But lest we think Rashi is going to decide this once and for all which commandments constitute what we might call "Jewish values" writ large, the commentators who follow after Rashi can't seem to agree on whether he's talking about the verses right *before* or right *after* the phrase, "*kedoshim tih'yu.*" You shall be holy. And so we go on guessing. Sort of.

The verses before this phrase have to do with sexual morality. Some of them are challenging for us to accept fully in the 21st century, there's no denying it. And there's so much more to say. But when you boil them down, the spirit of those laws is an ethical prohibition against treating another human being as an object.

And the verses thereafter, as we've heard, also demonstrate the overall importance of communal ethics, giving us a medley of familiar rules: do not harm the vulnerable, do no injustice in court, do not take vengeance, and so on.

Though we could litigate between us which chapter of Leviticus is actually the rov gufei Torah, the heart of Torah according to Rashi: the Torah itself solves Rashi's problem. In either case we're talking about ethics! *Interpersonal* ethics. Kind, compassionate, just behavior toward our fellow human beings. That is the *ikar* of Torah. That is the most important thing. A couple centuries later, Maimonides chimed in with his own interpretation of this section of Torah. "The chief aim of humankind," he writes, in the *Gude for the Perplexed*, "is to make oneself, as far as possible, similar to God, that is to say, to make one's acts similar to the acts of God, or as our Talmudic sages explained it in explaining the verse "Kedoshim tihyu": just as God is gracious, so must you be gracious. Just as God is merciful, so must you also be merciful."[2]

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[1] Rashi on Lev. 19:2
[2] Guide for the Perplexed I, 54

So we've got Rashi commenting on the verses, and Maimonides parsing the philosophical underpinnings of the laws, and both come out in the same place: showing mercy, compassion, and kindness to one another is the chief aim of humankind as expressed in Torah.

Let's not forget that observing Shabbat and avoiding idolatry are also mentioned here, as are other ritual commandments. Traditional observance is just as essential, classically speaking. But equal in weight to those are mitzvot like "when strangers reside with you in your land, you shall not wrong them." And, the famous, lo taamod al dam re'echa, "you shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor."

I share these texts with you all this morning to remind us of what Jewish values are. Not *Reform* Jewish values. Not *American* Jewish values. But Jewish Jewish values. Per Rashi and Rambam. And anyone, especially anyone who speaks or acts in the name of Jews, must be measured against the basic standard of this week's Torah portion.

We may feel we know this well. What need is there to say what we all know and maybe even intuitively understand? But when we look out at the world today, there is no question that these are lessons that people still need to hear. And that *our* people still need to hear.

This week, as we read the news from Israel, about the government's plans for the next phase of its war, it is necessary for us to name *these* Jewish values, when a Jewish government is so egregiously setting them aside. It's even commanded of us. Hocheach Tochiach, we read in this parsha. You shall surely rebuke your kinsfolk when they act out of bounds. And so, despite our ongoing commitment to Israel, and actually *because* of it, we have to name that the current Israeli government has long ago abdicated any sense of morality or sacred duty in its pursuit of this war.

This past week, Prime Minister Netanyahu announced an escalation in Gaza, calling tens of thousands of reservists to the front, stating his intention to conquer the territory fully. Also this week, Finance Minister Betzalel Smotrich reiterated a call for complete annexation of the Gaza strip, necessitating further military action. Meanwhile, 53,000 Palestinians have been killed in this war to date, and 59 hostages remain in Gaza. But as Netanyahu said this week: while freeing the hostages remains "an important goal," it is not his main objective. And it is all but certain that escalating this war will harm what hostages remain, and continue the devastation of Gaza. We know that Hamas shares accountability for this war, and is surely to blame for the trauma of October 7th, but we don't expect Hamas to live according to Jewish values.

We need to say out loud that it's time for this war to end. For the sake of countless innocent lives that can still be spared. For the sake of however many hostages remain alive in Gaza. For the sake of innocent Palestinian children and adults who languish without food and medical supplies. And in the name of our most holy values. Of not standing idly by the blood of our neighbors. Of loving our neighbors. Or, if that feels too much, then because we also learn in this parsha that we shall love the *stranger* as *ourselves*, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

It is not likely that the Israeli government will listen to this rebuke. We know this. But if that must be so, then may we remind each other and anyone who *will* listen: that the actions of the current Israeli government do not represent traditional Jewish values, they do not represent *us*, and they surely are not an expression of holiness.

May each of us hold fast to our conviction that to be Jewish is to walk a path of justice and compassion, of fierce love for our people and unwavering care for all people. And may we have the courage to walk this path throughout our days insisting that the name of Torah, the name of God, and the name of our people, be associated only with holiness, righteousness, and peace.

Shabbat Shalom.