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Love Your Neighbor

"You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge against the members of your people; you shall love your fellow as yourself; I am God" (Vayikra 19:18).

The Sages (Yerushalmi, Nedarim 9:4) identify one mitzvah as the fundamental principle the entire Torah is based on: "You shall love your fellow as yourself."

To properly understand how to fulfill this crucial mitzvah we must answer the following four questions:

1. How can the Torah legislate an emotion and obligate us to love?
2. What is the purpose of the seemingly extra words "as yourself"?
3. Why is this mitzvah preceded with the additional prohibitions of "You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge"? It is highly unusual to have three separate commandments in one verse.

4. Why does the verse conclude with the words "I am God"?

Is it Possible to Obligate Love?

Obligating love strikes us as impossible. Yet it is actually something we all do.

Imagine a son telling his father, "I hate my sister!"

No father is going to respond, "That's fine, it's okay if you hate your sister." He is far more likely to say, "Don't talk that way! You *have* to love your sister!" We know our children should love each other, even if one took the other's eraser, or iPod, or sweater without asking. Nothing should get in the way of their filial love.

The father is not merely suggesting that the brother love his sister; he is demanding it. It is not just preferable for children to love one another, just as it is not optional for parents to love their children. But do we actually go about loving a sibling, or a child?

Parents love their children naturally, you'll answer. But what if their child turns out to be an obnoxious brat? "It doesn't matter," you say. "They'll find something to love about him no matter what."

We define love as the emotional pleasure of appreciating the virtues of another person and identifying them with those virtues. With our children, we are naturally committed to focusing on their virtues and minimizing their shortcomings. "My son has a heart of gold. So what if he's a little hyper?" Therefore we love them, no matter what.

The reality is that the emotion of love is a decision: if we choose to focus on other people's virtues, we will love them, but if we choose to focus on their faults, we will be

repelled by them.

This understanding of love is the basis of a healthy marriage. When a couple marries, they appreciate each other's virtues and begin to build a loving relationship. Yet today almost 50% of all marriages end in divorce, and many of those who stay married are not exactly living in bliss. When they first got married they were madly in love. What went wrong? They stopped focusing on each other's virtues, taking them for granted, and instead focused on their spouse's flaws and the subsequent disappointment they caused.

Every person is a mixture of virtues and faults, but what we choose to focus on and identify the person with is entirely up to us. When the Torah obligates us to love it is instructing us to identify people with their virtues. Consequently, this is something that can indeed be commanded.

Love: Greek Style

The Greek concept of love is symbolized by Cupid, who flits around and shoots an arrow into two unsuspecting people. *Presto!* Bob and Sue are now head over heels in love! The Western view of love, which comes from the Greek concept, sees love as an accident that you "fall" into. It either happens or it doesn't; it's not something you can control.

However, be forewarned: as easily as you "fall in love," you can just as easily fall out of love. If Bob's love for Sue is not based on a commitment to appreciate her virtues, then when the stresses of married life grow, the following could easily happen. One day, after taking his wife for granted for years, Bob is staying overtime at the office working on a big project with his secretary, Jane. Suddenly Cupid sneaks up behind him and without warning shoots another arrow into him. *Boing!* Bob has now fallen in love with Jane.

Bob sheepishly returns home and explains to

his wife, "I'm sorry, I fell in love with my secretary. But it's not my fault, I wasn't looking for it, it just happened since that rascal Cupid shot me!" Out goes the wife and in comes the secretary.

If love is not something you can actually choose, then all you can do to stay married is hope that Cupid does not shoot you. Is it any surprise that the divorce rate is so high?

Contrast this with the relationship between parents and their children. No sane parent ever comes home one day and tells his children, "I've fallen in love with the neighbors' kids. They don't cough at night and they get better math scores. Sorry, but you kids are out. The kids next door are moving in."

We don't "fall out of love" with our children because we understand that loving them isn't a "happening." We don't stop caring about our children just because they annoy us. We accept the obligation to love them despite the fact that they are often far more aggravating than our spouses!

If we carried this same type of commitment into our marriages, our love would continue to grow and deepen over time, just as it does with our children, enabling our marriage to not only withstand the winds of time, but to thrive.

Don't Take Revenge, Don't Bear a Grudge

Resentment poisons love. Someone wrongs you, and for months you cannot see them without recalling how they hurt you. This grudge colors your perspective and renders you completely incapable of seeing the good in this person. Your resentment brews and your desire to even the score and take revenge grows, preventing you from loving the person.

If you want to love your spouse, your parents, or anyone else for that matter, you have to let

go of any resentment you have towards them. This is why these two prohibitions precede the mitzvah of loving our fellow Jews.

Letting go of our resentments is not easy, but if we see the person who hurt us as part of us, our resentment disappears. Imagine accidentally cutting your finger while slicing a carrot. Would you take the knife from your right hand and deliberately slice your left hand in revenge? Of course not, because your other hand is you, and hurting it is only hurting yourself.

Humanity is ultimately one. Taking revenge on someone else is as self-destructive as slicing your other hand with a knife, and that is one reason why the Torah says to love your neighbor "as yourself." Seeing the other person as yourself will remove the resentment that is impeding your love.

Unfortunately we often do not realize how we are all connected on our own, and it often takes an outside force to get us to appreciate that we are indeed one people. For example, the Nazis did not differentiate between different types of Jews. In their eyes we were all one people. When Hamas terrorists murdered three boys learning in Gush Etzion, the entire Jewish world united. It did not matter what type of kippah they wore; everyone felt that these were "our boys." During the times in life when we recognize this as true, hold on to that perception because it is the ultimate cure against the destructive effects of resentment.

True Friendship

The Jewish people have a rich repertoire of stories that powerfully inculcate Torah principles in our children. Every Jewish child used to hear the following story that shows us the power of loving another "as yourself."

At the time of the Roman Empire, two Jewish boys had grown up together in Israel and

become very close friends. Eventually, they moved far apart – one was living under Roman control, and the other under Syrian control. Yet despite the distance between them, they remained dear friends.

Once, when the fellow from Rome was visiting Syria, he was falsely accused of being a spy. He was brought to the Syrian emperor, and eventually sentenced to death.

While being led out to be executed, the Emperor asked him if he had any final requests. "Please," he begged, "let me go back to Rome to settle my affairs and say goodbye to my family. Then I'll return to be executed."

The Emperor laughed. "Are you crazy? What guarantee do I have that you'll come back?"

He answered, "I have a friend living here in Syria who will stand in my place until I return. He will be my guarantor. If I do not come back, you can execute him instead."

The Emperor was intrigued. "This I've got to see. Okay, call your friend."

His friend in Syria was summoned and sure enough, he agreed to stand in his friend's place in prison, and risk being killed if his friend did not return on time.

The Emperor was so startled by this arrangement he agreed to let the man from Rome return home. "I'll give you 60 days," the Emperor said, "but if you're not back by the dawn of the 60th day, your friend is dead."

The fellow from Rome raced home to say goodbye and put his affairs in order. After a hectic time and a lot of tears, he started back in plenty of time to reach Syria before the 60 days were over. But in those days they sailed galleys, and at times you could sit for days waiting for the right wind to come. As luck would have it, there was no wind for several days, the boat was delayed, and by the time

he arrived back in Syria, dawn of the 60th day was breaking.

As agreed, the jailors took the friend in Syria out to be executed.

Executions were gala affairs, and by early morning the crowds began to swell. Then just as they were about to execute him, the friend from Rome came running in, yelling, "Wait! I'm back. Don't kill him! Kill me!"

But the Syrian friend protested: "You can't kill him. He came too late. I'm the guarantor. You've got to kill me instead!"

Each one was equally adamant. "Kill me!" "No, kill me instead!" The executioner didn't know what to do. The crowd was in an uproar!

Finally, the emperor convened a meeting with them in his private chambers. He turned to the two of them and said, "I'll let both of you go free on one condition - that you make me your third friend!"

This is why the verse "Love your neighbor" concludes with the statement, "I am God." Because when there is unity and friendship between people, it is so precious that God so to speak wants to be part of it. He becomes the third friend.

In summary, love is a decision to focus and appreciate another person's virtues. Therefore, it can be commanded. In order to love, we need to let go of resentment by appreciating that we are all connected. When we unite in love, Hashem Himself joins the union. Drop resentments: "Do not take revenge and do not bear a grudge;" choose to love: "Love your neighbor as yourself;" and God will dwell with you: "I am God."



What the World Needs Now

What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of.

These lyrics are as timely now as they were when first recorded in the 1960s. Yes, the world needs more love—a love that embraces all of humanity. How can such love be developed and maintained?

The answer was recorded more than 3,300 years ago. The familiar words "Love your fellow as yourself" are found in this week's Torah reading. The verse concludes with the words "I am God." Let's explore the meaning of this passage.

An essential element of loving another as yourself is recognizing that we share something integral in common. It's natural to gravitate toward others who share your interests and beliefs. What is the one thing that we all have in common? Each of us was created in God's image; our common denominator is God. Recognizing, and thereby respecting, this connection intensifies the significance of the words "Love your fellow as yourself."

More than just a cliché, this is meant to be actualized. To know how better to love one another, we must seek to connect with God. It is God who has mandated us to love and taught us how to love.

Yes, the innate connection among all of us is God. Therefore, we seek to enrich this vital connection, so that we truly know how to love one another. Most people mistakenly think that one has to “fall in love.” Not so. One may fall accidentally into a hole or on an uneven sidewalk. This word should not apply to the love between people. Love is too essential and life-affirming to be casually left to our own passing feelings and whims. Love is a choice, a sanctified act.

Subsequently, the Talmud records the words of the Sage Hillel: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary.” The Torah instructs us in how to express love through kind actions and behaviors. Someone who loves others as himself will make sure not to cause them harm in any way. Love is expressed in deed. A person who loves others would not steal their belongings or cheat on them. Furthermore, this view is expressed by not mistreating another physically, verbally, or emotionally. Malicious gossip and hate are the antithesis of God’s will. But why? Because we diminish our own Godly image by choosing to act in such un-Godly ways. It’s crucial to recognize this point. When our actions express respect and love for others, by extension, we are showing respect and love for God. This is not only good for each one of us, but for all humanity.

What is it that we love in another? Can it be identified? Perhaps we love the particular traits that make someone unique. Now, expand this thought; contemplate how or where each specific trait originates. Each one was initially bestowed by God for us to cultivate and bring to the fore. We can thereby amplify our love and direct it to God as well, for He is the one who creates every detail just so.

SANCTIFICATION: THE ULTIMATE LOVE

For love to endure, it must be sanctified. Many

refer to marriage as the bond of matrimony. The Hebrew word for marriage, *kiddushin*, is a derivative of the word *kadosh*, holy. In this week’s Torah portion, the Torah succinctly states, “You shall be holy, because I, God your God, am holy.” Let’s explore some examples of what the Torah teaches us about holiness.

At Mount Sinai, God communicated to the entire nation of Israel their timeless mission: “You shall be to Me a kingdom of ministers and a holy nation.” From here, we learn that acquiring holiness is a national goal. Holiness is to be practiced and maintained within the community. We each can exemplify the Torah’s ideals when interacting with others with sensitivity and sanctity.

The concept of separation is associated with attaining holiness. Let’s highlight a few examples of this association. Developing holy attributes requires distancing oneself from corrupt influences. Therefore, upon its formation, the nation of Israel was separated from the influence of the other nations. Just as a mother, beginning from pregnancy, must be careful not to expose her child to harmful or toxic physical influences, so too, she must be vigilant against harmful spiritual influences. Such exposure could block burgeoning spiritual sensitivities, thus obstructing the very channels through which holiness flows.

It’s essential to recognize that it is God who determines what is holy. The Torah, Shabbat, the Jewish People, the Land of Israel, and the Temple in Jerusalem are holy because God sanctified them.

Holiness is first mentioned in the Torah when “God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it [*va’yekadesh*, from the verb meaning ‘to be holy’], for on it He rested from His work, which God created to make.” The seventh day, being the culmination of God’s creative process, is sanctified. Shabbos is the very center of Jewish life and Torah observance. This sanctified day embodies the particular chosen time in which

we enrich our relationships with God, others, and ourselves. By mindfully observing Shabbos, we elevate it above all other days of the week and sanctify it. Shabbos observance recharges every Jewish soul from the ultimate source of Divine energy. Such sanctity emanates from the One who continually creates all of creation.

Holiness expands outward. The innate holiness of the Land of Israel is understood from God's first instruction to Avraham: "Go to the land that I will show you." Abraham was sent to a specific land and place that God already had chosen. Furthermore, God chose the exact location of the future Holy Temple when instructing Abraham, "Please take your son...Isaac and go to the land of Moriah. Bring him there to one of the mountains which I shall tell you." That mountain was where the Holy Temple later would be built. God sanctified and designated special times, places, and people to become holy. They were separated from all others.

The connection between holiness and love is not merely theoretical. It's actualized through thought, choice, and deed. We become what we think and do, continually. Choosing to connect to what God has sanctified contributes to living a sanctified life. By honoring and observing God's mitzvot, we align ourselves with eternal Godly values. Each of us can strive to make this life-enriching choice daily. By sanctifying our lives through Torah and mitzvot, we choose to manifest our connection to God and to one another. Reaching out to all others with love and kindness connects us to our Creator. Doing so can increase the love in our lives.

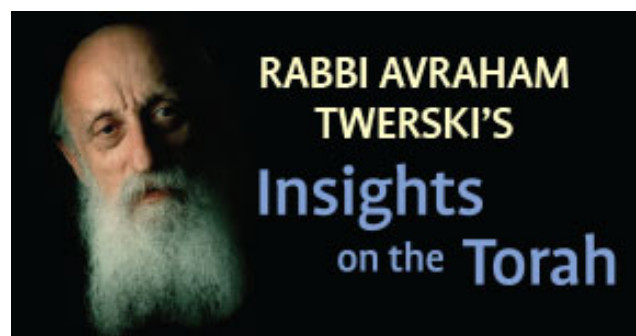
Cultivating and expressing true Godly love to all others empowers our values and puts them into action. Continual Torah study provides the fuel to strengthen our momentum moving forward. Each of us, thereby, can become the best version of who we want and are meant to be. By choosing to pay the love we share

forward, love won't be just for some, but for everyone.

Who wouldn't love that?

Making It Relevant

1. Start viewing everyone that you meet and see as being in the image of God and as having a God-given soul, just like you. How might that influence how you perceive others?
2. Actively focus on connecting to God in the ways that you treat others. Which details will you emphasize?
3. Mindfully strive to focus on the sanctity of learning Torah and performing mitzvot. How do these activities connect you to God and to humanity?
4. Contemplate the innate sanctity of humanity in general and the Jewish People in particular. Then, think about where and how you relate to each.



Loving Your Fellow Jews

You shall love your fellow as yourself (Vayikra 19:18).

Rashi explains that this Torah portion was addressed to the entire assembly of Israel because it contains the greater part of the body of Torah. It is possible that "contains the greater part of the body of Torah" refers to the

above verse. Indeed, Rabbi Akiva said that this verse is “the all-encompassing principle of Torah” (Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 9:4).

Rabbi Akiva's statement is sometimes translated as, “This verse is the cardinal or primary rule of Torah.” This is an inaccurate translation. Rabbi Akiva's words are that this is a *klal gadol*, which means “a great, all-encompassing principle” of Torah, and this has a broad implication.

A *klal* is a general principle under which there are many *pratim* (specifics). Each specific item must have the characteristic of the *klal*. If any specific item does not have the characteristic of the *klal*, then it does not belong there. For example, “animate objects” is a *klal*. A rock lacks the characteristic of animation, hence it cannot be classified under that *klal*.

One of the ethicists said that inasmuch as “You shall love your fellow as yourself” is the “great *klal*” of Torah, this means that it encompasses all 613 mitzvot, and that each mitzvah must partake of the characteristic of the *klal*. Every mitzvah must relate to *ahavat Yisrael* (love for a fellow Jew), and must contribute to *ahavat Yisrael*. Therefore, he concludes, if a person does not have an increase in *ahavat Yisrael* after the performance of a mitzvah, that mitzvah was not done properly. A properly performed mitzvah must contribute to *ahavat Yisrael*.

This statement was nothing less than shocking. I had considered some mitzvot I had done as being properly performed. My tefillin are top quality, and there were at least some times when I had proper *kavannah* (concentration). The matzah I ate at the seder was of the highest quality shmurah (supervision). The sounding of the shofar that I heard on Rosh Hashanah was without fault, and the esrog (citron) that I used for the mitzvah of the four species on Sukkot was free of the slightest blemish. I felt I had fulfilled these mitzvot properly. But I must confess that

I did not feel an increase in *ahavat Yisrael* after these mitzvot. The argument that R' Akiva's *klal* necessitates *ahavat Yisrael* as an ingredient in every mitzvah is unassailable. Where was I lacking?

It then occurred to me that I was overlooking something I say in davening every day. Is it not tragic that we may verbalize without thinking about what we are saying?

Prior to the opening prayer, *Baruch She'amar*, there is a short Kabbalistic declaration of intent that includes the phrase, “I pray in the name of all Israel.” This is not the same as praying for Israel, which we do abundantly in the Amidah and other prayers. Rather, this is a declaration of intent that I am not praying alone, but that I wish to share my prayer with all Israel. Whatever merits accrue from my prayer are not exclusively mine, but belong to all Israel.

I found this same declaration of intent preceding the mitzvot of putting on the tallit and tefillin and the Counting of the Omer. Further research revealed that it is recommended that this declaration is recited prior to every mitzvah one performs.

If there were true unity among Jews, this declaration would not be necessary. Just as the mitzvah of shofar accrues to the entire person rather than just to the ear, so would the mitzvah of every Jew accrue to the credit of all Jews if they were united as one body. Alas, that highly desirable state does not exist, so we must make a declaration that we wish to share the mitzvah with all of Israel. Of course, all of Israel means without exception, and indeed, *ahavat Yisrael* should be without exception.

R' Eliyahu Dessler says that there is a common misconception that you give to whomever you love. The reverse is true: you love to whomever you give. When you give to someone, you invest part of yourself in him,

and since every person loves himself, you now love that part of you that resides in the other person (Michtav MeEliyahu vol. 1 p. 36).

If we listen to the words we say and are sincere, then we can fulfill R' Akiva's principle. By sharing our mitzvos with others, we can generate love for fellow Jews.



What Is Holiness?

What comes to mind when you hear the word "holiness"?

Most religions present holiness as separation from the physical world - the monk isolated on a mountain, the priest in his austere abbey. This view seems so universal that we rarely question it. Yet Judaism offers a radical alternative that turns this concept completely upside down.

In this week's Torah portion, God commands, "You shall be holy (*kedoshim tihiu*) for holy am I."¹ Rashi, the greatest Torah commentator, explains, "Separate from sexual misconduct and idolatry - wherever you find a fence against lewdness, you find holiness."

At first glance, this confirms our assumptions - holiness means renunciation, asceticism, detachment. But this understanding completely misses Judaism's revolutionary approach to spiritual life.

Sacred Union

The most powerful evidence against this misunderstanding comes from our marriage tradition. The very act of betrothal in Judaism is called "*kiddushin*"—literally "holification." When a Jewish man places a ring on his bride's finger, he declares "*Harei at mkudeshet li*" - "I am making you holy (*kadosh*) to me." If *kadosh* means separate, he'd essentially be saying "Get away from me!" But we know that on the contrary, he's declaring, "Let's connect in the most powerful way imaginable! Let's become 'one flesh!'"²

We find further confirmation in Tosafos—the Talmudic commentary authored primarily by Rashi's grandchildren—which defines *Kedushin*—betrothal— as “The act of prohibiting your wife to everyone else **by designating her uniquely and specifically to you.**”³ This reveals the true essence of *kedusha*: not mere separation, but sacred, exclusive connection.

So where did we go wrong in interpreting Rashi? Let's look carefully at his comment - "wherever you find a fence against lewdness, you find holiness." Wait - is the fence the holiness? No! Holiness is the result of putting up the fence! The fence doesn't create holiness directly; it clears away the obstacles that block true connection. *Kedusha*, holiness, is the passionate connection enabled by removing all impediments to oneness.⁴

But it gets even better. Just as a man and woman who come together in physical unity achieve the highest level of physical pleasure, the unity of man and God - *kedusha* - produces the highest spiritual pleasure. Whereas physical pleasure is subject to limitation and impermanence, spiritual pleasure is infinite and eternal. *Kedusha*—oneness with the Divine—is therefore the greatest pleasure of all.

Separate to Connect

Now that we've established the true meaning of holiness, let's revisit Rashi's emphasis on separation. Why does achieving *kedusha* require separating from improper behavior? Imagine two perfectly smooth surfaces. When completely clean, they naturally meld into one when brought together. Yet even the smallest dust particle creates a rift between them. For two to become one, there must be nothing blocking the connection.

Interestingly, Rashi highlights two specific sins that, by refraining from them, lead to *kedusha* - sexual misconduct and idolatry. Why these two out of hundreds of sins in the Torah?

As we've explained, *kedusha* is fundamentally about relationship - two becoming one. The two most important relationships in our lives are with our spouse and with God. Our Sages teach that the spousal relationship serves as our training ground for how we're meant to relate to God. Both relationships demand complete dedication - cutting off distractions to fan the flame of love for what we hold most precious.

Sexual misconduct directly attacks our relationship with our spouse. Idolatry directly attacks our relationship with God. While other sins certainly damage these relationships, these two strike at their very foundation. By refraining from what destroys our most vital connections, we create the space for holiness - for passionate connection - with those we are meant to love most deeply.

When I first started connecting to Judaism, I remember reaching my hand out to greet the Rabbi's wife at a Shabbas meal. She politely declined, explaining: "In our tradition, we keep physical contact reserved for our spouse alone—it's our way of honoring the special bond we share." The story again illustrates that way to *kedusha*—to passionate connection—is by maintaining boundaries that strengthen and protect our most meaningful relationships. Think of putting your thumb over

the top of a hose, turning a lazy stream into a powerful blast.

Sacred Integration

Unlike other religions where "holy men" renounce marriage, Judaism's approach embraces and elevates the physical world. Our greatest sages marry and raise families—this isn't a concession to human nature but the essence of Jewish holiness.

In the ancient Temple, the Torah calls the innermost chamber the "*Kodesh HaKodashim*"—the Holy of Holies. Paralleling this, our sages call the marital bedroom the "*Kodesh HaKodashim*" of the home. True holiness doesn't reject the physical; it infuses it with spiritual purpose.

Judaism teaches that *kedusha* isn't about escaping the material world but about revealing God's presence within it. Consider Shabbat—our holiest day. We separate from mundane weekday activities, yet we sanctify this day with wine and delicious food—vehicles of physical pleasure and joy. This process of sanctification applies to all facets of life. When we eat mindfully, conduct business ethically, or unite in intimacy as husband and wife, we become partners with God in connecting heaven and earth.

Divine Reciprocity

The Path of the Just, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato's foundational guide to character development, culminates with its highest level—*Kedusha*. There, the Ramchal reveals what makes *kedusha* unique: unlike other traits requiring solely our efforts, with *kedusha*, as we draw close to God, He draws equally close to us—we invest effort and He completes the rest.

Rabbi Aharon Lopiansky elaborates: God constantly seeks closeness with us, but we

pursue fulfillment in all the wrong places. Therefore, to reconnect with God, we need only to return to our true nature. The pathway back to Him is already within us—He's simply waiting, longing for us to remember the connection that has always existed. In our verse, God tells us, "You shall be holy because I am holy"—I am always passionately connected to you; you need only remove the blockages and turn your focus back to Me; I'll be waiting with open arms.

"Kedoshim Tihui" ("You shall be holy") rather than solely on the word "Kedoshim." Had he focused on defining "Kedoshim" itself, he would have explained what holiness is. Instead, by commenting on the complete phrase, he addresses how to become holy—the process of achieving kedusha. This distinction reveals that separation from misconduct is the path to kedusha, not kedusha itself.

Cultivating Closeness

To make *kedusha* practical, try this exercise:

- Take a few deep breaths and begin to watch your thoughts.
- When your mind drifts to mundane concerns—desires, worries, fears, gently refocus on the reality that God is constantly seeking a loving relationship with YOU.
- Allow yourself to feel a desire for this closeness. Just as we cultivate attraction and passion in our human relationships, we must nurture our desire for God by actively yearning for His presence.

By bringing this consciousness into prayer times, quiet moments, and even routine activities, we open ourselves to experiencing the profound joy and genuine serenity that flows naturally from living in connection with the Divine.

Shabbat Shalom!
 Avraham

Inspiration for this essay comes from the teachings of my Rabbi and mentor, Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld

1. Leviticus 19:2
2. Genesis 2:24
3. Tractate Kedushin 2B
4. A subtle nuance in Rashi's commentary further supports our interpretation. Rashi comments on the phrase