

Yom Kippur Afternoon 5769
Dvar Torah – The Holiness Code
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10 *Tishri* 5769
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“Act Like You’ve Been There”

It was Week 2 of the new year, and things were so far going according to plan. The defending Super Bowl champion New York Giants were putting the finishing touches on an impressive 41-13 rout of the hapless St. Louis Rams. Twenty-five year-old defensive end Justin Tuck had intercepted a pass from Mark Bulger and was off to the races. Forty-one yards, without a soul near enough to even think about catching up to him. And even though it was the young man’s first ever touchdown, he took his time. He wasn’t showboating or high-stepping or planning a backflip into the end zone or any of that. But he certainly wasn’t running full speed. After the game, he said, “You don’t need to spring into the end zone. Act like you’ve been there.” Never mind the fact that he’d *never* been there. Act like you’ve been there.

And here we are, ourselves in Week 2 of the new year, reading from Leviticus 9, better known as the Holiness Code because it begins with the famous words, “You shall be holy, for I, your Eternal God, am holy.” Some of the instructions listed here in the Code are repeats or variations of what was laid out in the Ten Commandments, like revering your mother and father and not making idols. Others show concern for the plight of the poor, the neglect and disrespect often shown to the elderly, and most of all fairness—in your business dealings, in your judgments, and in your social interactions of all kinds. And sometimes, as we read the Holiness Code, we go through it and we think, “Duh.”

Of course we should judge fairly. Of course we should have honest measures. Of course we shouldn’t oppress the stranger, hold grudges against our kin, curse the deaf, put a stumbling block before the blind. These are, from one standpoint, a no-brainer. But we read them on *Yom Kippur* afternoon because we need to hear them; we need to be

reminded of them, in all of their beautiful simplicity. Because these are the ideals we hold up as the moral gold standard, the way we know things should be even while admitting to ourselves that they are not. And we read them on the holiest day of the year because we don't need to act like we've been there. We've been there. And our liturgy on this sacred day reminds us of that, guiding us through the entire history of the Jewish people from Creation through the Holocaust, and up through this new year of 5769. No matter how great our successes and accomplishments, we've been there, and we are not allowed to forget that.

We are commanded to leave the corners of our harvest for the poor, because we were poor. We're not allowed to steal or be deceitful to others because we have been stolen from, we have been deceived. We can't hold on to the wages of a laborer overnight when he or she has worked hard for it, because we have been exploited and taken advantage of; we know what it's like to come home with empty pockets. We can't be anything but fair and impartial in our judgments, because we have been tried without cause, convicted without proof, subject to the whims of kings and emperors and dictators. And when a stranger comes to live in your land, you shall not wrong him, you shall not oppress him. You shall treat him like yourself. Because you know what it's like to be the stranger in a strange land, to be victimized by ignorance and xenophobia.

We've been there. We don't need to act like it. We've been through it all. And the Holiness Code is our annual reminder never to forget that.