

When it comes to learning targets, the instruction to “be holy” seems to be missing a rubric! As teachers and students of Torah, we might complain to the Author: You haven’t clearly defined the objective! “Be holy,” we are told at the beginning of Parshat Kedoshim, “for I your Lord am holy, (Leviticus 19:2),” but what—exactly-- is expected of us? What does it even mean to strive for holiness? And what, if any, are the scoring criteria for knowing we have arrived at our goal?

It would be nice to imagine a clear set of directions to the task of becoming holy. In a sense, this is what Rashi suggests in his commentary on the verse. Rashi notes that throughout the Torah, the idea of holiness is juxtaposed with sexual prohibitions, and he infers a relatively straightforward dictate: “separate yourselves from sexual indecency and from sin.”

Rashi’s commentary is simple, but later scholars argue that it doesn’t fit with the Jewish approach to indulgence. For Ramban (13th century Nachmanides), the task of becoming holy is not so easily defined. As he writes, the Torah does not forbid all sexual activity, or, for that matter, all consumption of meat and wine or other acts that some religions might assume to be sinful. Yes, for other traditions, staying away from sex, meat or wine might seem like a way of being holy, but our text only warns us against overindulgence, not indulgence in its own right. Rashi’s gloss doesn’t work, argues the Ramban. He reminds us that the Torah “says more generally ‘Do the right and the good.’” For Ramban, it seems, it is the ethical laws in Leviticus chapter 19 (love your neighbor, pay your workers on time, honor the elderly) which might actually define holiness.

Ramban’s understanding makes our mission more difficult, but, I would argue, far more interesting, as well. Doing the right and the good—as imprecise a directive as it is-- is harder than simply abstaining from indulgences that might tempt us. Walking the sometimes blurry line of ethical living requires constant vigilance as well as regular reflection and recalibration. How am I showing respect to the elderly today? Where might I be more honest in my business dealings? When should I be standing up to injustice? Having a rubric is useful when it comes to our school assignments, but when it comes to holiness, we have to provide our own measures of achievement. The criteria for success may be less clear, but the effort itself—the continual, daily striving for *kedushah*, or holiness—is a worthy and lofty task. Shabbat Shalom.