

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Kedoshim
May 14, 2016

פרשת קדושים
ו' באייר תשע"ו

Torah Reading: *Vayikra* (Leviticus) 19:1-20:27

In this *parasha*, God tells Moshe to give the people a series of ethical and ritual laws instructing them in how to be holy.

The *parasha* opens with the words קְדוּשִׁים תִּהְיוּ – *Kedoshim tihyu* – “You shall be holy.” A very simple statement, but how does one achieve this, and what is holiness anyway?

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines “holiness” as: “Of or associated with a divine power; sacred; worthy of veneration or awe; revered; spiritually pure; saintly.” All of the definitions allude to a higher plane of existence – a plane which brings us closer to the Divine.

How do we accomplish this?

Commentators present totally divergent opinions on how to become “associated with a divine power.” Malbim (Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Weiser), a 19th century Russian commentator, states explicitly that the only way to accomplish *kedusha* (holiness) is to separate oneself from all earthly pursuits and devote one’s life only to the service of God. He bases his view on the translation of the word *kedusha*, which derives from the root *k-d-sh*, which is also the root word for separation. I believe, however, that most Jews would reject the notions of asceticism and self-denial that this path to God would require.

Rabbi Eliyahu Ki Tov (20th century Poland/Israel) presents a different view of the path to holiness and God. He says, “When a people deserve the merit On High, and they busy themselves with all of the interests of the world, the pursuits themselves will become holy things On High. One eats and drinks, takes a walk and enjoys it; gets involved in worldly pursuits and enjoys them, and doesn’t separate from that which is allowed in the world, and the Divine presence rests upon all of the activities.” Rabbi Ki Tov is saying that one should enjoy the pleasures and benefits of the world which God bestowed upon us, always being conscious of the fact that Hashem is behind all of it. With this understanding, every single thing we get involved with in life becomes a path to holiness – to closeness with God.

Nachmanides (Ramban – 13th century Spain/Palestine) presents a third view. He says that one can fulfill every single *mitzvah* in the Torah, and still be מְנוּבָל בְּרִשׁוֹת הַתּוֹרָה – *menuval bir’shut haTorah* – “a reprobate with the consent of the Torah.” He gives the example of gluttony. People may keep all of the laws of *kashrut*, but if they overeat to the point of over-satiation or if they are territorial about their food, they are certainly not *kadosh*, holy. He claims that קְדוּשִׁים תִּהְיוּ – “you shall be holy” – is a *mitzvah* unto itself, instructing us to maintain balance in our lives and to go “above and beyond” in the ethical practices of our behavior.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- How do *brachot* (blessings) fit into Rabbi Ki Tov’s model of holiness?
- How else can we incorporate a recognition of God into our activities of daily living?
- Which of the three models seems easiest to accomplish in terms of a way of life? Why?
- Which one seems the easiest path to accomplish holiness and closeness to God? Why?