

Of Forests and Trees

Acharei Mot- Kedoshim 5783

It has been observed, with much justice, that there are those individuals who possess an instinctive grasp for details, without much vision for the ‘big picture’, and, on the other hand, individuals who may be described in precisely the opposite manner. The latter category is occupied by individuals who are possessed of broad, sweeping vision, with deeply held convictions regarding matters of philosophy and ideology, but who often cannot be bothered to take out the garbage, assuming they even notice that doing so might be well in order.

If this dichotomy may be applied to life, more generally, it may also be applied to the world of observance. There are some individuals who gravitate towards the broader, profound themes of Judaism- *chessed*, *tzedek*, the centrality of family, to name but a few- but for whom details are often secondary, at best, or, sadly, languish in a state of benign neglect.

Conversely, there are some individuals who are, much to their credit, fastidious in observance of highly technical halakhot, but seem oblivious to the broader, overarching themes of halakhic living. Indeed, they might react with a measure of skepticism, if not outright dismissal, if someone asked them to articulate the values for which the halakhic system stood.

Parshat Kedoshim, enables us to cultivate a healthy balance between appreciating both the big picture, and every detail, or, as the metaphor goes, to see every tree, but also the forest.

Commenting on the verse from Kedoshim, R. Akiva, as is well known, boldly asserted, ואהבת, ¹לרעך כמוך זה כלל גדול בתורה, the essential principle of the Torah is to love one’s neighbor as one does oneself. To a great extent, R. Akiva was following in the footsteps of Hillel², who famously told the prospective convert that refraining from doing to another that which is displeasing to oneself is itself the Torah on one foot. Rambam³, in his own right, identified cultivating peaceful and harmonious social fabric as the teleological principle of all of Torah.

And, to be sure, they were not alone. A celebrated passage at the coda of Masekhet Makkot lists, in descending order, David, Yeshayahu, Micah, Yeshayahu for a second time, Amos, and Chabakuk, who distilled the Torah into eleven, six, three, two, and one principle respectively.

¹ Sifra, Parshat Kedoshim.

² R. Akiva was taught by R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua, who themselves were students of R. Yochanan b. Zakkai, who was a student of Hillel (Sukkah 28a).

³ See Hilkhos Shabbat, Chapter 2, and Hilkhos Chanukah, Chapter 4.

Apparently, despite the clear importance of every mitzvah in the Torah, and every detail within that mitzvah, *ad kudzu shel yud*, there can be little doubt that there are broader values which animate halakhic life, a whole which transcends the mere sum of the seemingly infinite parts . For all of us, whose daily lives are shaped by R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi's charge to be equally fastidious in mitzvot, "both large and small"⁴, the audacity of these formulations is undeniable.

II.

Interspersed, however, with the broader themes of קדושים, such as וְאֶהְיֶה לָרֵעַךְ כְּמוֹךָ, and קדושים תהיי, and demonstrating respect for Torah leaders, are numerous technical halakhot. These areas range from intent during sacrificial slaughter, to forbidden mixtures, to laws governing half-emancipated slaves, to the forbidden fruits during the first three years.

The essential point of this textual interweaving between broad themes and technical *halakhot* illustrates the halakhic emphasis upon actualizing, to the smallest detail, the broader values for which the Torah stands.

To be sure, intensive study of each of these technical halakhot hopefully yields a fair bounty in terms of perspective on how a particular law reflects a broader value. Still, while the rationale for each of these technical halakhot may, at times, elude us, the persistent effort to translate broad themes into the most concrete, tangible lifestyle remains the central project of Torah life.

He who best succeeds in synthesizing an unwavering commitment to the broader, moral-ethical themes of Jewish life, and their concrete implementation across the range of halakhic corpus, sets the bar for which we all strive. He has seen every tree in the wood, but his eye continues to behold, in all of its beauty, the entire forest

⁴ Avot 2:1