

Refraining from Being a “Scoundrel Within the Bounds of the Torah”

Parashat Kedoshim

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Rabbi Daniel Ornstein, a friend and colleague of mine, tells a story about something that happened to him once while he was still a rabbinical student. He and his wife were travelling through Israel with another couple, visiting sites together. They visited the ancient Jewish cemetery in Tsfat where Shlomo Alkabetz, the author of *L'Cha Dodi*, and other famous 16th century Kabbalists are buried. While there, they struck up a conversation with a young man who was also visiting the cemetery, a Yeshiva student at one of the prominent Jerusalem yeshivas. After their visit, they walked together to the bus station in Tsfat to wait for a bus to Tiberius. While there, they were joined by another yeshiva student, a friend of the young man they'd met at the cemetery.

“What do you do?” the young man asked Rabbi Ornstein and his wife. “We’re students at JTS. We’re studying to become Conservative Rabbis.” After a few moments, the fellow whom they’d befriended shrugged his shoulders and said, “Well, we should all do the right thing,” which they took to mean, “I find your brand of Judaism offensive, but I’m trying to tell you politely so that you’ll ultimately come to do this my way.”

They moved on to talk about other, less fraught topics. They got onto the bus and began the journey to Tiberius. But all the while, the yeshiva student who’d gotten on the bus with them in Tsfat was stewing. All of a sudden, he stood up and shouted out to them, “You people are destroying Judaism!”

“Excuse me?” said Rabbi Ornstein. “You’re destroying Judaism!” the man continued. “You pull one brick out of the wall of Jewish belief and practice like you’re doing, and the entire wall will fall down!”



“Sir, please,” my friend said. “Stop yelling so much.” Other passengers also chimed in. “Quiet!” “Shut your mouth!” But the yeshiva student couldn’t be deterred. He kept yelling and shrieking.

Finally, Rabbi Ornstein turned to him and said, “You know what!” “You’re being a *NAVAL BIRSHUT HA-TORAH!*”

That stopped him. “Me?” “*Me* you’re calling a *NAVAL B’RSHUT HA-TORAH?!?*” “How *dare* you call me that!”

Rabbi Orenstein continued: “You’re a *NAVAL B’RSHUT HA-TORAH* because you’re being rude and treating another human being badly. Stop it.”

That quieted him down. He sulked, but didn’t say another word all the way to Tiberius.

What’s that phrase all about, that “*NAVAL B’RSHUT HA-TORAH?*”?

That expression refers to someone who behaves badly, in an uncouth manner -- yet within the permissible boundaries of the laws of the Torah. It’s someone who follows the laws -- the ritual laws of Kashrut and Shabbat, and also the interpersonal laws like the prohibitions against stealing or physically attacking or murdering another. He obeys the law -- but he’s rude, disrespectful, nasty, or vulgar. He has a distressing, disappointing, disrespectful attitude to others.

That term first appears in the commentary of the great 13th century commentator, Moses ben Nachman, or Nachmanides, on this week’s portion. It’s part of his opening commentary on our portion. The question Ramban is trying to figure out is: “What is holiness?” The reason he is grappling with that is that this is how the portion begins. The opening words are: “Be holy, for I the LORD am Holy.” Well, that sounds very nice, but what does it mean to be holy? Let’s put it another way: When the Torah is telling us to “be holy” is it telling us to do something more than or different from all the other rules and regulations it goes on to state?

Does “Be Holy” mean to obey the 613 commandments? Does that make you holy? Or do you have to do something more?

The laws in this portion are pretty difficult to fulfill: “Revere your father and mother, keep Shabbat, don’t steal, don’t swear falsely.” Etc, etc. Let’s include all the laws, such as “Be fair in judgement.” “Don’t favor the poor, or for that matter, the rich.”

Even so, is *that* what we’re talking about when we’re talking about being holy? Or is there more to it than that?

Rashi (the great 11th century French interpreter) tells us that to be holy means to exercise special caution with respect to the sexual prohibitions mentioned in the parshah. That’s what holiness is all about. It’s adopting an almost ascetic discipline.

Ramban puts it differently. He says, it’s *to behave with refinement within the domain of what is permissible*. In other words, it’s to go *beyond* the letter of the law and to seek to grasp and incorporate the values embodied in its spirit. For example, we should do more than just eat what’s permitted. We shouldn’t eat gluttonously. We shouldn’t wolf our food down. We shouldn’t speak harshly, with words of contempt. We shouldn’t be coarse, or vulgar, or rude, or dismissive.

According to this interpretation, “being holy” is a tough mitzvah to fulfill! Because you don’t fulfill it so much by doing this or doing that, but by maintaining the proper *attitude* toward your impulses and toward other people, and by properly calibrating your responses to others.

You could say that how you argue has a lot to do with how you interpret the meaning of this command to be holy. There are those of us who are on one side of a debate and who feel strongly, so strongly that we act out, not so much righteously as *self-righteously*, mocking and demeaning others with whom we disagree. Some go so far as to see that as a mitzvah: to put down others.

That's what was happening on that bus in Israel with my friend Rabbi Ornstein. That fellow on the other side of the aisle was convinced that Rabbi Ornstein was an enemy of Judaism and the Jewish people, and thought it totally *appropriate*, maybe even *exemplary*, to castigate him in public like he did. Now, he had every right to think that Rabbi Ornstein and his wife and their --I should say, *our* -- approach to Judaism are wrong, but to yell belligerently is not the proper way to express that. It certainly wasn't the effective way to convince anyone that he was right -- but holiness isn't about effectiveness; it's about propriety.

Looking back, Rabbi Ornstein realized that his own behavior, losing his cool and yelling back at the man on a crowded bus in front of others, was *also* not the right way to teach that man the ways of righteousness. So he also learned something very important from that encounter, namely, that it's very easy to slip into intolerance; it's very easy to adopt, even to embrace, behavior that you loath in those with whom you disagree.

We live in contentious, argumentative times. We live in times when we are sorely tempted to yell and scream at and demean those who disagree with us. Moreover, we live in times that seem to reward rudeness and disrespectful and even vulgar behavior.

We should resist those temptations. We should resist the tendencies of our age, the incentives and the encouragement that the world in which we live seems to present to us, to lower ourselves to the truly lowest common denominator -- which is vulgarity and baseness.

A word like "holy" may seem, well, too much "holier than thou," but it needn't and shouldn't be thought of that way. Let's strive to adopt the refinement that Ramban puts before us as a holy ideal. Let's run far away from being *nevalim*, base and uncouth -- whether we are outside of, or within, the bounds of the Torah.

Shabbat Shalom!