

Sanctifying our Homes

BeHukotai

May 15, 2004

In the words of our Etz Hayyim commentary, this parasha centers on the brief, but eloquent promise of blessings for those who follow God's ways and a lengthy and chilling series of curses for those who reject God's ways.

Yet amidst the litany of the blessings and curses, the Kotzker Rebbe found a means of commenting on the significance of the Jewish home. Almost buried in the text, in chapter 27, verse 14, are the words, v'ish kee yakdish et baito – "a person who sanctifies his house..."

Commenting on this verse, the Kotzker Rebbe observed, "When a person is involved in spiritual matters, it is relatively easy for him to do so in a sanctified state. But true holiness is when a person sanctifies the seemingly mundane daily activities of running his house. When one behaves in an elevated manner in his own house, he is truly a holy person."

In other words, the way to know if a person is truly holy or not, is whether or not one's home is holy.

Judaism calls upon us to sanctify our homes, which is why the home is called mikdash me'at, the mini sanctuary – the mini place of holiness. This, in fact is the reason for breaking the glass at the end of the wedding ceremony. The explanation usually offered is to remind us of the destruction of the Temple. While this is true, it is only part of the story. The shattering of the glass reminds us of the fragility of life, and of our eternal connection to the Jewish people. But by reminding the bride and groom that the Temple exists no more, they are reminded that it is now incumbent upon them to bring holiness into the world. The Temple, that place which no longer stands, after all, is called the Beit Mikdash, and the Jewish home is called the Mikdash me'at. Thus, the two are connected.

The Kotzker Rebbe is teaching that the principles of torah are not only for the beit mikdash, or even for the beit midrash, (house of study), the synagogue, or other public places. Ideals of Torah should be lived and practiced in all areas of our lives. He is teaching that in our homes, we have the most opportunities for acts of kindness and to elevate our acts.

Some of you may have seen the article in the Washington Post earlier this week about the problem of information overload. It is also referred to as information pollution. All of us who are connected via the internet and e-mail, experience this phenomena – the constant barrage and intrusion of massive amounts of information demanding a response, preferably immediately. David Levy, a computer scientist at the University of Washington's Information School has a remedy for the problem. He responds by unplugging one day a week.

He told the reporter, “We are living web fragments. We don’t remember that it is part of our birthright as human beings to have space and silence for our thoughts.”

The article explains how he goes about tries to tame the information overload. “From sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, Levy does not use e-mail, the internet, the telephone or television. Instead, there is candle lighting, a dinner with friends and services on Saturday morning.”

As you may have guessed by now, Levy is an observant Jew. Interestingly, though, although the article does not tell us his affiliation, he is not Orthodox, for it states that his wife is a rabbi. So, this non-Orthodox, probably conservative Jew, has found that by making that distinction, between Shabbat and the rest of the week, he is able to cope with the clutter and information overload he experiences the rest of the week.

This is what the Kotzker was talking about. Making Sabbath a meaningful part of our home and family experience is a means of making our homes, and thus our lives holy. By sanctifying time, which is what we do, when we recite the kiddush, and observe the rituals of the Sabbath, we bring holiness into our lives.

He also teaches in his work, Amud HaEmet that we also make our home holy by how we treat the people within it. Behaving properly towards members of one’s own family is sometimes more difficult than behaving properly towards strangers, but this is where we can truly achieve holiness.

It is one of the reasons why a mezuzah is placed on the doorposts of our homes, and why it is slanted. The School of Hillel claimed that the mezuzah should be affixed in a horizontal position, since we recite the shema when we “lie down.” Beit Shammai, however, said that the mezuzah should be placed vertically, since we are commanded to say the shema when we “rise up.” So the rabbis agreed to compromise, which is why the mezuzah is placed diagonally. From this we learn how important it is to compromise in our homes and with our loved ones.

Furthermore, we are reminded when we see the mezuzah, as we leave our home in the morning to carry Jewish principles and ethics with us into our work in the world. Similarly, when we return to our homes, we are reminded to seek to elevate our acts at home to a realm of decency and to be guided by the ideals of our faith in our interactions with our family members as well.

Through our acts and how we conduct ourselves, may each of us strive to, in the words of this week’s parasha, sanctify our homes. In so doing, we bring spirituality to our lives, and to the world.

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