

This Week in Torah *Kedushin*

We aspire to be holy. That is a quest before us. The term holiness has 2 prongs to it: God is present and thus something is holy as well as a mission for us thru actions that seems borne of a social construct. Acting holy means emulating divine behavior.

In the Talmud [Sotah 14a], we read: And Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, says: What is the meaning of that which is written: “After the Lord your God shall you walk,” (Deuteronomy 13:5)? Is it actually possible for a person to follow the Divine Presence? But hasn’t it already been stated: “For the Lord your God is a devouring fire” (Deuteronomy 4:24), and one cannot approach fire. He explains: Rather, the meaning is that one should follow the attributes of the Holy One. Just as God clothes the naked, as it is written: “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21), so too, should you clothe the naked. Just as the Holy One visits the sick, as it is written with regard to God’s appearing to Abraham following his circumcision: “And the Lord appeared unto him by the terebinths of Mamre” (Genesis 18:1), so too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One consoles mourners, as it is written: “And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son” (Genesis 25:11), so too, should you console mourners. Just as the Holy One buried the dead, as it is written: “And he was buried in the valley in the land of Moab” (Deuteronomy 34:6), so too, should you bury the dead.

Emulating Divine behavior is a conscious act. But it is more than doing the right thing; it also is a mindset to recall that we are created in the Divine image and thus we act as God’s representative in the earthly realm. This is summarized beautifully in a quote in our prayer book: “Pray as if everything depends on God; act as if everything depends on you.” The Chasidic master, Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto [1800-1865] would not take exception with that—for him, the 2 prongs are simultaneous in nature. He wrote that some people act as if God is not constantly present and even when we are alone, we sometimes act that God cannot “see” what we are doing. As a result, we treat God as if the Holy One was a police officer with a speed gun on the highway; sometimes you can get away with going over the speed limit!

Here is where traditional rabbinic commentators add a bit of guidance. Leviticus 19:14 states: “You shall not insult the deaf...” To which, Rabbi Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno [Italian rabbi who lived 1475-1550] commented: “deafness is not a status of being permanently without hearing. It is also a status when another speaks of one who is not able to hear because of location. This stumbling block is the damage that a person causes to another because of gossip.” Ibn Ezra [Spanish rabbi who lived between 1089-1167] stated that the stumbling block is a form of maliciously exerting power over another without them knowing it by speaking behind people’s back.

On one hand, the insult to the deaf is a form of *l’shon Harah*. But using Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto’s definition, it is failing to acknowledge the omnipresence of God as well. As a result, being holy is a double prong approach—knowing God is everywhere while at the same time knowing that we are the Holy One’s emissary in creating *tikkun Olam*.

“Pray as if everything depends on God; act as if everything depends on you.” This is a metaphysical notion of holiness—in perception and in action.