

BECOMING HOLY

Kedoshim 5779

I.

I've sought and explained some definitions of *kedushah*, holiness, before, but I'd like to use the opening command we read this morning – *kedoshim tihyu*, “be holy,” *ki kadosh ani hashem elokeichem* “because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Lev. 19:2) – together with the fascinating debate surrounding its interpretation to explore the meaning of holiness. And I'd like to suggest three different levels of *kedushah* that we find within our Jewish lives.

It begins with the interpretation of Rashi. How does he understand the command that we be holy?

הוּוּ פְּרוֹשִׁים מִן הָעֲרִיזוֹת וּמִן הָעֵבֶרֶה, שְׁבֹל מְקוֹם שְׂאֵתָהּ מוֹצֵא גְדֵר עֲרוֹהָ אֶתָּהּ מוֹצֵא
קִדְשָׁהּ

This means, keep away from the forbidden sexual relations [just mentioned in the Torah] and from sin. Wherever you find in the Torah a command to fence yourself in against such relations you also find mention of ‘holiness.’

To prove his point, Rashi then lists several *mitzvot* prohibiting sexual relationships that are then followed by a verse recalling the holiness of God and the Jewish people.

To expand Rashi's view slightly, the simplest and most intuitive understanding of how to achieve *kedushah* is through the observance of *mitzvot*. If we do what God wants us to do and avoid what He does not want us to do, then we will be holier people. And this concept is underscored by the *berakhah* we make before so many of our *mitzvot*. They all begin with the same formula:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ...

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has made us holy us with
Your commandments, and commanded us concerning X.

We continually declare that it is the *mitzvot* that make us holy and that the specific *mitzvah* we are performing contributes to that level of holiness.

This, I'd argue, is one clear and obvious path towards holiness. It's one tier of what *kedushah* is. But there is a more fundamental tier than this.

II.

The formula for *berakhot* that I just mentioned is striking in the times it is not used. And, I realized the most significant example a couple of weeks ago on Pesach. Because it was *birkat kohanim*, the time when the kohanim bless us. And, as they are about to do so, they make a *berakhah*:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּקִדְּשָׁתוֹ שֶׁל אַהֲרֹן וְצִוָּנוּ לְבָרֵךְ אֶת
עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַהֲבָה:

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has made us holy us with the holiness of Aharon, and commanded us to bless your people, Israel, in love.

What anchors this *berakhah* is not the belief that the *mitzvot* make one holy, but birth. The kohen declares that he is holy through his ancestor Aharon. And the idea of natural holiness is at the core of so much Jewish belief: we are here today on an innately holy day, Shabbat. There is a part of the world, the Land of Israel, that is *kadosh*. And we are part of a people that, as God tells us in *Parashat Yitro*, is a *mamlechet kohamin ve-goy kadosh*, “a kingdom of priests and holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). There is a holiness to all of us.

III.

Now, in some ways, it's a matter of personal preference which definition of holiness you think of as more important – but your answer would be telling. I'd rather place more weight on our obligation to earn a higher level of holiness through observing *mitzvot* than claim that innate holiness is more important. If I were forced to choose, I'd say a religious non-Jew who has committed his or her life to a better world is better than someone born a Jew who rejects all good and God. A *shul* in America may not be on sacred ground, but I'd put it on a higher spiritual plane than a McDonald's in Israel – kosher or not.

And I know that Rambam would agree with me because, as I mentioned last year on *Parashat Toldot*, he rejects notions of Jewish superiority. But I think Ramban, Nachmanides, one of the greatest Torah commentators, would agree, too, because of how he defines *kedushah* in contrast to Rashi. In one of his most well-known and fascinating comments, he argues that the concern of the Torah

is that, even if one observes all the *mitzvot*, one might become a *naval birshut ha-torah*, “a scoundrel with permission from the Torah.” A person might guzzle kosher wine all day and night, devour kosher food to a point of gluttony, and be lecherous with a spouse – and so the Torah introduces a new meta-command: *kedushah*.

In other words, it’s not good enough to just keep the *mitzvot*! That, in and of itself, is only a base-level – let alone being Jewish. Holiness is something even stronger still: a total, all-encompassing pursuit in which the ethic of the *mitzvot* guides all our actions. It’s not enough, says Ramban, for *kashrut* to restrict the number of options on the menu, true holiness means restricting what you pick, too.

And the staunchest advocate of this way of thinking in modern times, was Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, a Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, whose fourth *yahrzeit* was observed this past week. In a wide-ranging lecture given in the winter of 1986, he lamented the existence of what he termed “glatt-kosher hedonism”:

In recent years, one observes on the American scene a terribly disturbing phenomenon: the spread of hedonistic values, but with a kind of glatt-kosher packaging. They have trips to the Virgin Islands, we have trips to the Virgin Islands. Consequently, there has been a certain debasement of values, in which people have a concern for the minutiae of Halakha (which, of course, one should be concerned about), but with a complete lack of awareness of the extent to which the underlying message is so totally non-halakhic and anti-halakhic.

Don’t misunderstand me – I am not opposed to people enjoying themselves to some extent. I am not arguing for a totally ascetic approach to life; I don’t live that way myself, and what I don’t practice I certainly am not going to preach. In a sense, I don’t practice it because I don’t really think that it is demanded. ... The question is something else entirely. The question is not whether there is room in human life for a person to have a certain measure of pleasure. Rather, the question is what is his basic perspective? How much does he involve himself in this? Does he see himself as basically being born to enjoy or to work?

We are born holy. And we become holier, as Rashi captures, by following the will of God. But to truly claim the mantle of holiness, as Ramban argues, there is a tougher task: for the quest for holiness to dictate every choice we make, to suffuse every act we do.

Kedoshim tihyu, “be holy,” issues us with a challenge, one that every moment of our life tests. Holiness is more than how we are born, it is more than our observance, it is about the way we act. And we are judged against the highest standard, *ki kadosh ani hashem elokeichem*, “because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” And, in the most crucial ways, it is not our prayers or *kavanah* in this room that decide our holiness, but our actions outside those doors. That is our true test to become *kadosh*.