

What It Means to Be Holy

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We live in a bizarre period in history. We see things transpiring in this country and across the world that are stranger than fiction and people are powerless to stop the retreats from normalcy, morality and common sense. What can we do to ensure that we aren't infected by what is going on around us and are able to maintain our fidelity to propriety and decency? What does Hashem want from us in times like these?

Perhaps He wants us to keep to ourselves, minding our own business as we withdraw from involvement with what is going on in our communities and in the world in general.

This week, the Sefirah period really kicks in as a time of mourning. We are back to saying Tachanun and there are no weddings taking place or music being played. This week, we learn the parshiyos of Acharei Mos and Kedoshim, which present many mitzvos relating to our conduct and how to treat other people.

The posuk (18:3) tells us not to act as the other nations do and not to adopt their culture, habits and hobbies. A subsequent posuk (18:5) states, "And if you observe My mitzvos and chukim, you will live." While Rashi cites the Chazal that if you follow Hashem's commandments you will live in Olam Haba, perhaps we can also understand the posuk to mean that no matter what is going on around you, if you live your life according to the way the Torah directs you, your life will be worth living. You will live a productive, healthy life and won't fall prey to the insanity that surrounds you that causes life to be empty, worthless and bizarre.

If you seek the fulfillment and contentment that come with a good life, spared of drugs and emptiness, stick with a life of Torah. Otherwise, your life will bring you depression, sadness, emptiness and loneliness.

This parsha is followed by the parsha of Kedoshim tihiyu, which teaches us to be holy people. And we may wonder: I am awash in a sea of hedonism, decadence and licentiousness. How can I be expected to be holy? The answer is that if you follow the Torah's guidance, you will live life on a higher, protected plane.

This is why Parshas Kedoshim was said b'hakhel, to all of Klal Yisroel, as the posuk states, "Dabeir el kol adas bnei Yisroel." Hashem told Moshe to tell all of the Jewish people that they must be holy.

Many meforshim wonder how all of Am Yisroel could be commanded to be kedoshim, when holiness is way up there, one of the highest levels a person can attain. How can it be expected of plain simple people to rise to the highest rung on the ladder of devotion?

The simple answer is that the way to attain holiness is by following the mitzvos contained in the pesukim that follow: Honor your parents, don't steal or cheat, don't curse other people, don't step on the poor and kiss up to the rich, don't be a tattletale, don't stand by as innocent blood is being spilled, respect young and old, and love, don't hate. These are mitzvos that we are all aware of. By following them, you become a kadosh. Loving other people, treating people with love, and not hating or embarrassing other people are not just nice things. They aren't just mitzvos. By living that way, you become a kadosh, a holy person, and Hashem wants all of us to be kedoshim, because we all can.

Living among rotten, depraved people is not an excuse and does not have to hold us back from being holy.

And more than that, the meaning of the word kedusha is commonly misunderstood. We loosely translate the word to mean holy, synonymous with asceticism and austerity. Kedusha certainly means that, but it means much more.

A life of kedusha means to live with Hashem and to be enveloped by an awareness of His reality and presence. To be a kadosh means to live with a vision and a goal. It means living within the present, but never losing sight of the reason we are here, what life is all about and what our ultimate aim ought to be.

A person who lives with kedusha can rise above our one-dimensional world and see a bigger and deeper universe. That realization propels him to accomplish so much more than people who are trapped in the here and now.

Other people don't have time to spend with a boy who wants to learn, lovingly reviewing the Gemara with him repeatedly until he understands it, and then moving along with him and helping him develop into a great talmid chochom, but a kadosh does, because his focus is on the larger goal of spreading Torah. Other people don't have the patience and drive to return and introduce people to the beauty of the Torah way of life, but the kadosh does. Other people have no problem embarrassing people they disagree with, but the kadosh doesn't behave that way. He treats all with respect.

Last week, I had the pleasure of spending some time with Rav Shamai Blobstein of Monsey. A tzaddik who spends his life opening the beauty of Torah to teenage boys, he embodies this definition of a kadosh.

A kadosh doesn't tire after sitting with people and helping them through their problems. He doesn't complain when he speaks to a person for several hours, providing a comforting shoulder and calm direction, because he is focused on the goal of having another healthy person in Hashem's army.

Rav Michael Bender's yahrtzeit is coming up. He was a tzaddik and also a kadosh.

There are so many other kedoshim among us, who enable us to live, exist and grow. But Hashem wants us all to be kedoshim, not just a select few.

A kadosh has time and infinite patience for davening, learning and bentching. No matter what he does, he is not in a rush, because if it is worth doing, then it is worth doing right. If he is talking to Hashem, then he is going to make sure that he understands every word he is saying and says it with the proper pronunciation and kavanah.

A kadosh sees himself as part of a greater group, connected with all, and seeking to bring the world and all he is connected with to a better place.

A person who cares about Hashem and His people is a kadosh, because the decisions he makes aren't guided by personal negios or petty calculations, but by the one essential truth. That is kedusha. His life is spiritual and he is occupied with big and important things. He is not a slave to pettiness and silliness. Therefore, he is a kadosh. Small things don't get in his way. He remains focused on the goals set for him in Parshas Kedoshim.

That is why the parsha of Kedoshim was said by Moshe himself b'hakhel, to everyone. Every person can be a kadosh. Every person can study Parshas Kedoshim with Rashi and the Ramban and improve himself step by step until he is a kadosh.

If you do so, then every interaction with another person becomes an opportunity to demonstrate that you are a kadosh. If you present yourself properly, carry yourself with dignity, dress in decent clothing, and speak like a mentch, then you are mekadeish Sheim Hashem and demonstrate that you are not caught up in the vagaries of the moment.

If you have time for other people, you show that you are on a higher plane. If you exhibit common courtesies, you show virtues of a kadosh. You demonstrate that you believe Hashem is with you and watching you, and you behave the way Parshas Kedoshim indicates you should.

Every dark cloud has a silver lining. Although we are living through a historic and trying time, we can rise above the nonsense. We can daven better, taking time to say each word properly. We can find more time to learn and thus lift ourselves as we bring more kedusha into our lives.

We can learn Chumash and mussar with our children, teaching them what our mesorah is and incentivizing them to be good, ehrliche people whose lives are occupied with doing good and living a life of kedusha.

The life of a kadosh is spiritual and focused on important things. Small things don't get in his way. He remains focused on the goals set for him in Parshas Kedoshim.

Nobody can say to himself that he is but a simple person. I don't have to get involved with other people. I don't have to spend time helping other people. I do the mitzvos, give tzedakah, and daven three times a day. That's enough.

It's not enough to be satisfied with coasting along in your own lane. Hashem demands that we be part of a larger group, living as much for others as for ourselves.

The Torah demands that every person who can study Parshas Kedoshim be a kadosh, focused on the vision to see beyond our little corners, seeing a wider world and playing a role within it.

When you have time for other people, when you hold the door for an older person, you show that you are on a higher plane. If you exhibit common courtesy when you drive; if you stop to let someone park, pull out of a parking space or cross the street; if you give another driver the right of way, you show virtues of kadosh. You demonstrate that you believe Hashem is with you and watching you, and you behave the way Parshas Kedoshim indicates you should.

If you're dealing with your chavrusa, or a delivery boy, or a salesman in a store, talk to him the way the Mesilas Yeshorim tells you to, because you know that kedusha is the highest level you can attain, and you know that you get there by being a person of Torah, which means acting in a way that brings you closer to Hashem.

Every day of Sefirah, we take a step forward towards Kabbolas HaTorah and a step further away from Mitzrayim and enslavement to physical wants and demands. Each day that we care about other people, every day that we prevent a machlokes or work to end one, each day that we treat people the way we wish we were treated, we become holier and make the world a holier place, closer to the ultimate goal of Moshiach's arrival.

Let's admit it: Money is very important. We all need it to pay bills and to live. But there is more to life than making money. It is a tool, not a goal. We live to set goals, reach them, and seek success in things that are really important. Help a person and you've created a world. Smile at someone and you're doing something important. Rid your heart of hatred. Don't be involved in machlokes. Pursue peace and constructive enterprises, and your life will be enriched. You will be richer than the person who earns millions of dollars a year but keeps it all for himself, to satiate himself.

Kedoshim tihiyu and v'ohavta lerei'acha kamocho are both in the same parsha. They are interdependent. If you are a kadosh, then you love every Jew, you appreciate each person for who they are, and you embrace them even if they aren't on your level or behave differently than you do, because they are children of Hashem, just as you are, and Hashem commands you to love them.

If you understand "mah chovaso ba'olamo," what the world is really about and why we are here, then you can love and aren't jealous, intolerant and judgmental.

And you can be a kadosh.