

Leimor: Living With Holiness

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

This week, as we study the parshiyos of Acharei Mos and Kedoshim, we are reminded of our sacred task as Jews navigating a turbulent world.

Parshas Kedoshim begins with a brief introduction: Hakadosh Boruch Hu tells Moshe to gather all of Klal Yisroel and instruct them to be kedoshim. The word kedoshim is commonly translated as “holy,” and the implication of the commandment is that we must all strive for holiness.

But what does it mean to be holy? What is expected of us?

Rashi, quoting the Toras Kohanim, explains that Parshas Kedoshim was delivered by Moshe to the entire Klal Yisroel because rov gufei Torah teluyim bah, most of the Torah’s fundamental principles are found in this parsha. It begins with the directive of “Kedoshim tihiyu” and concludes with a similar instruction: “Vehiyisem li kedoshim.”

Many people wonder how it is possible for every Jew to be commanded to be a kadosh. How can ordinary individuals be expected to reach the spiritual heights of the holiest among us?

It seems that the concept of kedusha is often misunderstood. We tend to equate it with severe asceticism and rigid self-denial. While kedusha may include elements of that, it encompasses much more.

Kedusha means living a life of elevation, pausing before every action to consider whether it will make us better or diminish us. Before we speak, we must ask ourselves: Will these words uplift Hashem’s world or degrade it? Will our actions support the cause of Torah or will they weaken it? Will they bring honor to Torah and Yiddishkeit or will they invite ridicule upon from Jews, our rabbonim, and yeshivos?

A kadosh does not drift through life on autopilot. He is intentional, thoughtful, and conscientious. He is guided by vision, inspired by dreams, and anchored in responsibility. Ultimately, a kadosh is someone whose driving purpose is to bring more kedusha into the world—and into himself.

A kadosh adheres to the halachos found in Parshas Kedoshim, particularly the mitzvah of “Ve’ohavta lerei’acha kamocha,” to love others as you love yourself. He is mindful of the feelings and needs of others, never causing harm—financial or emotional—intentionally. He looks for ways to help others, whether through physical support or spiritual guidance. When someone is in distress, he quietly steps in to help, even if the person never knows who assisted him.

In fact, the Rambam writes that the highest level of charity is when the recipient has no idea who helped him. A person who gives in such a way is filled with love for others and seeks to improve the world. He acts not for recognition, but because it’s what he would want done for him and because it is the right thing to do.

The Rambam also writes (Hilchos Avel 14:1), “It is a mitzvah midrerabbonon to visit the sick, comfort mourners...,” listing various forms of chesed in which we should engage. He concludes that although these mitzvos are midrerabbonon, they are included in the mitzvah min haTorah of “Ve’ohavta lere’acha kamocha”—anything you would want others to do for you, you should do for your fellow Jews in the spirit of Torah and mitzvos.

A person living with kedusha rises above the flat, self-centered perspective of this world. He is able to suppress selfish impulses and accomplish far more than others. While many might not find time to patiently sit with a struggling boy and go over the Gemara again and again until he understands it, a kadosh does, because his focus is on the greater mission of spreading Torah.

A kadosh has time and endless patience not only for others, but also for davening, learning, and bentching, because he recognizes that he is connecting with Hashem, the Creator and Sustainer of the world and of himself.

Parshas Kedoshim was said to all of Klal Yisroel together, because to be a kadosh, a person needs to see himself as part of a group, connected with everyone, while seeking to bring the world and all he is connected with to a better place.

Rabbi Isaac Schmidman was a Slabodka talmid who came to America on behalf of the glorious yeshiva. While here raising money for the bastion of Torah, he noticed that proper chinuch in this country was almost non-existent. Focused on the goal of increasing kedusha and Torah, he sensed the potential for change. He remained in New York and opened Yeshiva Toras Chaim, an elementary school, in Brownsville, then a major Jewish metropolis.

The novi Yirmiyohu (2:2) praises the willingness of Klal Yisroel to follow Hakadosh Boruch Hu into the desert. He proclaims, “Lechteich acharai bamidbar b’eretz lo zeruah.” Hashem says, “I remember the chesed of your youth as you followed Me into the desert to a land that is not planted.”

Rabbi Schmidman would offer an alternative explanation, noting that there are times when a person encounters a land of “lo zeruah,” where the “no” is firmly planted. It is a place where negativity and pessimism dominate. He would say that there is a special reward for those who forge ahead instead of succumbing to that mindset.

In the America he encountered, religious immigrant parents—even those with beards and peyos—had given up on their children following in their footsteps. It was widely accepted that Torah Judaism was a fading memory of Europe that would never take root in this country. That concept became a self-fulfilling prophecy and millions of Jews were lost forever.

Rabbi Schmidman went against the tide. He opened a yeshiva and convinced parents to enroll their children in a religious school. Rabbi Binyomin Kamenetzky, a rebbi in that school, absorbed the lesson and went off on his own to a different land of “lo zeruah,” establishing a similar school in the Five Towns of Long Island. Though the area had many Jews, there weren’t even ten shomrei Shabbos with whom to form a minyan.

With emunah, bitachon, Torah, and wisdom, he got to work. With his goal firmly implanted, nothing could deter him. He wasn't in it for himself. He didn't seek glory. There was no one around, but he wasn't lonely. There was no support, but he wasn't poor. He was bringing Torah to a place that had never welcomed it. He was bringing it to a midbar, and he knew that it was only a matter of time before it would sprout and bear fruit. The name of the school, Toras Chaim, "The Living Torah," defined him, as the Torah gave him life. His mission to spread that life and spirit empowered him and made a desert bloom.

When you think of what the Five Towns is today, think of Rabbi Kamenetzky and his wife, two pioneers, young in age and spirit but timeless in their values and worldview, who won over family after family, student after student, one soul and then another and another.

Wherever Torah thrives today—in the hum of a bais midrash, in the voices of schoolchildren reciting pesukim, in communities alive with kedusha—it is thanks to those sacred souls who planted seeds in barren ground.

They were kedoshim, holy ones who thought not of themselves, but of Klal Yisroel.

Each city, each town, had its quiet giants, tzaddikim who stood against public opinion, who labored during the day and at night, not for praise but for promise.

In Detroit, it was Rav Avrohom Abba Freedman and Rav Shalom Goldstein, who stood at public school bus stops in Jewish neighborhoods and spoke gently and passionately to parents and children, urging them toward a life rich with Torah.

They didn't wait for hearts to open. They knocked, they entered, and they kindled fires.

There was Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, whose burning vision gave birth to a movement, Torah Umesorah, and to the heroes it sent across the American landscape.

They were pioneers in a spiritual wilderness.

With briefcases of hope and hearts aflame, they traveled from town to town, raising schools from the dust, inspiring communities to invest in eternity.

Men like Dr. Joe Kamenetsky, Rabbi Sender Gross, Rabbi Bernie Goldenberg, and Rabbi Shea Fishman gave not just their time, but their lives, so that Torah would no longer be a whisper in America, but a voice. A presence. A promise fulfilled.

More recently, Rabbi Nate Segal took up their mission, traversing the country with vision and resolve. From city to city, he built what others only dreamed: Torah communities with day schools, kollelim, and yeshiva-trained rabbonim—seeds planted, roots deepened, futures secured.

There is still much to be done, and thankfully, there are many who continue to live by the command of "Kedoshim tihiyu," helping others in every way possible. Every community has them, and without them, we could not function. They are the rabbeim and moros, the Hatzolah men, and the Bikur

Cholim and Tomchei Shabbos volunteers. They are the people we turn to when we can't get our children into a good school, when we need legal assistance, or when we need advice or a push. They are the kedoshim who help us remain an am kadosh.

We often imagine a kadosh as an elderly man with a long white beard, sitting in a quiet corner, immersed in a life of dveikus and abstinence. Surely, he is a kadosh. But a kadosh can also be the baker who does chesed, the grocer who feeds the poor, and the accountant and lawyer who quietly help those who cannot afford to pay.

And then there are the legions of kollel yungeleit who just began the summer zeman, dedicating their lives to shteiging in Torah and kedusha. They are the prime example of kedoshim in our day.

Kedoshim tihiyu. The Torah wants us to live with our eyes on the highest goal. Each day of Sefirah, we take another step toward Torah and kedusha. Each day that brings us closer to Kabbolas HaTorah brings us closer to understanding our purpose and why we are here.

The Ponovezher Rov, a soul carved from fire and faith, rose from the ashes of the Holocaust and built not only with stone, but with spirit. On the ruins of what was lost, he laid the foundation of the Ponovezher Yeshiva, a sanctuary of Torah built with tears turned into strength. He was a kadosh who never stopped building, healing, and carrying others upon his unbroken heart.

Among his sacred efforts was a home for the youngest survivors, children who emerged from the smoldering darkness of war, orphaned but not forgotten. It was there, in the gentle light of that home, that he once rose to speak at a bar mitzvah—not just any bar mitzvah, but one marked by miracle: the lone surviving child from the Kovno Ghetto.

The Rov's voice, steady and burning with purpose, turned to the parsha of that week, Shemini, a portion cloaked in mourning. It tells of Nodav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon Hakohein, consumed in divine fire. Afterward, Moshe addresses the remaining sons, Elozor and Isomor: "Vayiktzof al Elozor ve'al Isomor bonov hanosarim leimor—And he became angry with Elozor and Isomor, the remaining sons, saying."

Rashi pauses on the word leimor, saying, and explains that Moshe asked them to answer. But what was he asking?

The Rov shared that Chazal teach that Elozor and Isomor, too, had been destined for death, yet Heaven spared them. Moshe's question now echoes: Why? Why were you kept alive if not to be mekadeish Hashem? Tell me, where is your kiddush Hashem?

Then the Rov turned, his eyes locking with the bar mitzvah boy's, his voice soft yet thunderous.

"From all the children of the Kovno Ghetto, only you are alive. Do you hear what Hashem is saying to you? I kept you alive to sanctify My Name."

Then his message widened, reaching every child and every heart: “Not only to you does Hashem speak. To every Jewish soul—each one spared, each one born of survival—Hashem says: Leimor. Answer Me. Why are you here? To be a living sanctification of My Name. To carry the light forward.”

Years have flowed like rivers since those words were spoken, yet their echo remains. The Holocaust recedes into history, but we, survivors and children of survivors, are its living legacy.

We are here for more than survival. We are here for holiness.

We are here to be kedoshim.

Our lives are meant to shine with kedusha.

We are called to answer.

Leimor – speak it with your life.

Leimor – proclaim it with all your deeds.

Leimor – in every corner of the world, let us be mekadshei Hashem.

Let the world see: We live not just to endure, but to elevate.

Let them hear: Our survival is not silent.

It is a symphony of kiddush Hashem.