YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT KEDOSHIM**

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This shiur is dedicated in memory of Rabbanit Frieda Heller z"l

whose yahrzeit falls on the third of Iyar,

by her granddaughter, Vivian Singer

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**"You shall be holy"**

**I. A specific command or a general instruction?**

In both *Parashat Acharei Mot* and in *Parashat Kedoshim*,the concept of *kedusha*, "holiness," recurs quite a few times. The most direct expression of this is the explicit commandment found at the very beginning of *Parashat Kedoshim*:

Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy. (*Vayikra* 19:2)

"Holiness" is a basic and fundamental concept in the Torah and in Halakha, and to a large extent, it encompasses our entire lives. We encounter in it in the dimension of time (on *Shabbatot* and holidays), in the dimension of place (in the sanctity of the synagogue, the Land of Israel, and Jerusalem) and also, in our *parasha*, in the human dimension: every member of the people of Israel is commanded to be holy.

The *Rishonim* disagree as to whether this is a commandment with specific content or whether what we have here is a general reinforcement of all the Torah's commandments. The Rambam states in the fourth principle at the beginning of his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* that "general commandments" are not counted among the 613 *mitzvot*:

The fourth principle is that it is inappropriate to count commands that include the whole Torah. There are commands and warnings that appear in the Torah that are not about a specific thing, but rather include all of the commandments. It is as if it says: "Do everything I have commanded you to do and be careful about anything from which I have prohibited you"; or "Do not transgress anything of what I have commanded you about." There is no room to count this command on its own – as it does not command us to do a specific act, such that it should be a positive commandment; nor does it warn us from doing a specific act, such that it should be a negative commandment. (Rambam, *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, principle 4)

Thus, according to the Rambam, a commandment lacking specific content should not be counted as a separate commandment. He cites our commandment, among other things, to illustrate this principle:

And this is like its saying… "You shall be holy," and "you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy" are commands to keep the whole Torah. It is as if it said: "Be holy by doing everything I have commanded you and being careful about anything I have prohibited to you." (Ibid.)

On the other hand, the *Sefer Chareidim*[[1]](#footnote-1)states that the Gaon (Rabbi Saadya Gaon) counted this mitzvaseparately, and explains its content:

The Gaon counted [among the 613 commandments] "to be holy," and the Ramban in his commentary to *Kedoshim*: This is what *Chazal* said: Sanctify yourselves with what is permitted to you. (*Sefer Chareidim*, positive commandments, chapter 7, no. 13*)*

To some extent, this corresponds to a disagreement among the commentators at the beginning of our *parasha*: Whereas Rashi sees in the command of "you shall be holy" an obligation to keep aloof from forbidden sexual relations, the Ramban, as the *Sefer Chareidim* notes, explains it as an obligation to practice moderation even in matters that are permitted, in order to reach the ideals that the Torah has set for us in its commandments:

The idea is as follows: The Torah cautioned us against immorality and forbidden foods, but permitted sexual intercourse between man and his wife, and the consumption of [certain] meat and wine. Thus, a man of desire could find room to become immersed in relations with his wife or many wives, and to be among winebibbers, among gluttonous eaters of flesh, and he might speak freely all profanities, since this prohibition was not [expressly] mentioned in the Torah, and thus he will become a sordid person within the permissible realm of the Torah! Therefore, after having listed the matters which He prohibited altogether, Scripture came and commanded as a general matter that we should hold back even from matters which are permitted. (Ramban, *Vayikra* 19:2)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* as well sees this command as a mitzva, but in a manner slightly different from that of the Ramban and the *Sefer Chareidim.* Whereas they understand that the mitzvahere is to abstain from that which is permitted, the *Or Ha-Chaim* argues that a person becomes "holy" when he abstains from transgressions:

Furthermore, our verse may reflect what *Chazal* say in *Kiddushin* 39b: “If a person sits and refrains from committing a transgression, he is given a reward as if he had performed a positive commandment.” This is the statement of Scripture, "You shall be holy," as a positive commandment – regarding one who is presented with an opportunity to commit a sin and refrains from doing it, and with this he has fulfilled the positive commandment that we were commanded in the statement, “You shall be holy.” (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Vayikra* 19:2)

**II. Seeking Holiness**

All three approaches that we have seen recognize that a Jew should strive to be "holy," but they differ on the question of how to reach holiness: according to the Rambam and Rashi, by performing the *mitzvot*: according to the Ramban, by abstaining from that which is permitted; and according to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, when a person is tested and holds firm, he increases holiness.

It seems that these three approaches (and there are many more that we have not mentioned here) are built on the same basic point of "holiness" that is expected of the people of Israel. We will try to understand, from the *Or Ha-Chaim's* explanations of our *parasha*, how he understood the concept of holiness and how it finds expression in the various approaches that we have seen.

**III. For I am Holy**

Some of the *mitzvot* in the Torah are decrees, the reasons for which have not been explained to us, while for other *mitzvot*, the Torah offers explicit reasons. Our mitzvapresents an interesting case: on the one hand, the Torah offers an explicit reason for the mitzva ("for I am holy"); on the other hand, this reason is very difficult to understand. What is the connection between the command and the rationale? Why does the fact that God is holy obligate us as His people to conduct ourselves in holiness?

In his first explanation, the *Or Ha-Chaim* suggests that "for I am holy" is not the *reason* for the commandment, but the *purpose*. The difference between reason and purpose is subtle: a reason is the *rationale* because of which God commanded us to perform a certain act; a purpose is the *content* with which God wants us to come out of doing the mitzva. For example, the reason for the mitzva of resting from work on Shabbatis that God rested on the seventh day of creation, whereas the purpose of the mitzvais that we should leave Shabbat with an understanding of the greatness of God and of the fact that He rules over the entire world. As for the mitzvaof holiness, *Chazal* in *Torat Kohanim* expound as follows:

"For I the Lord your God am holy." That is to say, **if you sanctify yourselves, I will consider it as if you sanctified Me.** And if you do not sanctify yourselves, I will consider it as if you did not sanctify Me. (*Torat Kohanim Kedoshim* 1)

In other words, the sanctity of man involves sanctifying the name of God. When you consider this idea deeply, it is quite exciting. On the face of it, God's holiness is fixed and does not depend at all on human action, but here *Chazal* teach us that the holiness of God depends, as it were, on the holiness of the people of Israel.

**IV. What is "holiness”?**

In order to understand more deeply how this works, how man’s holiness can “affect” God’s holiness, we will turn to the end of our *parasha.* After the Torah commands us to differentiate between a pure animal and an impure one in order to avoid eating forbidden foods, it offers a reason:

And you shall be holy to Me; for I the Lord am holy, and have set you apart from the peoples, that you should be Mine. (*Vayikra* 20:26)

The same reason of "for I am holy" appears here, this time with a short explanatory note: the difference between Israel and the nations. This difference also has a specific purpose, which is already written in the verse: "that you should be Mine." That is to say, the people of Israel were meant to be God's representatives in the world. Thus, Israel's level of holiness directly affects the level at which God's holiness will be present in the world, since this is Israel's role.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains that the distinction between pure and impure foods must be made not for health, nutritional, or moral reasons, but only because of God's commandment:

"And you shall be holy to Me, etc." The reason the Torah adds the words "to Me" in this verse may best be understood in connection with the comment of *Chazal* (*Torat Kohanim*) that one should not say: "I do not want to eat pig's meat," but one should say: "I would love [to eat pig's meat,] but my Father in heaven has forbidden it to me." And this is what it says, "And you shall be holy to Me" – you shall abstain for Me, for the sake of My commandments, and not because you detest the thing that is prohibited. (*Or Ha-Chaim* *Vayikra* 20:26)

This can be understood based on the mitzvaof holiness that we just saw: If a person’s abstention from forbidden foods is not explicitly because of God's commandment, but relates to worldly factors such as nutrition, his conduct does not bring God's name to expression in the world; therefore, it is not included in the mitzvaof holiness. According to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, in the commandment regarding holiness, emphasis is placed on the fact that a person must act for the sake of God and strictly by virtue of His commandment.

Let us go back to the *Or Ha-Chaim’s* definition of the mitzvaabove:

This is the statement of Scripture, "You shall be holy," as a positive commandment – regarding **one who is presented with an opportunity to commit a sin and refrains from doing it**, and with this he has fulfilled the positive commandment that we were commanded in the statement, “You shall be holy.”

The *Or Ha-Chaim* emphasizes that it is specifically one who is "presented with an opportunity to commit a sin" who is considered holy. Why is this so? On the face of it, even a person who was never presented with an opportunity to commit a sin should be considered just as righteous! However, if we understand that holiness expresses explicit commitment to God, then we can see the great difference between them. One who was not presented with an opportunity to commit a sin did not commit a sin, but he also did not sanctify the name of God – since he did not face a confrontation in which the will of God would have had to overcome his own desires. In contrast, a person who was faced with a test and passed it has sanctified the name of God and increased commitment to God in the world, based on the understanding that He created the world, and thus the name of God has become more sanctified.

**V. Abstention from Sexual Relations**

Another example of this approach can be seen in the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* with respect to holiness in the context of sexual relations. The *Or Ha-Chaim* deals with a most difficult dilemma: On the one hand, a person cannot allow his sexual desire to run wild, for the Torah issued prohibitions that limit sexual behavior. On the other hand, if a person completely refrains from sexual relations, he will abandon the mitzvaof procreation and the continued existence of the world:

It further seems the verse can be explained in this way: Since God issued commandments regarding the aspect of desire that is ingrained in human nature [all of which ask us to deny natural biological urges]… for it is impossible for a person to overcome it except through a protective distancing [including] in the aspect of thought. And since God commanded in its place [that we procreate and thereby] to ensure the continuity of the human species, one cannot totally dissociate oneself from the subject of sex and all that this entails. Not only that, but there are times when the very preoccupation with that subject becomes a positive commandment; how else is one to engage in one's marital duty at the right time and place?[[2]](#footnote-2) (Ibid.)

Therefore, the *Or Ha-Chaim* suggests:

The word of God comes here and commands…: “Be holy” – meaning, that we sanctify ourselves with acts that are subject to commandment [i.e., that we elevate the subject of procreation to a spiritual experience], that one not act for the fulfilment of a mere physical urge…but to perform the act in holiness and purity [as a mitzva], just like wearing *tzitzit* and *tefillin*. (Ibid.)

The comparison between *tefillin* and *tzitzit* – *mitzvot* whose entire essence is to represent the name of God that is called upon man, and for which there is no physical or natural reason for a person to do them – and sexual relations is a far-reaching comparison. It comes to emphasize the very principle which we noted: when a mitzva is performed purely for God, His name is magnified in the world.

**VI. The Mitzva and the Shekhina**

“*Gematriyot[[3]](#footnote-3)* are an after-course of wisdom” (*Avot* 3:18), and kabbalists used them extensively in order to express profound ideas in the esoteric realms of the Torah. Our principle also appears in the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* in a kind of *gematriya* from the *Zohar*:

Therefore the Torah writes "for I the Lord your God am holy." This can be understood based on what *Chazal* said (*Tikkunim* 70) that whenever someone performs a mitzva, God's holy name rests on the organ with which he performed the mitzva[*mem-tzadi-vav-heh*]*,* because the word mitzva alludes to the name of God: the letters *mem* and *tzadi*,using the system of *at-bash* [*alef=taf*, *bet=shin*, etc.],are *yod* and *heh*, and with the letters *vav* and *heh*, you have the name of God – *yod*, *heh*, *vav*, *heh*. I already explained elsewhere why half of the name of God is through *at-bash*, and half in a revealed manner. If so, when a person performs an act for the sake of a mitzva, the name of God rests upon him, so that he becomes holy. (Ibid.)

What is the meaning of the statement that when a person performs a mitzva, God rests upon the organ with which he performed it? How does this find expression? I would like to suggest that this is connected to the principle that was raised above: when a particular organ refrains from committing a transgression, it gives expression in our world to the existence of God, and for this reason, the name of God rests on it. The *Or Ha-Chaim* relates to the Tetragrammaton specifically (as opposed to other names of God) because its meaning is "who was, is, and will be" (*Shulchan Arukh*, *Orach Chaim* 5), expressing God’s enduring existence.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* expresses the same idea in *Parashat Acharei Mot* when the Torah commands, at the beginning of the section dealing with prohibited sexual relations:

My ordinances shall you do, and My statutes shall you keep, to walk in them: I am the Lord your God. (*Vayikra* 18:4)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains "walking" in God's way as follows:

This can be understood based on what the Tanna Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (*Zohar* I, 170b) said, that man's 248 organs and 365 sinews correspond to the 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments. When a person performs a mitzva, the name of God rests upon the organ with which it was performed. Because the letters of the word mitzva are the letters of the Tetragrammaton, half in a revealed manner and half in a hidden manner, because the letters *mem* and *tzadi* in *at-bash* are *yod* and *heh.* And it is known that God is His name and His name is He, as it is stated: "The Lord is one and His name is one" (*Zekharya* 14). “You have been shown to know” that when a person performs a mitzva, he becomes a chariot for the *Shekhina* and God walks within him.

This is the meaning of "to walk in them." And then it explains who it is that walks in them, saying: "I am the Lord," as if it said: "to walk I the Lord in them." This is the hidden meaning of "[Build for Me a *Mishkan*,]that I may dwell among them" (*Shemot* 25:8). According to this, the word *bahem*, "in them," should be understood in its plain sense. For when a person performs a mitzva, the preparation is made for Him to walk among them. This is the meaning of: "And I will walk among you" (*Vayikra* 26:2) and of: "But you that did cleave to the Lord your God" (*Devarim* 4:4). (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Vayikra* 18:4)

The *Or Ha-Chaim's* words here are quite novel: when a person performs a mitzva, he "enables" God, as it were, to walk in that mitzva*.* Of course, this does not mean that God literally walks there, but the observance of the mitzvain the world allows God to become revealed and to find expression even in our material world. When we perform a mitzva,we give God presence in our world.

**VII. Humans as Angels**

The idea that holiness refers to revelation of the *Shekhina* through fulfillment of the *mitzvot* in our world finds expression in another comment of the *Or Ha-Chaim* about the mitzvaof holiness:

Yet another meaning of the words "You shall be holy" is that you should be like the angels who are called "holy," as it is written: "And a holy one said" (*Daniel* 8:13). This is like what is stated: "I said, You are godlike beings, and sons of the Most High, all of you" (*Tehillim* 82:6). As the Holy One, blessed be He, rested his *Shekhina* among the people of Israel and made them members of His palace in place of [i.e., parallel to] the angels. Learn what they said in the book of the *Zohar* (II, 140b) about the time that the Holy One, blessed be He, rested His *Shekhina* in the lower world, how great was the agitation of those in the celestial regions about God’s choosing residence among Israel [i.e., humans on earth] more than among the angels. And therefore, God commanded… the Israelites to be holy like angels [in order that the angels should cease complaining]. (*Or Ha-Chaim* *Vayikra* 19:2)

In Hebrew, the word *mal'akh*, "angel," means messenger. The angels are God's messengers to do His word. There is an interesting discussion as to whether the angels even have free will at all,[[4]](#footnote-4) but it is clear that they have very little ability to change God's word. The *Or Ha-Chaim* says here that the people of Israel, as it were, "replaced" the angels in this world. But there is a problem here: whereas the angels are deprived of free will, for man, the ability to choose is a central pillar in his life. This is where the commandment of holiness comes in. The ability to subordinate themselves to the word of God *despite* their free will sets Israel on the level of the angels, and perhaps even above them.

**Summary**

We have seen that the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains holiness as an expression in the material world of man's subservience to God. This expression can come into being through performance of *mitzvot* with the proper intention, for the sake of heaven, or by overcoming the evil inclination in order to avoid transgression. At the beginning of this *shiur*, we saw three approaches to the mitzvaof holiness, and it seems that all three are directed toward the principle that we find in the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim.*

The Rambam maintains that the commandment to “be holy” is a general reinforcement for all transgressions and *mitzvot*, and this accords with the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim*: with every transgression or mitzva, one can give expression to one's subservience to God. The Ramban maintains that there is sanctification when a person abstains from what is permitted to him, which also accords with the principle laid down by the *Or Ha-Chaim*:abstaining from something permitted, for the sake of God, demonstrates how much a person is prepared to give up for His sake, and thus it gives Him presence in the world. The understanding proposed by the *Or Ha-Chaim*, according to which holiness comes from holding back when the opportunity to commit a sin presents itself, is based on the idea of giving up one’s own desires for the sake of performing God's will.

May it be God's will that we merit to make our will be like His will and thus become sanctified so that the name of God should rest upon us.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Rabbi Elazar Azikri, a contemporary of the Ari and the *Beit Yosef* in Tzefat in the second half of the 16th century*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some of the translations of the *Or Ha-Chaim* borrow from the explanation of R. Eliyahu Munk, available at Sefaria.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I.e., the use, for exegetical purposes, of the numerical values of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example, *Or Same'ach*, *Hilkhot Teshuva*, chapter 5, *Kuntrus* "*Ha-Kol Tzafui ve-ha-Reshut Netuna*; *Sefer ha-Ikarim*, II, chapter 28; and in contrast, Radak, *Bereishit* 19:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)