



Question:

I have heard reference to kedushat hamachane, sanctity of the camp, in the context of military camps. Could you clarify from where is this concept derived, and what are its practical applications?

Answer:

The concept kedushat hamachane is derived from the verse in Devarim (23/15), "Since your God moves about in your camp... let your camp be holy..."

At face value this requirement of holiness relates to two issues stated in the verses. One is the laws of one who is impure by a nocturnal emission. The second pertains to the handling of urine and excrement. The issue of nocturnal emission has no halachic implementation today so we will not elaborate on it.

On the topic of the handling of urine and excrement the Torah states: "there shall be an area for you outside the camp, where you may relieve yourself. With your gear you shall have a spike, and when you have squatted you shall dig a hole with it and cover up your excrement." (Devarim 23/13-14) The Rambam reads these verses as two positive commandments. The first to set aside a place to relieve yourself. The second to carry a spike to dig and cover excrement.

The implementation of these commandments is as described by the Rambam in Hilchot Melachim. "It is forbidden to defecate in an army camp or in an open field anywhere. Rather, it is a positive commandment to



establish comfort facilities for the soldiers to defecate as Deuteronomy 23:13 commands: 'Designate a place outside the camp to use as a lavatory. Similarly, it is a positive commandment for every single soldier to have a spike hanging together with his weapons. When he goes out and uses those comfort facilities, he should dig with it, relieve himself, and cover his excrement as *ibid.*:14 states 'You must keep a spike among your weapons.'

The verse states, "Since your God moves about in your camp... let your camp be holy". The commentaries differ on how to understand the concept of God's presence in the camp. The Rashbam suggest this refers to the Ark that would go with the warriors to battle. The Ark represents the presence of God and requires the soldiers to maintain a sanctity of the camp. In contrast the Rambam writes, "They must follow these practices at all times, whether the ark accompanies them or not, as is stated: 'God walks among your camp... therefore, your camp shall be holy'".

There is a halachic significance to the two readings. Today and at any time there is no Ark, according to the Rashbam there would be no biblical requirement of the above mentioned laws. According to the Rambam, it is the fact that God is present to protect the warriors that brings about the requirement of a sanctified camp, this applies today as in any other time. Since in these areas we rule like the Rambam it should be seen as a biblical requirement today as well.

Rabbinic tradition defines the wording of the verses in a manner that expands the laws of camp sanctity. In the first verse it states, "ve'nishmarta mikol davar ra", "be on your guard against anything untoward". The simple meaning of these words is, take care not to transgress halachic



prohibitions. However, the Rabbinic tradition focusses on the word "davar", reading it as "dibur", speech, rather than thing. This leads the Sifrei and the Gemara Ketubot to speak of a requirement to be particular about ones form of speech.

Similarly, from the wording "let [God] not find anything unseemly among you", we learn a special requirement of modest behavior.

Furthermore, we can apply the principle the Ramban taught on the verse of "Kedoshim tihiyu", "Be holy". There are times the Torah teaches halachic details and then adds a general directive reflecting the general spirit of the law. Here too we are given specifics and then a general statement calling to maintain sanctity in the military camp.

Sources:

Devarim 23 verses 10-15

Sifrei on the verse "venishmartem mikol davar ra".

Ketubot 46a.

Rambam Sefer Hamitzvot Positive Mitzvot 192-193` Ramban Prohibitions the Rambam Omitted Mitzvah 11.

Rambam Hilchot Melachim chapter 6 laws 14-15.

Ramban's Commentary to the Torah 19/2 Kedoshim Tihiyu.

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