YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat ACHAREI MOT - Kedoshim**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch Gigi**

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Dedicated in memory of Rav Hanoch ben Aaron Eliyahu Singer *z"l*,   
whose *yahrzeit* is 12 Iyar, by his granddaughter Vivian Singer

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**Progression in Holiness**

Summarized by Yaakov Aduram

Translated by David Strauss

*Parashot Acharei Mot* and *Kedoshim* both discuss sins related to the privilege granted to us to dwell in the Land of Israel. We are told that commission of these sins will lead to a situation in which the land will “voQmit” us out and we will no longer be able to dwell in it. However, we must note the fundamental difference between chapters 18 and 20, which are in different *parashot* but parallel each other.

In the concluding verses of *Parashat Acharei Mot*, we read:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these [things], for in all these the nations are defiled, which I cast out from before you. And the land was defiled, and I visited its iniquity upon it, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. And you, you shall keep My statutes and My ordinances, and do not do any of these abominations; neither the home-born, nor the stranger that sojourns among you – for all these abominations have the men of the land done, that were before you, and the land was defiled – and [thus] the land will not vomit you out also, when you defile it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. (*Vayikra* 18:24-28)

This warning, in chapter 18, is formulated as a general injunction to all the inhabitants of the land. The essence of the warning is refraining from evil with regard to forbidden sexual relations, whose punishment is the expulsion of the land's inhabitants. The land is unable to contain inhabitants who transgress these prohibitions.

The warning at the end of *Parashat Kedoshim* is formulated differently:

You shall keep all My statutes, and all My ordinances, and do them, and [thus] the land, where I bring you to dwell therein, will not vomit you out. And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation that I am casting out before you; for they did all these [things], and therefore I became disgusted with them. And I have said to you: You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess it, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am the Lord your God, who has set you apart from the peoples. (*Vayikra* 20:22-24)

Here the emphasis is radically different – it is not a question of the land's inability to contain its inhabitants due to their sins; rather, God is the one who punishes and expels the inhabitants of the land because He has had enough of their sins. Accordingly, the addressees of the warning also change: chapter 18 addressed a general warning to all the inhabitants of the land, including the Israelites; here, the warning is specifically directed to the Israelites. They are cautioned that God is bringing them specifically into the Land of Israel, in order for them to dwell there, and that He is giving them laws and statutes that will enable them to do so. Here, their continued residence in the land is contingent upon doing the will of God, not upon avoiding defilement of the land.

What led to this change between the two *parashot*? It stands to reason that this shift relates to what came in the interim, namely, the attribute of holiness, and the commandments derived from it, which were given to the people of Israel in chapter 19:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: 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* 19:1-2)

After receiving the commandment of holiness, the people of Israel were set apart from the nations. They were no longer to be judged solely on their ability to (passively) *refrain from evil*, as in chapter 18; they were also charged with (actively) *doing good* and emulating God. And on this obligation, God Himself would keep watch – as described in chapter 20.

The holiness invoked here is not a description of the state of the Jewish people. It is not a statement and declaration of fact – "Just as He is holy, so you *are* holy" – but an obligation and demand that they must sanctify themselves. Indeed, all expressions of holiness express a call towards progress and process: "And say to them: You shall be holy" (*Vayikra* 19:2); "sanctify yourselves and be holy" (20:7); "and you shall be holy to Me" (20:26).

Only in God do we find a state of perpetual sanctity: "For I the Lord your God am holy" (*Vayikra* 19:2). Man, in contrast, must constantly be on the move, always ascending and progressing in holiness.

This process of progression is intrinsic to human nature. Each of us is on a lifelong journey towards the unattainable goal of cleaving to God. The fact that the goal is unattainable does not prevent us from progressing; rather, it imposes upon us a perpetual obligation to rise in holiness. This idea appears in the Mishna in *Keilim*, which enumerates '"ten sanctities," each more inward than the other – a hierarchy of sanctity that invites a person on a journey to progress in the realm of holiness, from one level to the next, towards God:

There are ten [grades of] holiness: the land of Israel is holier than all other lands… Cities that are walled are holier… The area within the wall [of Jerusalem] is holier… the Temple Mount is holier… the *cheil* is holier… the women’s court is holier… the court of Israelites is holier… the court of the priests is holier… the area between the porch (*ulam*) and the altar is holier… the *heikhal* is holier… the Holy of Holies is holier… (*Keilim* 1:6-9)

From the outermost circle, one proceeds inward and approaches the holiest place – a progression that is ostensibly "geographical," a walk in actual space, but whose essence is a spiritual journey toward ever-increasing sanctity. This is the proper attitude to the call to emulate the Creator and cleave to His ways – not standing still, in satisfaction with the level already attained or with a sense of helplessness in the face of an incomparably lofty goal, but a constant progression.

Two further points of difference between the parallel chapters must be noted in order to better understand the nature of sanctity. The prohibitions of forbidden sexual relations are repeated in both chapters, but with different emphases. Chapter 18 primarily addresses forbidden relations within the family:

Each of you shall not approach any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness. I am the Lord. (*Vayikra* 18:6)

These transgressions usually come hand in hand with extensive moral corruption, for only deep corruption could allow the breaking of the clear and natural boundaries within a family. This is implied by the warning that opens the section:

After the deeds of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and after the deeds of the land of Canaan, where I bring you, you shall not do; and you shall not walk in their statutes. (*Vayikra* 18:3)

Separation from impurity and basic prohibitions constitutes a distancing from the ways of Egypt and Canaan – the two sons of Cham, the son who uncovered his father's nakedness. Shem, certainly, had no part in this event, for he was familiar with the worlds of sanctity. But even Yefet, who was not a man of holiness but was concerned with the development of the aesthetic side of humanity, abhorred Cham’s act, which was an assault on the most basic levels of morality and humanity.

But the prohibitions of forbidden relations in chapter 20, which follow the commandment of holiness, are different. Rashi explains the commandment of holiness in this regard:

"You shall be holy" – [This means:] be separate from the forbidden sexual relations [that were just mentioned] and from sin. For wherever you find a fence against such relations, you also find [mention of] holiness. [Thus, a *kohen* is told not to marry] “a woman who is a harlot, or profaned" (*Vayikra* 21:7), [and in the next verse:] "for I, the Lord, who sanctifies you[, am holy]"; "He shall not profane his seed… I, the Lord, sanctify him" (ibid. 15); "they shall be holy" (ibid. 6), [followed by:] "[they shall not marry] “a woman who is a harlot, or profaned (*chalala*)." (Rashi *Vayikra* 19:2)

We are not dealing here with prohibitions which are in themselves clear-cut impurities, such as those in chapter 18; these are prohibitions of a different type. A relationship between a High Priest and a *chalala* may not be “impure” in itself, but it is forbidden because it is not a fitting marital relationship for one who exists in the world of holiness.

The Ramban takes a further step up the ladder of sanctity:

Therefore, after detailing the matters which He prohibited altogether, Scripture came and commanded a general matter: that we should be separate [i.e., practice moderation, even] from those [matters] that are permitted. (Ramban, *Vayikra* 19:2)

This is not a matter of additional prohibitions, but of the idea of "sanctify yourself through that which is permitted to you"[[1]](#footnote-1) – even regarding permitted matters, there is an obligation to minimize them and thereby sanctify oneself. In a similar statement, the Gemara tells us that a certain enactment was instituted so that "Torah scholars will not be found with their wives as [often as] roosters" (*Berakhot* 21a). The aspiration for sanctity entails control and refraining from one's desires even in the permitted realm.

Thus these chapters trace a journey from impurity, which comes from the basic prohibitions that relate to man as a human being, to sanctity, and finally to sanctification even within what is permitted. It is therefore clear why the death penalty is imposed on one who transgresses the prohibitions of forbidden sexual relations: one who engages in impurity while involved with holiness is not worthy of this world at all.

We also find the prohibition of Molekh in both sections, yet its placement within each section indicates a fundamental difference. In chapter 18, it appears at the end of the section, as an appendix to the prohibitions of forbidden relations. There is a degree of similarity between the practices of Molekh, in which children are used to satisfy a person’s spiritual cravings, and the prohibited relations in one turns to a family member to satisfy physical desires; however, the main point of the *parasha* relates to the basic limits on a person in the realm of physicality.

In contrast, in chapter 20, the prohibition of Molekh opens the chapter and appears as its first commandment. In light of our discussion of the attribute of holiness, this is understandable: we are not talking here about satisfying a person's lusts, but of exploiting family members in order to advance in the realm of holiness, which is forbidden not only because of the damage to those around him but because the approach is so inherently wrong. There must be a clear demarcation in the realms of sanctity regarding which acts are and are not permitted in order to ascend; therefore, the prohibition opens the *parasha* as a general directive to all who enter the realm of sanctity.

Regarding this prohibition, the Torah emphasizes the role of “the people of the land”:

Moreover, you shall say to the children of Israel: Any one of the children of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, that gives of his offspring to Molekh; he shall surely be put to death; the people of the land shall stone him with stones. And I will set My face against that man, and I will cut him off from among his people, because he has given of his offspring to Molekh, to defile My sanctuary and to profane My holy name. (*Vayikra* 20:2-3)

One who lives in holiness must abhor and expunge such acts from the camp, and so an obligation is cast upon all of society to expel such persons from its midst.

We find the importance of society on the positive side as well, in the call to sanctify and progress, as we see in Rashi's remarks at the beginning of *Parashat* *Kedoshim*:

[The words "all the congregation"] teach that this section was proclaimed in full assembly, because most of the bodies [i.e., fundamental teachings] of the Torah are dependent on it. (Rashi, *Vayikra* 19:2)

This passage was stated in the context of an assembly of the people, in the presence of all segments of the nation. Neither the aspiration to draw near and ascend the ladder of sanctity, nor the obligation to punish those who harm this process, is entrusted to individuals alone. This is a task that is incumbent upon all of society, to advance in holiness and to build a holy society. This is the next level that emerges from the verses:

And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. (*Shemot* 19:6)

And your camp shall be holy. (*Devarim* 23:15)

Thus, these *parashot* describe the continuous journey of man's progress in the realm of holiness – beginning with withdrawal and distancing from the worlds of impurity, moving on to the prohibitions of sanctity and to sanctification of the permitted as well, and culminating in the building of a wholly sanctified society.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Baruch Gigi on Shabbat *Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim* 5783.]

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. [*Yevamot* 20a.] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)