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***Bein Adam Le-chavero*: Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct**

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

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**FESTIVAL OF FREEDOM: ESSAYS ON PESAH AND THE HAGGADAH**

**by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik**

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**Shiur #21: “*Kedoshim Tihyu”* – The Holiness of Interpersonal Perfection**

**“*Kedoshim* *Tihyu*”**

Many of the explicit legal directives regarding interpersonal behavior, from positive commandments such as loving one’s neighbor to negative commandments such as the prohibition of taking revenge, appear in Chapter 19 of *Vayikra*, the first half of *Parashat* *Kedoshim*, although we do find ritual *mitzvot* interspersed with the social ones. *Parashat Kedoshim* begins with a very general and at the same time enigmatic opener, which seems to present a common theme for the various *mitzvot* mentioned there. The introductory verses state:

God spoke to Moshe, saying: “Speak to the entire assembly of the Israelites and say to them, ‘You shall be holy (*kedoshim tihyu*), for holy am I, Lord your God.’” (*Vayikra* 19:1-2)

Rashi (*ad loc.)* quotes the *Sifra*, noting that the Torah speaks here to “the entire assembly of the Israelites” because of the importance of this section:

This teaches that this chapter was delivered in full assembly (i.e. in the presence of all of Israel). Why was this so? This is because a majority of the Torah’s essential laws are contained therein.

Rashi’s comment is rather intriguing, especially after a perusal of the various *mitzvot* introduced by this statement. The chapter seems to discuss assorted commandments*,* with a large concentration of interpersonal directives. There seems to be no clear connection or order; therefore, one may wonder: what makes this section so special? Secondly, what is the intended meaning of holiness and the directive to be “*kedoshim*”?

Throughout *Tanakh*, the term *kadosh* (the singular of *kedoshim*) has many diverse intentions; at times, it refers to bodily cleanliness, purification, abstaining, separating, etc. In general, *kedusha* (holiness) is associated with a specific act; however, in this introductory verse at the beginning of *Kedoshim*, the directive “You shall be holy” seems to stand alone. What does it mean?

One who studies these verses is liable to get the feeling that gathering the entire assembly to teach them the section of the Torah dealing with so many essential laws serves to express a major underlying concept of Judaism. “*Kedoshim tihyu*” does not specifically refer to a unique act of *kedusha*; it directs each Jew to a comprehensive life of *kedusha*. The question that then arises is the following: what does such a life entail, and how do the various *mitzvot* which are introduced with this imperative of “*Kedoshim* *tihyu”* lend to that *kedusha*?

In fact, various commentators, differing on the specifics but presenting the same general theme, understand this verse as expressing a fundamental tenet of Jewish life.

The Rambam understands it as a general principle to keep the entire Torah; consequently, he rules that it is not an individual mitzva, but rather a universal commandment, “a general exhortation to keep all the commandments of the Torah and to be holy by complying with its precepts and restrictions” (Rambam, *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, *Shoresh* 4).

Rashi, based on the *Sifra*, explains that this verse is not introducing Chapter 19, but rather summarizing Chapter 18, which deals with the forbidden sexual relationships. The holiness which the verse describes is “abstaining from forbidden relations and from sin.”

Other commentators accept Rashi’s application of holiness to the self-control necessary for refraining from sensual gratification, but they explain that this is to be viewed more as symptomatic of the general overall quality of holiness that should be a mark of every Jew’s personality. Notably among the various commentators, the Ramban explains that this directive has far-reaching ramifications and is meant to ensure that the spirit of the Torah’s laws is to be maintained even when legal loopholes exist.

**The Ramban’s Stress on the Spirit of the Law**

The Ramban (*ad loc*.) begins by citing Rashi’s comment based on the *Sifra*, that one must be restrained in his sensual relationships. However, the Ramban notes, this actually appears in the *Sifra* in more general terms: “You shall be removed.” He goes on to argue that the *Sifra* seems to indicate that to be holy, it is insufficient to merely separate oneself from forbidden relationships; one must exhibit overall abstemiousness, so as not to “become a degenerate with the sanction of the Torah.”

The idea of this commandment is that the Torah proscribes the forbidden sexual relationships and the forbidden foods, but it permits correspondingly the cohabitation of a man with his wife and the consumption of meat and wine. Accordingly, the sensual man could find room within the law to be steeped in the carnality of his wife or his many wives, to guzzle wine and to gorge himself on meat and to speak as he pleases all vile things, for these things are not explicitly prohibited in the Torah. But if so, he will become a degenerate with the sanction of the Torah. Therefore, this verse, “You shall be holy,” comes after the Torah details the forbidden relationships; it commands in a general statement that we shall be removed from the excesses of permissible acts.

The Ramban seems to indicate that this admonition, “*Kedoshim* *tihyu*,” implies that beyond the explicit norms, there is a wealth of unwritten requirements, in order to ensure that one lives a life of holiness. He continues:

Hence the specified total prohibitions are followed by a general exhortation of restraint, even in things permitted: limiting intercourse… to the fulfillment of the precept of reproduction; refraining from excessive wine-drinking — indeed the nazirite is called “holy” by the Torah — and pondering the ills of drunkenness, as exemplified by the stories of Noach and Lot… One must also shun gluttony and unseemly talk, as the verse states, “And every mouth speaks obscenity” (*Yeshayahu* 9:16), in order to attain purity…

The Ramban concludes his remarks on this verse by indicating that this is not the only place in the Torah where, after mentioning a series of laws, the Torah issues a general statement to ensure that not only the letter of the law is fulfilled, but the spirit as well. One example he brings is *Devarim* 6:18, the requirement to do the right and the good.

We have seen in previous lessons how this verse directs one to ensure that all of his interpersonal actions maintain the spirit of God’s desire for upright behavior. Evidently, the requirement of *“Kedoshim tihyu”* reflects one’s responsibility to maintain the spirit of ritual laws and *mitzvot bein adam le-atzmo,* laws between man and himself. In order for an individual to maintain control over his desires and to succeed in his ritual requirements, he must develop a sanctified personality. It is this personality that will enable him to regulate his behavior and not to be tempted to ignore the spirit while maintaining the letter of the law. This is how the Ramban interprets the dictum (*Yevamot* 20a) “Sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you.”

The Ramban explains that man can develop a sanctified personality by modeling his character after God’s holiness. Sanctity is restricted to those who use the physical world but are not owned by it. The world has purpose that the Torah allows one to unlock, but only if the spirit of its teaching is maintained.

**Inculcating a Holy Character**

With the Ramban’s comments in mind, it is not surprising that a number of commentators introduce another element to the imperative of “*Kedoshim tihyu*” which is very pertinent to the interpersonal realm. In fact, both the Rambam and the Ramban cite *“Kedoshim tihyu”* as an imperative in line with the all-important directive (*Devarim* 28:9) of following the ways of God (see lesson #06). Indeed, this idea already appears in Midrashic sources, and it is the simple explanation of the verse: one must be holy, for God is holy.

The Rishonim list *kedusha* as one of God’s attributes that man must emulate in God: “Just as I am holy, so too you should be holy.” A number of Midrashic sources even refer to “*Kedoshim tihyu”* as an explicit requirement to emulate God’s holiness, similar to the general directive to walk in the ways of God (see *Moreh Ha-nvukhim* I, 54, Schwartz edition, fn. 35).

In one chapter in his *Moreh Ha-nvukhim*, the Rambam seems to understand *“Kedoshim tihyu”* as the basis for the directive to walk in the way of God and to emulate God’s mercy and compassion.

For the chief aim of man should be to make himself, as far as possible, similar to God: that is to say, to make his acts similar to the acts of God, or as our Sages (*Shabbat* 133b) expressed it in explaining the verse “*Kedoshim tihyu”:*  just as He is gracious, so be you also gracious; just as He is merciful, so be you also merciful. (*Moreh Ha-nvukhim* I, 54)

The Rambam seems to view walking in the ways of God and being holy like Him as expressing two sides of the same coin. The ways of God are inherently ideal, and modeling ourselves after Him serves to sanctify ourselves and our actions.

This idea may appear in the Ramban’s writings as well. In his *Iggeret* *Ha-Kodesh*, *“Kedoshim tihyu”* is used as a directive to be a shining example for the nations of the world.

It is known that servants act based upon the way they observe their masters, and He, our master, is *kadosh* with an incomparable holiness. As our Sages *z”l* explained on the verse, “And you will follow His ways” — just as He is holy, so should you be holy; just as He is compassionate, so should you be compassionate (*Sifrei Ekev* 49). Thus, all the Jewish people’s actions are modeled after the unification of God’s names, and therefore, they model their actions after God’s, as it says (*Vayikra* 11:44) “And you shall sanctify yourselves, and you will be Holy, for I, God, am holy.” Since all our actions are similar to the actions of God, it turns out that any time we do the right and the good, we sanctify His great name as it says (*Devarim* 4:8) “And which is a great nation that has righteous decrees and precepts, such as this entire Torah that I place before you today?” for through them we model ourselves after God. Conversely, if we do not act properly, we defile the name of God, as expressed in *Yoma* 86a…

Here the Ramban turns our attention to the fact that following the laws of the Torah, and walking in the ways of God are the means to achieving a life of holiness. Because this holiness is Godly, it will be apparent to all, and the nations of the world will be able to observe our actions, observe a unique sublimity, and thereby notice a unique Godly connection.

Man’s holiness involves inculcating God’s attributes through following His will, a process through which man’s character is purified. The Chinnukh (Mitzva 611) explains the rationale of what he entitles “The Precept to Emulate the Right and Good Ways of Blessed God” in a similar vein.

Our Sages of blessed memory have said, “Just as He is called ‘merciful,’ so should you be merciful; just as He is called ‘gracious,’ so should you be gracious; just as He is called ‘righteous,’ so should you be righteous;” just as He is called “holy,” so should you be holy. The theme here is entirely to convey that we should educate our spirit to behave with good actions such as these and the noble qualities by which He, Blessed be He, is described by way of metaphor, to signify that He relates toward His human beings with these good characteristics…

The Chinnukh goes on to explain that though we cannot achieve his tremendously exalted status, we can attempt to inculcate within ourselves the holy traits that express our understanding of God’s pure actions.

***“Kedoshim* *Tihyu”* in the Interpersonal Realm:**

“*Kedoshim* *tihyu”* does not only require developing a holy character. As we may see in this line as well as the directives that follow, the Torah focuses our understanding on the realms wherein the holiness imperative is most apparent. As we noted above, the directive “*Kedoshim tihyu”* introduces numerous laws, many of them interpersonal requirements.

Rav S. R. Hirsch (*Vayikra* 19:1) analyzes the order of the portions and laws, explaining how *Parashat Kedoshim* relates to the preceding portion, *Parashat Acharei Mot*:

*Parashat* *Kedoshim* follows the chapter on sexual immorality, and it outlines, in succinct principles, the character of a holy Jewish life. These are the principles of the *mishpatim* of a society built on the basis of God’s justice… This is why the chapter begins with honoring one’s parents, the cornerstone of all morality… This is also why the social commandments introduced in this chapter enjoin mandate traits of character. They train a person to be sincere and upright, brotherly and forgiving, and they base the life of the society on love of one’s fellow.

These virtues cannot be enforced by state power. Failure to practice them will not be penalized by any human court. Their prevalence in a society depends solely on the character of its members.

In his commentary to the next verse, Rav Hirsch goes one step further in defining the nature of the law of *“Kedoshim tihyu”*:

The mitzva of *“Kedoshim tihyu”* is a command to strive for the highest degree of human moral perfection… Every person is summoned to attain the highest level…

He continues to explain how this can be achieved:

*Kedusha* means to be ready and willing to perform all that is good; a person cannot attain this virtue unless his whole being is so steeped in morality that the opposite of good, i.e. the inclination to evil, no longer has a place within his being…

Indeed, much work is required of anyone seeking to attain the heights of *kedusha*. *Kedusha* is attained through mastery over all of one’s powers and faculties and over all the temptations and inclinations associated with them; in all things, one must be ready and willing to do God’s will.

How may this be accomplished? He goes on to explain that it requires practice:

As with any other art, virtuosity in this, the highest morality, can be attained only through practice — training one’s moral willpower to master the inclinations of the heart…

Rav Hirsch thereby highlights this idea of bringing *kedusha* into one's life through the positive effects of self-mastery and *middot*.

Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Derash Moshe* vol. I, p. 196) explains that the use of the word “*kedoshim*” in the interpersonal context comes to teach us that “even the commandments that deal with obligations between man and his fellow, such as honoring one’s parents and refraining from theft and robbery, must be observed because they are God’s command and not because they are improper, as the non-Jews understand them.” He explains that the role of the *mitzvot* are not only to teach man how to act, but to allow him to “change his nature and his ways in order that his body and his thoughts” are transformed.

The Torah then proceeds to enumerate the *mitzvot* which one cannot observe unless he is holy, e.g. to understand the mitzva of fearing one’s father and mother, even if he is superior to them. One must also realize that the charity due the poor is not a gift, but rightfully theirs, and if one does not give, he is robbing the poor of what is rightfully theirs. These *mitzvot* can be understood properly only if one is holy.

**Understanding of *Kedoshim* *Tihyu*:**

One cannot conclude any discussion on the topic of *“Kedoshim tihyu”* without making mention of Rav Shimon Shkop’s fascinating introduction to his masterwork, *Shaarei Yosher*. Rav Shimon Shkop explains how *“Kedoshim tihyu”* is a fundamental tenet of the Torah’s outlook on interpersonal relations. He begins by explaining that by God’s creating man *be-tzelem* *Elokim*, in His image, He implanted within man the desire to do good for others. This, Rav Shimon Shkop maintains, stands at the heart of *“Kedoshim tihyu”*.

Blessed shall be the Creator, and exalted shall be the Maker, Who created us in His image and in the likeness of His structure and planted eternal life within us, so that our greatest desire should be to do good to others, to individuals and to the masses, now and in the future, in imitation of the Creator (as it were). For everything He created and formed was according to His Will, Blessed be He, [that is] only to be good to the creations. So too His Will is that we walk in His ways, as it says “And you will follow His ways.” This means that we, the select of what He made, must constantly hold as our purpose the sanctification of our physical and spiritual powers for the good of the many, according to our abilities. In my opinion, this whole concept is included in God’s *mitzva* “Be holy, [for I am Holy].”

He makes reference to the aforementioned explanation of the Ramban:

The Midrash(*Vayikra* *Rabba* 24:9) explains God’s thoughts behind this verse: “Can you [truly] be like Me? This is why I continue, ‘For I am holy,’ to teach you that My Sanctity is above yours.” After all, the foundation of the *mitzva* of sanctity, as explained in Torat Kohanim, is “‘You shall be holy’ — you shall be removed.” The Ramban, in his commentary on the Torah, explains at length this notion of separation as alluded to in this *mitzva*; it is separation from excessive comfort and pleasure – even if these delectations are not prohibited to us. In one illustrative statement, he writes that it is possible for a person to “become a degenerate with the sanction of the Torah;” see his holy words there.

However, he wonders how, according to the Ramban’s explanation, the Midrash can compare God’s holiness to man, as they seem to be unconnected.

This explanation is incumbent upon us to understand. In truth, the holiness He expects of us bears some similarity to His, except that His Holiness is more general and inclusive. Still, if we say that the essential idea of the holiness He demands of us (in this *mitzva* of “*Kedoshim tihyu*”) is to distance ourselves from the permissible, how does this kind of holiness have anything to do with Him?

After asking this question, he explains the meaning of this verse somewhat differently, though still using an element of the Ramban’s idea:

And so, it appears, in my limited understanding, that this mitzvaincludes the entire foundation and root of the purpose of our lives. All of our work and effort should constantly be sanctified by doing good for the community. We should not commit any act or movement, nor receive any benefit or enjoyment, that does not have in it some element of helping another. As understood, holiness is essentially being set apart for an honorable purpose – namely, that a person straightens his path and strives constantly to make his lifestyle dedicated to the community. Then, by anything he does, even for himself, for the health of his body and soul, he may also fulfill the mitzva of being holy, for through this he can also do good for the masses. Through the good he does for himself, he can do good for the many who rely on him. However, if he derives benefit from some kind of permissible thing that is not needed for the health of his body or soul, this benefit is in opposition to holiness. In this act, he is benefiting himself (for that moment, as it seems to him), but no one else…

Consequently, this holiness is comparable to the Holiness of the Creator, to some small degree. The actions of the Holy One in all of Creation, the fact that in each and every moment He continues to cause the universe to exist — these acts are sanctified for the good of others. So too, it is He wills that our actions be constantly sanctified for the good of the community, and not for our personal benefit.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Conclusion**

The mitzva “*Kedoshim tihyu*” is clearly a fitting directive to introduce the various requirements of interpersonal behavior. To be *kadosh,* one must not only master his outward behavior but also control himself; one must transform his character to a Godly level. All too often, people think that Jews who attend to their spiritual duties neglect their moral responsibilities. The sources which we quoted indicate quite the opposite. It is only one who bases his life on God’s characteristics who sanctifies his life, and his ethical behavior reaches perfection as well.

In the next few weeks, before discussing particular *mitzvot*, we will focus on the character development that *“Kedoshim tihyu”* requires, the way we may shape our actions in order to live a life of holiness.

1. However, he continues with a caveat that will be addressed in an upcoming lesson. The principle remains that one cannot be fully holy like God, so that everything one does is directed only for the good of others; at some level one must take care of one’s own needs, which is not necessary for God.

   …Therefore, He desires only to bestow good upon His creations, but what He wants from us is different; as Rabbi Akiva teaches us, “Your life comes first” (*Bava Metzia* 62a). [Our Sages] left us a hint of it when they interpret the verse “You shall love your fellow as yourself” (*Vayikra* 19:18) in a negative sense: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your peers” (*Shabbat* 31a). In terms of obligation, it is fitting for a person to place his own good first. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)