YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

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**Shiur #30: Holiness and *Emuna*, Part I:  
A Life of Personal and Interpersonal Holiness**

**The Recipe for Holiness**

In our last lesson, we defined *emuna* and saw how fundamental a role it plays in forging the honesty and integrity needed to bring one’s inner convictions to business transactions. In this lesson – the last for this session and, at least for the time being, the last lesson in this series – we will examine how this understanding of *emuna* is spotlighted by the entire chapter of Vayikra 19, whose interpersonal *mitzvot* have been a prime subject of our lessons.

*Parashat Kedoshim* is the part of the Torah dedicated to guiding the Jew to a life of holiness. To be sure, all of the *mitzvot* are rooted in holiness and impart sanctity to those who observe them. As we say in the blessings recited on their performance, *asher kiddeshanu be-mitzvotav* – God “sanctified us with his commandments.” Nonetheless, the Torah entitles this particular chapter of *mitzvot* with the words “you shall be holy” (*Vayikra* 19:2). It is these *mitzvot* that provide the most potent formula for a life of holiness, as the Torah repeats throughout the chapter and into the next.

With the unfolding of these verses, we gain a much deeper understanding of the concept of holiness, and the scope of numerous *mitzvot* is broadened to include not only what is obviously wrong, but grey areas as well. For instance, the prohibitions against stealing and robbing are self-explanatory, but their placement in *Vayikra* 19 implies that not only is taking another’s money forbidden, but so is any form of illicitly taking from another person. One may not even steal from someone who owes him money, and some opinions even forbid stealing back one’s own possessions. Similarly, one may not engage in deceptive practices, even for a good cause. All this is included in not stealing. The Torah identifies stealing as a morally deleterious action – one that is antithetical to holiness – and therefore the nation of Israel, which must be driven by the call to holiness (see Year 1, Lessons 25–27), is prohibited in almost all instances from engaging in such behavior.

Aside from the prohibition of theft per se, *Vayikra* 19 introduces a number of additional *mitzvot* that mandate integrity in business dealings, especially where dishonesty might seem profitable. As we have seen, the Jew’s business dealings must be characterized by *emuna*: unwavering knowledge of and steadfast commitment to God, appreciation of His existence, and recognition of the basic spiritual principles by which He runs the world. Because truth and *emuna* are intimately intertwined, an obligation to behave with *emuna* is equally a call to live life by the code of truth.

Our chapter not only broadens and illuminates numerous *mitzvot*, but declares unequivocally that a holy life is not defined only by ritual obligations to God, but also by fulfillment of interpersonal obligations. The chapter brings together interpersonal and ritual requirements, sometimes in the same verse, because both are fundamental components of holiness.

In this two-part closing lesson, we will consider how *emuna*, which is so central to the character of a person oriented toward interpersonal holiness, also is the guiding principle of many ritual *mitzvot* in the chapter. In so doing, we will see how the interpersonal and the ritual are not only two necessary parts of a holy personality, but are rooted in the same core, and intertwined in more ways than one.

**You Shall Be Holy**

If *emuna* is not only belief in God, but unwavering certainty and consistency in commitment to Him, then attaining it requires development of an understanding of the way in which God runs the world, as Rambam notes in his Principles of Faith. This awareness must be accompanied by an appreciation of God’s holiness, as well as of His commandment that man model himself after God’s behavior.

Let us now revisit the introductory verses of *Vayikra* 19:

God spoke to Moshe, saying, “Speak to the entire assembly of the Israelites. You shall to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.’ ”

As Rav Avigdor Miller relates:

*Kedusha* [holiness] is in line with perfection; objects become *kodesh* [holy] when dedicated to God’s service, and similarly man can also become holy through fulfillment of God’s *mitzvot*, which endow man with a touch of God’s holiness (as indicated in the blessings made over *mitzvot* – “who has sanctified us with His commandments …”), and by studying the ways of God and endeavoring to model oneself after His ways. In *Shemoneh Esrei* we recognize God as “the Holy God,” because as we recognize and show gratitude for His perfection, we recognize that we have endless opportunities to emulate Him and shape our behavior and thoughts according to His model. We identify the Holiness of God in His Torah, as well by studying His ways that are apparent in nature and history, just as Avraham did. Recognizing the charge for holiness is also connected to Hashem our God being holy, reminds us of our intrinsic holiness, built into our very nature. (*A Kingdom of Kohanim*, p. 189)

The mitzva of being holy requires that we instill the attitudes of perfection into our personalities, and stimulate our intrinsic spiritual strengths to grow, blossom forth, and produce the fruit of which they are capable.

Being holy, though, is not only a commandment. It is also a reward to live a godly life and behave in a godlike manner. Further, since God’s existence is the only true existence in the world, as we discussed previously, only one who emulates God’s actions truly exists in this world, rather than in a world of fantasy that he builds around himself.

It is for this reason that the directive to be holy brings together many *mitzvot* that not only perfect man’s personality, but also facilitate his understanding of God.

**The Root of Emotional Connection to God**

A person with *emuna* not only can maintain integrity in business – a major theme of the chapter’s *mitzvot* – but realizes that whatever happens in life has a purpose. He uses his life to influence those who act improperly, and recognizes that love of one’s fellow Jew – not hatred or revenge (see final lessons of Year 2) – is almost always the proper response to impropriety.

Not only is this message clearly expressed by the chapter’s interpersonal *mitzvot*, but many ritual *mitzvot* scattered within it are directly related to awareness of God’s existence, the purpose of nature in general, and that of human life in particular. The chapter begins with the mitzva of Shabbat, which reflects *emuna* by attesting to God’s creation of the world. Juxtaposed to it is the mitzva to act with awe toward one’s parents, which is a means of developing a stronger connection to and appreciation of God through interaction with His direct messengers in this world (see Lesson 5 of this year).

The commandment to safeguard Shabbat is repeated in verse 30, this time appearing alongside the mitzva to act with awe toward the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. By logical extension, the midrash (*Sifra*, *Kedoshim* 3) notes, this mitzva requires us to relate to God with awe:

It is not toward the *Beit Ha-mikdash* that you exhibit awe, but rather toward Him who commanded regarding it.

The emotion of awe – *mora*, also translated as “fear” – is referenced throughout the chapter, and is accompanied by *mitzvot* that require development of the emotion of love as well, both love of fellow man and love of God. The twin emotions of love and awe of God are a crucial part of the religious fabric of a person who relates to God as a reality in his life. Yet as central as these emotions are to a religious personality, only by recognizing their relationship to *emuna* can one recognize how essential they are in the greater lesson of holiness.

As Rambam writes, seeing God’s hand in the beauty and splendor of nature is a precursor to love and fear of God:

What is the path to love and fear of Him? When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates that His infinite wisdom surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him], yearning with tremendous desire to know [God’s] great name, as David stated: “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (*Tehillim* 42:3). When he [continues] to reflect on these same matters, he will immediately recoil in awe and fear, appreciating how he is a tiny, lowly, and dark creature, standing with his flimsy, limited wisdom before Him who has perfect knowledge, as David stated (*ibid.* 8:4–5), “When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers ... [I wonder] what is man that You remember Him?” (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:2)

One who sees the hand of God throughout life responds to the knowledge of His involvement with love and awe.

**A Believer’s Perspective**

Aside from educating us about the importance of *emuna* in our lives, *Parashat Kedoshim* makes a point of defining what *emuna* is and what it is not.

One reason holiness is so intertwined with *emuna* is that a proper understanding of *emuna* reflects the essence of holiness. In our early lessons ([Year 1, Lessons 21–22](http://www.vbm-torah.org/chavero.html)) we quoted a number of sources emphasizing that the Torah’s outlook on holiness is far different than what many people think. Holiness is not to live an otherworldly existence, but to see the hand of God in the physical world, to sanctify one’s corporeal existence, to transcend – not deny – one’s worldly body.

The call to holiness thus is associated with a number of *mitzvot* that define the parameters of *emuna* and distance the individual from perspectives that may lead to a misunderstanding of God. Two of these *mitzvot* are introduced with the term, “Do not turn”:

Do not turn toward the idols (*elilim*)*,* nor shall you make graven gods for yourselves. I am the Lord, your God. (verse 4)

Do not turn toward the *ovot* and the *yide’onim*;[[1]](#footnote-1) do not seek to become defiled thereby. I am the Lord, your God. (verse 31)

The parallel initial and final parts of these verses present two different ways in which people might distance themselves from God and from sanctity.

Rav Hirsch (to verse 4) provides background to the first of the verses:

*Elilim* are powers that deny. This constitutes the heathen conception of god, for the gods are powers that are hostile to man and hinder his success. When a person relies only on himself, he senses everywhere the limits of his own power; he senses that, in order to fulfill his aspirations and desires, he is everywhere at war with higher powers, and that he must struggle against them or flatter them so that they accede to his requests. This outlook and this need – more than anything else – produced the heathen gods and their cults. Even today, souls that become estranged from Jewish belief arrive, as a result, at heathen beliefs and practices.

Such notions must have no place in your conception of God. Do not direct your thoughts to divine beings that are hostile to man and his aspirations. Do not even consider believing in their existence.

As for the molten gods banned by the end of the verse, Rav Hirsch explains that these are protective gods considered necessary to protect man from harmful gods. More generally, though, “graven gods” includes all idols – all gods subjectively manufactured by man out of moldable material. It is not man who forms God, nor is man to “imagine and conceive gods out of himself. Rather, he is to comprehend and conceive himself out of God, for God is not only One who is not an *elil* … hostile to man and his existence … Rather, His eternal existence is the source of our transient existence.”

Thus the role of this verse is to prevent man from falsifying his perception of God and consequently looking for physical, subjective objects of worship.

The context of the parallel mitzva at the end of the chapter is the directive to maintain an accurate perception of God, which naturally is an essential aspect of *emuna*. It comes shortly after the prohibition of *nichush* (verse 26) – activity based upon superstitious beliefs and the assumption that events of no consequence can influence one’s life. In introducing this prohibition, Rav Hirsch explains:

Scripture now proceeds to those activities that relate to the human body, regarding which Scripture seeks to awaken … awareness, for this is the whole purpose of Jewish life: to keep us from falling into a lifeless routine, or thoughtlessness; to educate us to perform our actions with awareness and attentiveness. This holiness grasps every opportunity to awaken in our minds the awareness of those truths that form the basis of what we are and what we are meant to be. In light of these truths, we are to evaluate our actions and aims, for the sake of attaining our moral purpose, for a man is not worthy of his name unless he examines his ways, and to the thinking man, there is nothing that is insignificant.

Rav Hirsch notes that even the prohibition of rounding the hair on one’s head, though a matter of outward appearance, must be performed with an eye to holiness. Rambam explains that a man is not permitted to round the corners of his hair because this was the practice of idol worshippers, and our pursuit of holiness requires that we distance ourselves from their ways. (Also see Rav Hirsch’s explanation of the spiritual harm caused by the practice.)

The second mitzva not to turn (“Do not turn toward the *ovot* and the *yide’onim* …”) warns the Jew not to seek answers from spirits and demons, describing this activity as an active, conscious act of self-defilement: “do not seek to become defiled thereby.” Such impurity is the diametrical opposite of the holiness of this chapter. Rather than search out spirits, the Torah continues, we should seek out the aged and scholarly, rising to show respect and honor for them, as they will be able to guide us on a path of true spirituality and holiness.

The next chapter continues in this vein, detailing the extent of the immoral behavior liable to be practiced by one who refuses to recognize that “I am the Lord, your God” (the refrain at the end of many of the verses in these chapters), including child sacrifice and lewd, disgusting sexual behaviors. For this reason the chapter twice commands us to be holy – to develop a true understanding of holiness, not one that leads to human sacrifice.

**Recognizing God in the Physical World**

In defining the nature of holiness, we pointed out that sanctity is not expressed by denying one’s physical existence, but by sanctifying it. Thus a number of *mitzvot* in *Vayikra* 19 remind man to aspire to holiness within earthly existence.

This may be why the observance of Shabbat is mentioned twice in the chapter. Alsheikh (to verse 26) notes that part of the purpose of Shabbat is to remind man that God does not simply dwell apart from humanity in the heavens, and there is no need to go to the soothsayers and necromancers of the world in order to seek a relationship with Him. Shabbat, which testifies to God’s creation of the world, is the disproof of the soothsaying worldview.

Alsheikh then cites the account (*Sanhedrin* 65b) of how Rabbi Akiva demonstrated to Turnus Rufus, the Roman governor, that the special status of Shabbat can be proven even to a nonbeliever: on Shabbat, necromancers cannot exercise any control over dead spirits with which they try to communicate. From the Torah’s prohibition of such practices, it is clear that they are antithetical to what Shabbat represents.

The chapter also extends the sanctity of involvement in the physical world to fruit trees (verses 23 ff.), due to the need to ensure that even the act of eating is performed with holiness. We are to wait three years before consuming the yield of our fruit trees; eat the produce in sanctity in Jerusalem the fourth year; and only then, from the fifth year, eat the fruit wherever we like. This discussion is followed by another prohibition to enforce self-control in eating: “Do not eat with the blood” (verse 26). The Gemara derives a number of prohibitions from this verse, but as Rav Hirsch explains,

The concept that is common to them all is that one must not eat under the influence of animal life … Eating, per se, belongs to the physical aspect of man. The act of eating, then, is likely to impress upon our minds the idea of man’s relation to the animal. Therefore, when one is eating, it is necessary to call to mind man’s duty and moral purpose. Only thus is it possible to elevate the act of eating to the sphere of moral, human action. Certainly, then, one should not eat under any influence that calls to mind the opposite and causes one to lose sight of man’s moral freedom.

The prohibition against wounding oneself on the death of a dear one (verse 28) carries a similar message. A bereaved person is liable to tear at his own body, rather than his clothing, if he views the death of a loved one as negating his own existence. A Jew is rabbinically obligated to tear his clothing over the death of a relative, in recognition of “the tear that the death of the departed has made in the survivor’s closest surroundings, in his intimate world” (Rav Hirsch), but self-mutilation would signal a breakdown of the survivor’s own body and existence.

In fact, the loss of one who meant a great deal to us must spur us on to redoubled vital energy, so that we can help fill the gap that death has left in the work of serving God (*ibid.*)

Rambam gives a similar rationale for refraining from excessive mourning:

A person should not become excessively broken-hearted because of a person’s death, as is stated: “Do not weep for a dead man and do not shake your head because of him” (*Yirmiyahu* 22:10) – this means not to weep excessively – for death is the way of the world, and a person who causes himself grief because of the way of the world is a fool.

What should one do? Weep for three days, eulogize for seven, and observe the restrictions on cutting hair and the other five matters for thirty days. (*Hilkhot Eivel* 13:12)

Rambam does not discount the importance of mourning and recognizing one’s loss:

Whoever does not mourn over his dead in the manner our sages commanded is cruel. Instead, one should be fearful, worry, examine his deeds, and repent. (*ibid.* 13:13)

Rather, Rambam tells us that the loss should be felt against the backdrop of the purpose of life. Living life with *emuna* allows man to cope with grief and mourning, because amidst the difficulty man can recognize God’s hand in the bigger picture.

Rav Hirsch adds that a person whose approach to life centers on God will understand that honoring the dead is not to be achieved through self-mutilation or by throwing away one’s own life:

It is not an act of homage to the deceased, but a crime against God, Who decreed the death of the departed, for it is He Who commands life upon you; He wills that you live and serve Him – until he calls you too to your eternal home. Every fiber of your physical existence is sacred to Him.

**External Effects of a Lack of Inner Sanctity**

The message of the holiness and purpose in a person’s life is further reinforced by the next verse, which discusses the holiness of the human body:

Do not profane your daughter by causing her to act unfaithfully, so that the land not act unfaithfully and the land not be filled with lewdness.

Beyond the direct effects of a person’s actions on his or her body, depraved actions affect one’s surroundings as well. A life of defiling behavior does impact the balance of a person’s *mitzvot* and sins, but also affects his character. A person who refuses to live up to the dictates of holiness profanes his personality and desecrates his innate holiness, while simultaneously damaging his surroundings.

Rav Hirsch (to verse 30) explains the Torah’s warning that sinful human actions would affect the agricultural output of the Land of Israel:

The earth, as an astronomical body, has a cosmic meaning, but the earth’s surface, which bears the earth’s fruit, is called *adama*, and the *adama* is wedded to man, *adam.* If man betrays his moral duty, then the land too will betray man. If man is careless with the choice fruit of his world, viz. the seed and fruit of man, the land too will withhold and spoil its fruit.

This relationship between man and earth is expressed from the moment of Creation. In his commentary there (*Bereishit* 1:26), Rav Hirsch takes issue with the common assumption that the term *adam* is derived from *adama*, asserting that the opposite is the case:

On the contrary, *adama* is derived from *adam*. Further, man is not defined by his earthliness, for his earthly origin is what he has in common with the other creatures, whereas the uniqueness of man is that he is not created entirely from the earth. It is the breath of God, breathed into his very earthly frame, that makes him man.

Rav Hirsch argues that this in fact is the basis of God’s announcement in *Bereishit* (*ibid.*), “Let us make man …”

Man is the greatest manifestation of the divine in this world, and through Him God’s presence is revealed on Earth (this is the nature of relationship of the word *adam* to the color *adom*, as red light is the least refracted of all light). Similarly, *adam* is similar to the word *hadom*, footstool, as man is the agent and bearer of God’s glory on Earth.

In the second part of this lesson, we will see how the combination in *Parashat Kedoshim* of obligations to God with interpersonal *mitzvot* represents an eternal message of the fundamental path to true holiness.

1. Forms of pagan sorcery; see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)