

BECOMING HOLY

by Shlomo Katz

Parshios Acharei Mos & Kedoshim

Becoming Holy

Volume 26, No. 27

Sponsored by the Rutstein family in memory of father Mendy Rutstein (Menachem Mendel Shmuel ben Nachman Halevi a"h) and grandmother Bessie Rutstein (Pesha Batya bat R' Zemach a"h)

The Midrash Rabbah notes that the opening of Parashat Kedoshim, the second parashah we read this week, restates the Aseret Ha'dibrot / Ten Commandments, albeit in a different order. There it says, "I am Hashem, your Elokim," and here (repeatedly), "I am Hashem, your Elokim." There, "You shall not have other gods," and here (19:4), "Molten gods you shall not make for yourselves." There, "You shall not take the Name of Hashem in vain," and here (19:12), "You shall not swear falsely by My Name." There, "Keep the day of Shabbat," and here (19:3), "My Sabbaths you shall observe." There, "Honor your father and your mother," and here (19:3), "Your father and mother you shall revere." [The midrash continues, showing parallels between our parashah and the second half of the Aseret Ha'dibrot.]

R' David Zvi Hoffman z"l (1843-1921; Rector of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin) writes: The first five of the Aseret Ha'dibrot are listed in Parashat Kedoshim with the last two (honoring parents and Shabbat) appearing first because, to reach the highest level of kedushah / holiness [the subject of Parashat Kedoshim], one must start on the bottom rung. Honoring parents has been equated with honoring Hashem, and in order to reach the stage where one obeys Hashem unconditionally, one must start with honoring one's parents. One who would never commit an unseemly act in front of his best friend doesn't hesitate to do that thing when Hashem is watching. However, by honoring and fearing parents, one can develop the awe of Hashem. One should reflect that, just as one's parents watch over his every step, so Hashem is watching his every deed. (Peirush Al Sefer Vayikra)

"Aharon shall place lots upon the two he-goats--one lot 'for Hashem' and one lot 'for Azazel.'" (16:8)

The mitzvah to kill a sa'ir / goat outside of the Bet Hamikdash on Yom Kippur in parallel with the sa'ir that is offered as a chatat / sin offering in the Bet Hamikdash undoubtedly is one of the most difficult commandments to understand. R' Shlomo Wolbe z"l (1914-2005; a leading teacher of mussar) offers the following explanation, based on the Torah commentary of R' Menachem Recanti z"l (Italy; circa 1250-1310):

When a person sins, he intermingles different forces that Hashem created for different purposes. In particular, he takes abilities that he was given for purposes of kedushah / holiness, and he uses them for tumah / impurity.

Atonement for a sin involves reversing that process, i.e., making a clear break between kedushah and tumah. This is what is highlighted by taking two identical goats and offering one as a korban while throwing the second off of a cliff. (Shiurei Chumash [unpublished manuscript])

R' Recanti (see above) adds to his explanation cited above: This is alluded to by the meeting between Yaakov and Esav, at which Esav said (33:15), "Let me assign to you some of the people who are with me." Esav wanted his people to mingle with Yaakov's family, but, the verse continues, Yaakov rebuffed him. The next verse relates, "So Esav started back that day on his way toward Se'ir." At this point, Yaakov made a clean break from Esav. [Note the similarity between sa'ir / goat and Esav's land, Se'ir.] (Peirush Ha'Recanti)

[Ed. note: Perhaps this explains why we say in the Pesach Haggadah, "He (Hashem) gave Esav the mountain of Se'ir, and Yaakov and his sons descended to Egypt." Why mention Esav in the Haggadah? Because the Haggadah tells the story of how Yaakov's family was enslaved in Egypt and then freed, all in preparation for receiving the Torah and attaining a special holy status. Esav's departure for Se'ir and the resulting separation from Yaakov was a step in that process, as explained above.]

"You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge against the members of your people . . ." (19:18)

The Gemara (Yoma:23a) explains: If one says to another, "Lend me your sickle," and he replies, "No!" and the next day the second one says to the first one, "Lend me your hatchet," and he retorts, "I am not going to lend it to you, just as you refused to lend me your sickle"--that is revenge. What is "bearing a grudge"? If one says to another, "Lend me your hatchet," and he replies "No!" and on the next day, the second one says to the first one, "Lend me your sickle," and he replies, "Here it is; I am not like you, who would not lend to me"--this is called "bearing a grudge" because he retains enmity in his heart although he does not actually take revenge. [Until here from the Gemara]

Rabbeinu Yaakov ben Asher z"l (the Ba'al Ha'Turim; circa 1269-1343) asks: Why does the Torah address itself to the second person, and not to the first one, who was too stingy to lend out his belongings? He answers: There is no mitzvah to lend one's belongings if one is not so inclined. The second person, however, is not stingy; he suffers from hatred, and that the Torah cares about.

Others explain, Rabbeinu Yaakov continues, that the punishment of the stingy person is so severe that the Torah does not see the need to warn him about it explicitly. Specifically, the Gemara (Yoma 11b) says that the punishment for stinginess is tzara'at. (Peirush Ha'Tur Ha'aroch)

Pirkei Avot

Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa says, "Anyone whose **יראתו** / fear of his sin precedes his wisdom, his wisdom will endure." (Chapter 3)

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (the Maharal of Prague; died 1609) writes: Don't ask why the mishnah says, "Fear of his sin," rather than, "**יראתו מן החטא**" / "his fear of sin." This is not a question, for every person is ready to sin, as it is written (Kohelet 7:20), "There is no man on earth so wholly righteous that he always does good and never sins." Therefore it says, "Fear of his sin"--i.e., the sin that he is "prepared" for. (Derech Chaim)

R' Shlomo Wolbe z"l (see facing page) explains this in light of the commentary of R' Eliyahu z"l (1720-1797; the Vilna Gaon) to the verse (Mishlei 14:2), "One who walks in his uprightness fears Hashem . . ." The Vilna Gaon writes:

Every person must go on the path that is suitable for him. Different people have different middot / traits. Thus, one person must guard against a sin that he is susceptible to, while another person is not susceptible that sin. In turn, the second person is susceptible to a particular sin to which the first person is not susceptible. Thus the verse says, "One who walks in his uprightness . . ."--i.e., the particular path of uprightness that is suitable for him. Sometimes, one person's path will seem wrong to the masses; that's because they don't know what a specific individual needs. One who nevertheless "walks in his uprightness" is one who "fears Hashem." [Until here from the Vilna Gaon].

R' Wolbe adds: This is what the Maharal means as well: Every person is "prepared" by his nature for certain sins, and it is those sins in particular that a person must fear. This means, R' Wolbe continues, that the foundation of character improvement is to know oneself; there is no one-size-fits-all approach to improving one's middot. It also means that adopting specific practices (above and beyond what halachah requires) just because one sees others doing so is pointless, since one person may need those particular stringencies while another does not. (AleI Shur I p.133)

R' Itamar Schwartz shlita (Yerushalayim; author of the popular work, B'lvavi Mishkan Evneh) writes

similarly: In any field in which a person engages, he makes a point to understand the capabilities and limitations of the tools and implements he is given to work with. If a person was given a nefesh / soul with which to accomplish a mission in this world, does it not make sense to get to know that soul? For some reason, he writes, we spend billions of dollars to explore outer space but make relatively little effort to explore inside ourselves. A person must know that any effort he makes to work on himself before he knows himself is destined to fail. (Da Et Atzmecha p.3)

Letters from our Sages

The letter below was written by R' Moshe Shick z"l ("Maharam Schick"; 1807-1879), considered one of the leading Hungarian rabbis and roshei yeshiva of his time. It was sent to his son-in-law-to-be, and is published in Igrot Maharam Schick, no.17.

Life and peace and all good things to the young man, the chatan, destined to be my son-in-law, distinguished in Torah and fear [of Heaven], the diligent one, Yaakov Halevi, may his light shine.

I received your first and second letters. From your first letter, I see that a son was born in your family. Mazal tov to you and to your father's house. . .

In your second letter, I saw things for which it is appropriate to rebuke you. You wrote there that you were thinking about divrei Torah as you were falling asleep. It is not appropriate for a person to publicly announce the good things that he does. In the work Binah L'ittim [II:32], the author explains the verse (Mishlei 14:23), "In all toil there will be gain, but talk of the lips only brings loss," to refer to speaking about the good that one does, except where his intention is so that others may learn from him. This is written in Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 565:6 [where it says that a person who observes an optional fast day and publicizes it is punished]. How can a thinking person take pride in his writings and his deeds when he knows his own shortcomings? Further, it is not a wise thing to do, for others may not believe [a person who describes his own good deeds] and will assume he is seeking glory. Also, when one person sends divrei Torah to another person, surely he sends him the best that he has to offer, for a merchant does not show his worst merchandise first. Therefore, how could you write that you were sending me what popped into your head as you were drifting off to sleep, thoughts that you did not critically analyze or toil over? If only everything that a person did analyze and toil over would be true and good! . . .

These are the words of one who writes and signs with love. May Hashem be with you. From your father-in-law-to-be, who seeks your welfare.

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Torah.org](https://www.torah.org) start with

5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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