

IN HILLEL'S FOOTSTEPS

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"You shall be holy, for I am Holy, HaShem your G-d." [Lev. 19:2]

We are commanded to emulate G-d, by being holy. Yet why is it necessary for the verse to conclude "HaShem your G-d" - what purpose does this serve? Do we not know Who it is Who is giving the command?

Our Sages say that one might think that we should be holy _exactly_ like G-d. So the verse says "I am Holy, HaShem your G-d," to remind us that G-d remains distinct, unique. His Holiness is greater than ours, so we cannot be exactly like Him. But this answer itself causes us to question: who could even imagine otherwise? How could a person think that he could truly emulate any of G-d's attributes, much less his transcendent Holiness?

Rather, the Sages teach us that we cannot attempt to be holy in precisely the same _way_ as G-d. G-d transcends the physical world, and thus His Sanctity is transcendent as well. We, on the other hand, find ourselves within the physical world. Our mission is to achieve holiness under these circumstances; our holiness must express itself in the concrete, in day to day life.

The world thinks of "holiness" as some abstract concept, often involving a guru sitting atop a mountain, withdrawn from the world, fasting and meditating to the point that the walls could cave in around him without distraction. This is not the Jewish definition of "Kedushah", of holiness.

On the contrary, the Torah commands us to rejoice on the holidays, and our Sages say in the Talmud that "rejoicing" involves meat and wine! This does not mean that every person is necessarily obligated to consume meat and wine, but that they do not conflict with holiness when used appropriately. Thus we see that holiness does not involve asceticism, disavowal of all wealth or pleasure.

What, then, is holiness? It is not easily defined, but can be recognized - especially in interpersonal conduct. A 'tzaddik', a righteous individual, is a scholar - but one who is recognized for charitable pursuits, for helping others, and for being extremely difficult to anger.

The Talmud tells the story of the sage Hillel, and of a man who wagered with his friend that he could anger the great scholar. So the protagonist of the story (perhaps more accurately described as the antagonist) went and stood outside the bathhouse on the eve of Yom Kippur, as Hillel was busy with preparations for the holiday. He called out "who here is Hillel?" Then, when the sage emerged, he

asked him an extremely silly and non-urgent question.

Hillel answered the man with great patience. The fellow then permitted the sage to return to the bathhouse, and presumably remove half his clothing, before calling him out a second time for a similar purpose - and again, Hillel was patient in the extreme, and answered him gently.

This went on yet a third time, at which point the man confessed to Hillel that he had now lost a considerable sum for failing to arouse the leader's ire. Hillel responded that it was better that fortunes should be lost than that Hillel should become angry!

This is the holiness we seek. Not a person who is withdrawn from the world, but someone who achieves perfection both in his interaction with G-d, and in his interaction with his fellow man. May we merit to follow in Hillel's footsteps!

[Parts of this Dvar Torah come from Rabbi Grunblatt, Rabbi of the Queens Jewish Center and Professor of Judaic Studies at Touro College.]