

YOU SHALL SANCTIFY YOURSELVES AND YOU WILL BE HOLY

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You Shall Sanctify Yourself and You Will be Holy¹

The coda to the *parshah* of forbidden foods is as mysterious as it is elegant. "I am Hashem your G-d, and you shall sanctify yourselves and you will be holy, because I am holy." This enigmatic formula is important enough to appear, in one form or another, in regard to other areas, such as forbidden relations and *avodah zarah*.

Why do these very different subjects all require this formula? Why does the formula itself include an apparent tautology - you shall sanctify yourselves and you will be holy? Why does the Torah provide a reason for the commandment to be holy ("because I am holy"), and how does that reason explain anything at all? It seems to say that if G-d is holy, we should become as well, since it is proper to become what He is. But can human beings become what He is?

Ramban provides the insight to unravel the mystery. Where the Torah's attaches the prohibition of eating from an animal that is a *terefah*, to the words "People of holiness you shall be," Ramban² comments, "I desire that you be people of holiness, so that it you will be fit for you to cling to Me Who is holy. Therefore, do not make yourselves abominable by eating detestable things." In other words, Hashem desires that Jews cling to him, and provides guidance to us to avoid foods which result in the soul become coarser, and which block the acquisition of holiness.

The *seforim hakedoshim* provide the larger context to this thought. The ultimate purpose of all mitzvos, they emphasize, is to bring an individual to *devekus*. Should a person observe the entirety of Torah and mitzvos but fail to attach himself to HKBH, he is deficient in achieving the purpose of all the mitzvos.

This, then, is the fuller meaning of our passage: Sanctify yourselves by eschewing all things that distance you from Me. Avoid all things that distance a person from Me, that make you coarser and more material, that lead you away from Me, rather than assist you in clinging to me. You shall be holy because I am holy. By reason of that holiness, I cannot abide things that oppose *kedushah* and distance people from Me; in order to refine yourselves to the utmost, you are to eat only refined foods.

As we stated above, the Torah employs a similar formula regarding *kedushah* in regard to both illicit relations and *avodah zarah*. Both of these transgressions inevitably drive a person further away from

Hashem, distancing him from the goal of intense closeness to Him.

The centrality of *devekus* in the mitzvah system leads to a different understanding of a familiar story. The potential convert who came to Hillel asked for a synopsis of Torah that he could absorb while standing on one leg. Hillel accepted the challenge, and offered his famous summary: What is distasteful to you, do not do *lechavrecha*.³ The Magid saw in this last word a form of *lechavrusecha*, i.e. your ability to associate and bond with Hashem. Hillel told his interlocutor that the purpose of Torah, simply put, was to create real attachment between Man and his Creator. All the rest is commentary.

Another passage in Ramban offers yet greater insight into this principle. At the beginning of *Kedoshim*⁴ he famously warns us not to become "disgusting with the sanction of the Torah." The exhortation towards *kedushah* comes after a detailed listing of illicit relations. The message is clear. Beyond the restrictions that are legally fixed and normative to all, the Torah expects us to firmly integrate *kedushah* into all our behavior, including activities that are permissible, and violate no clear stricture. We note that the same structure applies to our *parshah*. The statement about *kedushah* serves as an abstract of the section on forbidden foods. It is placed, however, precisely in the same position as the *kedushah* passage attached to the section on illicit relations - right at the end. Here, too, the implication is that we are to understand that the complex system of forbidden foods is only a beginning, a platform common to the entire community. Besides the strictly forbidden, we must find ways to elevate, to sanctify the permissible food that we eat as well.

Chazal⁵ uncover another element in the verse that provides the title to this piece. "When a person sanctifies himself a little, they [i.e. the heavenly hosts] sanctify him a great deal." The *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* tells us⁶ that forbidden foods defile us even when consumed inadvertently. Their potency leaves their mark even without any intent to transgress. A person will not be punished for inadvertent transgression as he would for deliberate transgression, but his *neshamah* will be marred nonetheless. This is the "great" sanctification that is provided by heaven. When a person is careful to consciously avoid vile matters that are within his power, Heaven protects him against things that are not within his power.

Alternatively, the *berachah* the gemara speaks of can be understood in the light of the distinction the Ramchal makes⁷ between the levels of *taharah* and *kedushah*. The former deals with completely avoiding anything with negative impact; the latter turns pedestrian objects into holy ones, enabling all ordinary objects and events to bring *nachas ruach*, as it were, to HKBH. Ramchal cautions us that this level cannot be attained by us directly. Rather, we can only begin the process. Its completion is a Divine gift to us. This, too, is part of "You shall sanctify yourselves and you will be holy." When you begin the journey towards *kedushah*, Hashem will carry you the rest of the way.

Chazal⁸ apply a familiar pasuk to eating the *korban Pesach*. "The ways of Hashem are straight. The righteous walk in them, and sinners stumble over them."⁹ Two people partake of a *korban Pesach*, side by side. One eats for the sake of Heaven; the other gorges himself. The former is the *tzadik* of the verse, while the latter is the sinner. Why do they apply this verse specifically to eating the Pesach, rather than to any and all eating, if everything can be transmuted to *kedushah*? What Chazal are saying, it would seem, is that it is hard to conceive of a greater sin than spurning an opportunity to eat the very food in front of him for the sake of the mitzvah of Pesach, instead turning his eating into the opposite of the experience for which it was designed!

A Jew must understand that he is obligated to believe that Hashem's announcement, "You will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,"¹⁰ means that he has the ability to get there. A Jewish *neshamah* is likened to a diamond. If it falls into the mud, its internal luster is never lost. You must merely lift it up, remove the dirt, and it will shine as brilliantly as before.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom pgs. 44-48

² Shemos 22:30

³ Usually translated (following Rashi Shabbos 31A) as either "to your (human) friend," or "to your (Divine) Friend."

⁴ Vayikra 19:2

⁵ Yoma 39A

⁶ Vayikra 11:43

⁷ Mesilas Yescharim, ch. 26

⁸ Nazir 23A

⁹ Hoshea 14:10

¹⁰ Shemos 19:6