

AVODAH: KEDUSHAH IS NOT OPTIONAL

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

***Kedushah* is Not Optional¹**

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It makes no sense. Why do people who pride themselves on meticulousness in observance, people who take upon themselves all sorts of stringencies in the practice of the law, nonetheless ignore a Torah precept of monumental consequence?

Kedoshim tihiyu is not ignored because of its obscurity. People readily understand its implications. On the one hand, it means avoiding all things that are the opposite of *kedushah*. On the other, it means not moving away from something, but towards something else: making the changes towards becoming a living essence of holiness. (The conclusion of the verse - "because I am Hashem your G-d" more than alludes to this. You are to become holy like I am holy, not merely in the avoidance of the unholy.)

kedushah is the source and foundation of the Jewish people, and a critical part of its unique loftiness; it is its spiritual foundation.

The Zohar[2] takes note of the three-fold use of the word *kodesh* in a single verse: "You are to sanctify yourselves and you shall be holy, for I am holy." [3] The Zohar sees in this an allusion to different forms of *kedushah* in the worlds of *asiyah*, *yetzirah*, and *beriah*. [4] These worlds mediate our actions, our spirit, and our souls. Practically, this means that we can find places for *kedushah* in our deeds, in our wants and desires, and in bringing to light the bond between our *neshamos* and their source in the upper worlds.

If *kedushah* is so basic and so important, why is its pursuit so neglected? The culprit seems to be a common and toxic misconception. *kedushah* is all about lofty elevation, and so many people see themselves - quite realistically - as so distant from this kind of attainment, that they see any special quest for holiness as remote and irrelevant.

This is a tragic error. *Kedoshim tihiyu* is a mitzvah just like all others. It applies to all Jews, regardless of their spiritual standing. It most certainly applies to Jews whose *avodah* is stuck in the world of *asiyah*, the lowest of them all, still doing battle with himself regarding activities that are completely forbidden. Were a person to argue that a particular mitzvah of the Torah was not relevant to him, we

would brand him a heretic. Why should we assume that *kedoshim tihyu* is any different?

How can a person who is mired in his lowly desires supposed to approach the pursuit of the holiness, when he is so out of step with its nature? The answer is quite simple. The mitzvah is in the attempt. A person must do whatever he can do. What he achieves thereafter is irrelevant. The fulfillment of the mitzvah is in trying one's best.

Mesilas Yesharim[5] explains the subtle difference between *taharah* and *kedushah*. The former involves escaping from all contaminants. Because all material pursuits - even those entirely removed from any tinge of prohibition or impropriety - carry with them a shadow of contamination, of pulling the person towards his material facets, the *tahores* shews any involvement with them, unless absolutely compelled to utilize them for his own survival.

The *kadosh*, however, does not run from things of this world, but warmly accepts them. The *tahor* still needs to escape their appeal and their downward pull; the *kadosh* treasures each one as he elevates them, transforming their physicality into. The *tahor* eats little so that the excess will not weigh him down; the *kadosh* turns his food into a *korban*. Both of them are part of the mitzvah of *kedoshim tihyu*, which Ramban identifies with the epigram "sanctify yourself with what is permissible to you." This implies that a person will not be "gluttonous with the permission of the Torah" - he will avoid excess. But it also implies that he will take the objects that are permissible to him, and sanctify them by elevating them.

The Torah exhorts us to *kedushah* three times in *Parshas Kedoshim*, in reference to forbidden relations, *avodah zarah*, and forbidden foods. These references underscore three areas in which we need to strive for *kedushah*. The connection to arayos is self-explanatory. The reference to *avodah zarah* instructs us to seek *kedushah* in our system of beliefs. There are notions that we are not forbidden to harbor, yet diminish our pure and untarnished *emunah*. *kedushah* implies keeping them at arm's length. The reference to food tells us to elevate the way we eat, even when our food products are kosher.

Three distinct sources of *kedushah* are available to us from which to draw. *kedushah* resides in all our mitzvos, and in the Torah we learn. (We make mention of this *kedushah* in the *berachah* we recite: "*asher kidshanu*" - Who has sanctified us.) Special times and seasons, like Shabbos and the *yomim tovim* are fonts of special *kedushah* available to us. (Here, too, we mention that *kedushah* in the *berachah* that accompanies these times: "*mekadesh Yisrael ve-ha-zaminim*" - Who sanctifies Yisrael and the festival seasons. This means that HKBH sanctifies us by allowing us to draw *kedushah* from the special appointed times.)

The third source is the most onerous. We find *kedushah* in the hard work of breaking our lusts and desires. (Yesod Ha-*avodah* urged people to actively resist their wants and longings - even when no trace of sin was involved. We become masters of ourselves by resisting those inner voices that make demands upon us.) Our individual will is the fortress of the *yetzer hora*, the place he can call

home. *kedushah*, on the other hand, is the dominion of the soul from Above. The will and the soul are locked in perpetual conflict for supremacy. When one rises, the other falls.

Curiously, the standard works that enumerate the 613 mitzvos fail to include *kedoshim tihiyu*. Why is this all-important requirement not formally part of the inventory of Divine demands upon us? We might find an answer to this question in the Ran's approach[6] to the *akeidah*. Hashem begins His speech to Avraham, asking him to slaughter Yitzchok, with the words *kach na*. [7] Chazal[8] tell us that the word *na* has the effect of making this a request. This means, says the Ran, that Hashem never instructed Avraham to slaughter his son, so much as revealed to him that He would be pleased if Avraham would do so. Avraham faced no Divine retribution if he failed to comply. He acted completely volitionally, only to bring satisfaction *kivayachol*, to his Creator. The idea behind *kedoshim tihiyu* is the same. It differentiates between those who submit to the Will of their Creator, and those who love Him so much that they strive in everything they do to please Him. It is therefore in a class to itself, and not cut of the same cloth as the 613 mitzvos.

In the final analysis, we are still plagued by a crucial question. If striving for *kedushah* is mandatory for all of us, how can its requirements be met by those of us who still find ourselves stuck in the clutches of the *yetzer hora*, whose *yetzer* does not let up, and allows us no peace? The Torah provides a model for us. We know that there are sections of the Torah ordered precisely as we would expect them to be. At the same time, we are aware of sections that are presented in the text out of the order in which they chronologically occurred.

The same holds true of our *avodah*. The active mitzvos allow for no change or innovation. They must be performed according to the specification of halachah, without deviation. Nothing else will do.

The mitzvos that apply to the inner person also follow a prescribed order. The requirements here, however, is not as exacting. At times, a person can and should perform these mitzvos out of their assigned order. While we generally advocate *sur meira* before the *asei tov* - desisting from evil before working on the performance of the good -there can be exceptions. A person must sometimes make progress by jumping over obstacles, and - in what otherwise would be considered a premature step - reaching for a higher level. In chassidus, this approach is called "over and over." When a person faces obstacles in his progress, when that progress in fighting the attraction of *aveirah* proceeds too slowly, he must sometimes jump to a higher level of performance of the good.

How can this work? The explanation is quite simple. Sometimes, taking up residence on a higher plane gives a person the needed perspective to look down upon the evil within him, to detest it, and thereby give him the resolve to do something about it.

The view is indeed different at the top, and we do not all arrive at the same place. Setting off on the ascent, however, is expected of all of us.

1. Based on Nesivos Shalom, vol. 2, pgs. 122-126
 2. 3:190
 3. Vayikra 11:44
 4. Taken from the three verbs for "creating" at the beginning of Bereishis, they are three of the four spiritual "worlds" referred to in much kabbalistic thought.
 5. Chapter 26
 6. Derashos Ha-Ran 6
 7. Bereishis 22:2
 8. Cited by Rashi, ibid.
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