

# FOR I AM HOLY

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

*"You shall be holy (19:2)."* It sounds ominous. "Holiness" conjures up images of asceticism; of holy individuals who rarely eat or drink, and talk in barely audible tones. Of mountain tops and meditation. Rashi, perhaps the greatest Torah commentator of all time, has a much less complicated understanding of the word: Holiness is - to observe the mitzvos. Distance yourself from that which the Torah forbids, and perform with enthusiasm the mitzvos which the Torah advocates. This, ultimately, is what makes a Jew holy.

You shall be holy, for I (Hashem your G-d) am holy. The holy Rizhener Rebbe zt"l finds in the Torah's words what he says is the key to attaining this aspiration. To reach any degree of holiness, he says, it is imperative that one first realize and be conscious of the fact that he is innately a holy being. As long as one perceives himself as an earthly creature - flesh and blood - it is inevitable that he will be drawn towards his earthly, immoral, and materialistic nature, and will fail to achieve any level of holiness. First off, he must convince himself that he is indeed holy. Then, his actions and deeds will be governed by his sense of holiness.

Each day, we are presented with all sorts of tests to our morality, character, and dedication to the Torah. If one approaches these tests with a sense of his "this-worldliness," he is bound to stumble. He will forever find excuses for himself to, so to speak, fail the test. "After all," he assures himself, "I'm not a malach - I'm not an angel. I'm but flesh and blood! Can it be expected of me to live the life of an ethereal being? I'm doing the best that I can."

If, however, one approaches these daily tests, trials, and tribulations with an awareness of his innate holiness, then with each moment, with each passing trial, he will be fortified by his sense of higher purpose. "How could I do such a thing!" he will say to himself. "After all, deep down I'm really a holy person. I've been endowed with a holy neshamah, a holy soul, which is, as the holy Zohar describes it, a 'piece of G-dliness implanted within man.' A holy person doesn't do such things; speak such words; take interest in such matters."

There is a yiddish expression which captures this outlook: "Es past nisht! It's not appropriate!" How could I? If this is the attitude, explains the Rizhener, with which one approaches the daily onslaught to his character, then he will succeed.

Bearing this in mind, he homiletically explains the above verse. "Kedoshim ti-hiu, You shall be holy." How, you ask, is it possible for a flesh-and-blood human with weaknesses and base desires to even

approach and consider holiness? Teach yourself to say: "Ki kadosh ani, for I am holy."

When confronted with the temptation to sin, just say: "Ki kadosh ani - for I am holy! Holy people don't do such things." When a mitzvah comes up, and perhaps that little voice within you says, "You don't have to grasp every mitzvah that comes your way! You're tired - take a break." We must answer, "But of course I have to - after all, ki kadosh ani, I am holy! Holy people do every mitzvah they can possibly do." By convincing and reminding ourselves that we are holy, and that there are certain things which holy people must do, and certain things that holy people certainly can not do, we build within ourselves the strength and fortitude which ultimately make our daily battle with our "darker side" much easier to overcome.

Modern psychology has given society the gift of the "human condition." We are all too acutely aware of our humanness and the failings entailed within it. Popular thought teaches us to embrace our humanness: It's alright to get angry. It's okay to be mean sometimes. After all, that's what being human is all about.

The Torah, however, has a different perspective. Yes, there is a human condition. Yes, as humans, we are faced with being instinctively drawn to earthly desires and human failings. But this is not something we should embrace; it is something with which we should battle. How do we battle this? By reminding ourselves of our ultimate purpose: Ki kadosh ani - For I am holy. I have been placed in this world to preserve my holiness, to nurture my holiness, and to enhance my holiness with tools only a material world can provide. Not to belittle that holiness.

Of course, one must be careful never to be too "full of oneself." But, as a holy nation, as individuals who have been endowed with a G-dly neshamah, it behooves us to constantly be aware of our elevated status and the responsibility it entails, and to remind ourselves that not everything that is acceptable to secular society is necessarily acceptable to a people described as holy.

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