

HOLY PURSUITS - MUNDANE PATHS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Kedoshim, the second of this week's double portions, is perhaps one of the only Torah readings whose very name is a source of inspiration: "Kedoshim ti'hiu - You shall be holy, for I, Hashem your G-d, am holy. (19:2)" Kedushah, Hebrew for holiness or sanctity, arouses in us thoughts of lofty spiritual pursuits, piousness, and sacred rituals. Holiness makes us think of great individuals spending endless hours wrapped up in prayer and service before the Holy One Blessed be He. It conjures thoughts of Shabbos and Yom Tov, our tables bedecked with the whitest linen, the candles casting a heavenly glow. We would expect this week's sidrah to be full of mitzvos which inspire such thoughts and aspirations. It therefore comes as somewhat of a surprise as we read on that in fact parshas Kedoshim is home to some of the most mundane and earthly mitzvos: Pay your workers on time; don't steal; don't lie; don't take revenge against someone who has wronged you... Why would the Torah choose to introduce such ordinary and practical mitzvos with the lofty message, "Be holy?"

The grandson of the holy Ba'al Shem Tov was getting married. The wedding procession was a sight to behold. At its head stood the holy tzaddik, holding the hand of the chassan as he lead him to the chuppah. All the townspeople followed, dressed in their finest Shabbos garments. Just at that moment, a rickety wagon rumbled by. This wouldn't have attracted any attention - at least not until the holy Ba'al Shem Tov promptly left the wedding procession, approached its driver, and began speaking with him quietly and earnestly. All the assembled were astounded. They carefully observed how the Ba'al Shem Tov quietly whispered something into his ear, and then returned to the chuppah procession.

The driver was by all appearances a simple Jew. Yet evidently, this didn't fool the great Sage. Surely, the townsfolk mused, the stranger was a "tzaddik nistar - a hidden tzaddik." Why else would the Ba'al Shem Tov have left so suddenly to talk with him?

The next morning they decided to get to the bottom of things. They located the inn where the wagon driver was staying and paid him a visit. "Shalom Aleichem - Rebbe - Peace be upon you, our teacher," they addressed the stranger.

"Rebbe?" the man said, stunned. "I'm not a Rebbe, nor do I descend from a Rebbe," he insisted, "I'm just a simple Jew."

"You don't have to play games with us," they persisted. "If the holy Ba'al Shem Tov made a point of approaching you, you must be a holy man. The Ba'al Shem Tov makes no mistakes."

"Perhaps not," he said, "but you're making a big mistake! The Ba'al Shem Tov spoke to me about a very personal matter." Yet the townsfolk were so insistent that he eventually agreed to tell them what was spoken between them. This is what he told:

"I live in a small village," the stranger began, "and my closest friend lives right across the road. My friend is a peddler who peddles his wares throughout the surrounding countryside. At times, he's gone for weeks, and even months. Whenever he comes home, all his closest friends and neighbors gather in his house and welcome him back. I always come first, because I live the closest.

"One time my friend returned after a long absence, and as usual I was the first to come. I didn't bother to knock, as we'd known each other for so long that we felt at home in each other's houses. Oddly, however, he wasn't there. The children were out in the yard, and his wife was in the kitchen. Absentmindedly, I opened one of their cabinets. I was surprised to see a big heavy moneybag just sitting there, where anyone could find it. No doubt it held all the money my friend had just brought home.

"How careless!" I thought. 'I'm going to teach him a lesson.' I took the bag and put it inside my coat. Scaring my friend into thinking he had lost his money would ensure he never acted so irresponsibly again! I sat down and waited for him, but for some reason he was delayed. Then I remembered that I had something urgent to attend to at home, so I decided to leave and come back soon. In my mind, I was already preparing a long reprimand.

"But I never got to deliver it. When my friend came home and couldn't find his money, he let out a bloodcurdling scream. His wife and children started searching frantically. By that time, the house was already full of friends and neighbors, which only added to the tension. When I returned a few minutes later, it looked like a house of mourning. My little prank had gone terribly awry.

"I'll admit that I'm a coward - I just didn't have the courage to come clean before such a large audience. How could I ever explain myself? I made believe I didn't know what had happened, and pretended to share in my friend's sorrow. I resolved that at the first opportunity, I would return the money.

"The days passed, and the opportunity never presented itself. My friend was even forced to borrow. The longer things went on, the harder it became for me to come up with a way to return the money without looking like a thief. Several months later the money was still in my possession. Then my evil inclination started urging me to invest the money - so that at least I could return it with interest. But I couldn't figure out how to do so without arousing suspicion - it was quite a sum. I hired a horse and wagon and set out on the road. I figured I would invest the money somewhere no one knew me.

"Shortly afterward, I arrived in your town. When the Ba'al Shem Tov saw me, he came over and whispered in my ear, 'Reb Yid - it isn't too late! Go home and give back the money. Your friend will believe you if you tell him you never intended to steal it. I'll even tell him myself. But go right away, before your yetzer hara comes up with a reason to keep the money for yourself!'

"I feel as if a huge stone has been lifted from my heart," the stranger concluded. "Now I must go. I've learned a lesson that will stay with me the rest of my life." [Adapted from L'Chaim.]

R' Yisrael Salanter zt"l, the great founder of the mussar/ethical movement, used to say: People associate holiness with spirituality and heavenly pursuits. From the Torah it appears this notion is false. Kedoshim ti'hiu - You shall be holy. What makes a Jew holy? "Don't steal; pay your workers on time; don't lie; deal honestly with others..." For I, Hashem your G-d, am holy - in heaven, so to speak, I am holy, and I have many holy administering angels that serve Me constantly. If I demand that you be holy - down there, I mean sanctifying your lives through how you deal with others, at work, at home, and in shul. There is nothing mundane about that.

While we are accustomed to approaching mitzvos such as Shabbos and tefillin with feelings of sanctity and elevation, this doesn't always translate to our approach in how we deal with others. The Torah therefore prefaces its discourse on interpersonal relationships with the message that the path to kedushah may not be as far out in the woods as we thought.

Have a good Shabbos.

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