

HOLINESS APPLIES TO MORE THAN BAGEL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

If any words capsulize the attitude the Jew must have toward life, they are the words, "Kedoshim Teheyu," you shall be holy. Being holy is a mitzvah like all the other mitzvos, but with a difference. Most of the other mitzvos, such as kashrus, or tefillin, etc., have relatively obvious parameters. All of these types of mitzvos have clearly defined rules to let us know when meat can no longer be considered kosher, or when tefillin stops being tefillin, or when the time for the mitzvah passes. However, what are parameters for being holy?

The concept of holiness is one that many nations have tried to grasp, with limited success and often with disastrous results. How many crusades and pogroms have been launched in the name of "holiness"?

Perhaps the problem lies in the difference between the English translation and the actual Hebrew word. The English word for holy comes from the word "halo," like those associated with angels and those the non-Jews believed were "saints." The Hebrew word "kadosh" comes from the word that means "to separate," which is why kiddush, which separates Shabbos from the six working days, occurs at the onset of Shabbos.

This in itself indicates that the type of separation being referred to is more than just a physical separation of a person from what might be considered non-holy, which is what the monks of other religions have done. The first level of separation must begin in the mind- kedusha emanates from the distinguishing of ideas.

For example, most people know that the Torah values modesty; modest dress is often associated with religious circles. Thus, if a person merely considers himself or herself not to be religious, or wishes to make an "anti-religious" statement, they have little or no difficulty in dressing immodestly.

However, the truth is, modesty has more to do with a sense of human dignity than it does with religion. It has become a religious "symbol" because Torah is concerned with human dignity as defined by G-d Himself, who created us in the "image of G-d" (human dignity means to live in the image of G-d). Thus in this week's parsha, G-d tells us that we must be holy, because He Himself is holy.

Hence, if one truly understands the essence of man, and the true definition of human dignity, and how central such dignity is to the fulfillment of mankind, then he or she automatically will choose to

live on a higher level of modesty. The dress code of any society can actually be a "thermometer" of sorts indicating how well that particular society understands and relates to man's Divine image and human dignity.

Nowhere is this clearer than with Jews who, after years of living a less-than-modest lifestyle (at least by Torah standards), change their course in life and choose a more modest wardrobe. It was not an overnight decision to be sure. In fact, often there is a rebellion against this aspect of Torah observance at first, sometimes even a passionate one. Yet, a year or so later, the hemlines drop to more modest levels, and men who spent their summers in tennis shirts and shorts now wear suits. Were they simply worn down by the struggle?

No. The process was simple: they happened to have attended a class on the ABC's of Judaism which they found to be intellectually stimulating. One class led to another class, which, over time, sensitized the student to new levels of spiritual achievement and the pleasure that comes from spiritual growth. A deeper awareness of the purpose of life emerged, and through it, the person learned to grasp the universal importance of living up to the standards of Torah. A whole new image of man and his potential emerged, and this inner change prompted the need for external ones that were consistent with the inner ones. Modesty is just one such manifestation.

Thus, the directive to be holy, or kadosh, can be understood as a directive to become a deep thinker, and to look into the concepts of daily life to see them for what they really are. Being kadosh means looking past our emotions and attractions when making decisions, especially those that can dramatically affect the direction of society. If history teaches us anything at all, it is that ideas look different in hindsight than they did in the present. This is why the Talmud teaches: Who is the wise man? He who can see what will eventually result from that which occurred today. This could also be the definition of the holy person as well.

Perhaps this is why the "Kedushah" prayer in Shemonah Esrai is placed prior to the blessing of understanding and intelligence, as opposed to at the end of the Shemonah Esrai. Wouldn't it be logical to assume that holiness is the result of the process, as opposed to the cause of it? Putting Kedushah first is tantamount to saying that IT is the necessary prelude to all else that follows.

However, instead, it comes at the beginning of the section of requests. Why? Because what we want is clearly a function of our priorities in life, which are the result of what we understand to be important to G-d, and one cannot know this without seeing what He has to say about creation and our role within the grand scheme of things. Modest dress and a modest lifestyle is bound to result from knowing this.

Another example of this is the mitzvah of shatnez, also in this week's parsha.

Shatnez is a mitzvah to not wear clothing made from a blend of wool and linen. Though this mitzvah is typically a "chok," that is, a mitzvah whose logic is beyond human reason, the midrash tells us that a reason for this mitzvah goes back to Kayin (Cain) and Hevel (Abel).

As the story goes, Kayin brought a sacrifice to G-d, but of poor quality. Hevel saw his brother's action, and decided to do the same, but instead, he brought from the best of his flock. G-d accepted Hevel's offering and rejected Kayin's, for obvious reasons. However, Kayin didn't accept G-d's rejection very well, and instead he turned his anger toward Hevel. G-d warned Kayin that his growing hatred of his brother would lead him down the wrong path, but he ignored G-d's warning, and ended up committing the first murder in the history of mankind.

But what does shatnez have to do with any of this?

What did Kayin bring, and what did Hevel bring? Kayin brought from the least of his produce, which, being a farmer, was flax; Hevel, being a shepherd, brought from the best of his flock, which, as you can now guess, was wool. In the end, it was the "owner of the flax" who killed the "owner of the wool." Therefore, every time a person buys a new garment and delays wearing it until after it goes in for shatnez-testing (most cities with a significant orthodox population have a Shatnez Laboratory that can confirm the presence or lack of shatnez in clothing), they are reminded of what goes wrong in life, and how to keep on the straight and narrow.

For, murder was just an outer manifestation of something that was wrong on the inside of Kayin. And like Kayin, we are all capable of camouflaging negative qualities, at least until a situation presses us so much that we lose perspective and carry out acts that, for us previously, was unthinkable. And what better place is there to make this point than in clothing. After clothing is to the body what the body is to the soul—an outer manifestation of what is spiritually going on in the person. (I heard from Rabbi Yissachar Frand that this is why the mitzvah of "Love your neighbor as yourself" follows the command of Shatnez in this week's parsha. When G-d asked Kayin if he knew the whereabouts of his brother, Kayin answered, "Am I my brother's keeper"? This statement is answered directly and succinctly with the words, "Love your neighbor as yourself" as if to say, "Yes. You are expected to care for your brother at least as much as for yourself.")

All of Torah works the same way. Each level of understanding reveals more about how the Torah approach to life increases human dignity, and in doing so, brings about the fulfillment of mankind within the purpose of creation.

Kedoshim Teheyu means live in the image of G-d; don't be satisfied with what "feels" good at the moment, but go beyond the surface of issues and things to determine their true essence, their essential meaning (if they in fact have any). Increase your appreciation of what matters most to G-d, what is considered dignified, and what is not. Your behavior patterns will follow in time, until you resemble on the outside what you have created intellectually and spiritually on the inside.

There is no better time to do this than during the counting of the omer, which we began to do the second night of Pesach, and which we will continue to do until the night before the holiday of Shavuot. Fifty days of counting correspond to the famous "Fifty Gates of Understanding," to emphasize the intellectual and spiritual refinement process we are supposed to be going through

each day of the omer, on the way to the day on which we received the Ten Commandments.

The drive to do so must come from within, for it rarely comes from without. And from my recent stay in America, I can say that the forces of society work against such a process. Life has become very distracting, and in some ways, even absurd. The priorities in life are not what they used to be, and this is not a positive sign for it has resulted in a live-for-today attitude, and, in my opinion, a reduction in human dignity.

Kedoshim Teheyu: Be intellectual, be smart, be a wise person.

Kedoshim Teheyu: Be like G-d, be dignified.

Have a great and wholly Shabbos,

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