

HOLY, OR NOT HOLY - THAT IS THE QUESTION!

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and tell them, "Be Holy (kedoshim teheyu)! because I, Hashem your G-d, am holy." (Vayikra 19:1)

It is great timing that this parshah should follow on the heels of Pesach, and during the sefirah, a time of national mourning, a time of national introspection. For, in the above posuk and the parshah that follows is the most precise summation of the reason why G-d reached into Egypt and yanked the broken Jewish nation into freedom. It is THE mission statement of the Jewish people: Be Holy!

The Jewish people have many missions here on earth, but all of them emanate from the prime raison d'etre of being a holy people, as the Torah earlier foretold:

"Š You will be a kingdom of priests to Me Š a holy nation; these are the things which you shall tell the Children of Israel." (Shemos 19:6)

To be part of the Jewish nation, the Torah is telling us, is to strive to be holy. This is not something reserved only for the kohanim of our nation, for, G-d has called us a "kingdom of priests." To alter this meaning of the Jewish people and to pursue a different approach to being Jewish is to so dramatically alter the definition of Judaism that it can no longer be called "Judaism" -- even though externally, it looks "Jewish."

It is not coincidental that the mitzvah to be holy is based upon the fact that G-d Himself is holy. The Torah is telling us, "You want to know if you are holy? If you are DRIVEN to feel G-d's Presence, and you DO feel His Presence, then you are holy. If you have little drive to feel G-d's Presence, and therefore probably don't, then holiness has eluded you."

Perhaps one of the greatest "litmus tests" of this concept is prayer. Prayer is called by the Talmud, "that which is on High." The Nefesh HaChaim writes that the purpose of prayer is to increase G-d's Presence in creation, to draw down His holy light into the world. This is why the word "brochah" (blessing) is a derivation of the Hebrew word "breichah," which means "spring" (as in a wellspring of light Above; Rashba, Teshuvos 5:51).

A "holy nation," therefore, is also one that cherishes the opportunity to pray to G-d, to connect up with Him, and to feel His Presence.

Yet, in so many synagogues around the world, prayer has become, at best, ritualistic, no more complicated or challenging than walking into a good Jewish butcher shop and buying kosher meat. You have to come to pray because, TECHNICALLY-speaking, it is an obligation. You have to say certain prayers because, TECHNICALLY, that is the way you fulfill the mitzvah. You have to have intention for the mitzvah, and to think about the meaning of what you are saying, because, TECHNICALLY, that is what prayer is all about.

Does it make a difference whether or not I can do that in five minutes or fifteen minutes? ("Besides," one person told me, "the faster I finish praying, the faster I can get back to my Torah-learning Š") Does it make a difference whether or not my heart is in praying to the Master of the Universe -- the Holy One, Blessed is He, the A-lmighty Š the One Who grants life and takes it Š the One from Whom all my blessing flows Š the One Whom Moshe Rabbeinu found interesting enough to take time from HIS Torah learning to pray to -- or not, whether I find prayer boring or unbelievably fulfilling?

We could on about this disturbing dichotomy in the Jewish nation, but it has also begun to manifest itself in an even more frightening manner.

That Western fads and fashions have affected the Orthodox community is, unfortunately, nothing new. However, that fashion should be a reason to ignore Torah guidelines of modesty, be they limits on how much of a person's limbs can be "exposed" in public, or, how attention-getting one's outer appearance has been made to be, is a more recent phenomenon in many communities. Even in some more halachic-adhering communities, INCLUDING in Eretz Yisroel, fashion, in some cases, "hovers" at the limits of Torah-taste, emphasizing the person's restraint only out of fear of sinning, or, earning disrespect and ire in the eyes of others.

In the former case, it is a serious problem, and it endangers the Jewish people, as we saw at the end of last week's parshah. In the latter case, it is a better situation, but not a great one, and, G-d forbid, within one generation can lead to the former crisis.

Why? Because of "Kedoshim Teheyu."

Holy people are not dragged in the direction of decreasing modesty, either in appearance or attitude. As Rashi and the Ramban point out at the beginning of this week's parshah, holiness is very much a function of modest behavior; increased modesty results in increased holiness, which, in turn, results in increased union with G-d (I try to explain to my own children, not with a whole lot of success, especially when adults they look up to don't seem to fathom this concept, including her own father, sometimes).

It's that simple. Well, at least, it's THAT simple when there is no yetzer hara to pull us in the direction of less holiness. And, if that is so, then, a holy nation is, above all, one that takes on its yetzer hara head on in order to clear a path to G-d.

Shabbos Day:

You shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: you must not show favoritism to the poor, nor honor to the important person; in righteousness you must judge your people. (Vayikra 19:15)

To be human is to be biased, even when pursuing objectivity. How can it be any other way? We are products of childhoods we don't even recall, for better or for worst. We have been guided and nurtured by Society's mandate and its leaders in ways too insidious to detect, until we confront contrary points of view, which a person will often reject out-of-hand. Our own personal needs and handicaps will "force" us to emphasize certain priorities more than others, just as a matter of survival.

And, so the question returns, how can one judge anyone or anything objectively?

Let me answer this by way of example. There is a story in the Talmud of a great man who was overcome with desire when tempted by a woman whose desire it was to make this man fall. Unable to control himself, he pursued her without constraint, and after she climbed to the attic he followed up the ladder in hot pursuit.

Realizing that all was lost, while on the ladder, he yelled out at the top of his lungs, "Fire! Fire!" at which point his colleagues came running in to see what was the matter. Seeing him on the ladder, and to whom he was climbing, they quickly realized the man's predicament, and why he called out as he had. They were embarrassed for him and themselves, and commented how hard it must be for him to be seen in such a state. However, he answered,

"Better you should see me like this than in Gehinnom for having committed the sin!"

The point of the analogy is that sometimes we don't possess the keys to get the job done on our own.

"Hey! I thought the rule was that G-d never gives a person a test they can't pass?!"

Correct. However, sometimes the test is not always what we think it is. As in the case of the man in the story whose "fire" of passion drove him in the direction of grave sin, it was a test to recognize that he had the potential to err, and therefore, to seek outside help in preventing a catastrophic situation.

What saved the man in the story was not his ability to withstand temptation; what saved him against the fire of passion (he wasn't kidding when he yelled, "Fire!") and personal gratification was his innate desire to do the right thing. It was that internal recognition of the futility of temporal pleasure against the loss of eternal bliss that made him call down while he was climbing up.

By extension, then, this mitzvah to judge judiciously is really a mitzvah to WANT to be unaffected by the normal influences of human nature and the world around us. It is a mitzvah to rise to the

recognition that OBJECTIVE TRUTH is the highest level of reality, even if subjectively we stand to lose an aspect of physical well-being and comfort.

Getting to this point of awareness allows us to become real with our intellectual and emotional shortcomings. And THAT points us in the direction of the only One Who can help us make up for those shortcomings, the Knower of Objective Truth, G-d Himself!

Hence, the Talmud states:

From where do we know that three who sit in judgment the Divine Presence joins with them? It says, "In the midst He judges" (Tehillim 82:1). (Brochos 6a)

But, says the Talmud elsewhere, that is ONLY in the case of three who sit to judge according to the Objective Truth; of people who recognize their shortcomings and turn to G-d for Divine assistance in making the right decisions, in spite of their backgrounds and biases. And then, even in spite of the Heavenly assistance they do enjoy, it is accounted to them as if they chose correctly, on their own.

This is what the Chasam Sofer referred to as Heavenly Help when making decisions on behalf of the community, when the "judge" is G-d-fearing and in search of G-d's truth.

MELAVE MALKAH:

For the Conductor; of the servant of G-d, of David, Who spoke the words of this song to G-d on the day that G-d saved him from the hand of his enemies and from the hand of Shaul. (Tehillim 18:1)

This very long psalm was the Psalm of the Day for the Seventh Day of Pesach (according to the Vilna Gaon), and with an opening statement like the one above, it is not hard to figure out why. Like Moshe Rabbeinu before him, Dovid HaMelech often represents the entire Jewish people, and his plights are often seen as paradigms of the entire Jewish struggle, and his personal redemptions as preludes to national redemptions.

(According to the Tehillah l'Dovid, this is why Dovid made this tehillah the eighteenth one, corresponding to the eighteen wars he had to wage in his lifetime.)

This is one of the reasons why HIS Tehillim is OUR Tehillim, allowing us to say HIS words as if they are OUR words. Hence, it is fitting that his praise of G-d for his own personal redemption from his enemies be used as our praise for our redemption from our national enemies, which, in the case of the Seventh Day of Pesach, was the Egyptians.

That is the first reason. The second reason why this psalm is so appropriate as the Psalm of the Day for the Seventh Day of Pesach is the next posuk:

And he said: I will love You, G-d, my strength ... (18:2)

On Shabbos Chol HaMoed, we read Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs) because Pesach is a time of feeling and expressing national love for G-d. This is so, firstly, out of gratitude for His redeeming us from Egypt, and secondly, for having given us a "ticket" (Torah and mitzvos) to fulfillment in This World and eternal bliss in the World-to-Come.

Says the Radak:

"Love means when a person takes advantage of every opportunity in this material world to come close to G-d. Fear of G-d, however, must come before love, for, only after a person is used to fearing G-d can he become elevated to the point where he can serve G-d without concern for reward."

This is precisely the lesson we learned above from "Kedoshim Teheyu," that one must strive to turn every materialistic situation into a spiritual one, in order to create a spiritual environment within which the Divine Presence is "comfortable." This means overcoming one's yetzer hara, which is driven for materialistic pleasures as an end unto themselves.

This is why David loves G-d as "his strength," for, as the Talmud says:

Everyday, a person's yetzer hara seeks to overcome him and slay him. If not for help from The Holy One, Blessed is He, no man could survive ... (Kiddushin 30b)

Hence, this is another theme that was expressed above, namely, that one has to realize his limitations in the battles of life, and accept the need to invoke Divine assistance. This, perhaps, was one of Dovid HaMelech's greatest strengths, which made him fitting to be the father of Moshiach.

As a final note (for now), the Talmud says that Dovid composed this psalm upon the death of Shaul HaMelech (Moed Katan 16b), who, as Rashi explains, was equal to all of Dovid's other enemies combined. After all, how does one defend himself against a righteous king of Israel, except by fleeing, and fleeing, and fleeing?

However, says the Talmud, he was strongly criticized for this by none other than G-d Himself, who said that even "ten Davids would not equal one Shaul." Realizing his error, and in humility typical of Dovid HaMelech, he then wrote Psalm 7: an error to Dovid, to atone for his lack of respect for the great and righteous Shaul HaMelech.

... Therefore, I will thank You among the peoples, G-d, and to Your Name I will sing. He increases the victories of His king, and does kindness to His anointed, to David and his seed forever! (18:50-51)

Amen! May that be true in our generation as well!

Have a great Shabbos,
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