SELF-DIGNITY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Speak to all the congregation of the Children of Israel, and say unto them: "You shall be holy; for I, God your God am holy." (Vayikra 19:2)

RASHI SAYS THAT the directive to be holy in this week's parsha is a commandment to stay away from sexual promiscuity. The Ramban disagrees and says instead that it is a mitzvah to not overdo that which IS permissible. "Kashrus" does not apply only to things that are forbidden. It also applies, at least conceptually, to that which is permissible.

After all says the Ramban, we just spent the first half of Sefer Vayikra talking about forbidden things. It's a little late to begin a discussion about how avoiding treif foods and certain treif relationships results in kedushah—holiness. That should have been the introduction to Sefer Vayikra, not the middle of it.

Rather, says the Ramban, it is a more natural progression if the Torah is saying, "Now that we have discussed how to behave with respect to that which is forbidden to you, let's now discuss how to behave with respect to that which IS permissible to you. Too much of something 'good' is also wrong. Excessive physical pleasure is also destructive."

Such behavior would fall under the category of what the rabbis call lack of "Derech Eretz." It translates as, "Way of the Land," and the phrase has a few connotations. But, in this respect, "derech eretz" refers to Torah-appropriate personal behavior, and it covers every aspect of everyday life.

The Rambam has a whole section about such behavior—Hilchos Dayos—and there are many details to learn and keep in mind. However, they all come down to one idea, to one central principle: self-dignity, the level of which should be fitting for one made in the "image of God."

That is a discussion unto itself. Since God is not physical, then it obviously cannot be man's physical reality that resembles God. Even our spiritual component doesn't quite cut it, since it also has boundaries. It's a far closer fit, but also far from exact.

The Sforno describes our God-image as being our intellectual capacity to discern. Humans can weigh ideas and determine their level of importance. They can decide to do the right thing instead of the easier thing. They can sacrifice physical pleasure for spiritual pleasure. They can pursue and live according to the ultimate meaning in life, and in THIS respect, they are like God.

When someone acts in an undignified manner, we say that they have acted "beneath themselves." It

means that their behavior was less than fitting for someone on their level of intellect and understanding. Having assessed their level of intelligence, we assume that their priorities in life would have excluded such inappropriate behavior, which would be more befitting for a person of a lesser IQ.

Society, especially in recent years, has challenged this idea. They have questioned whether or not the moral standard by which many judge their actions and those of others, is the result of "nature" or "nurture." They have asked out loud if the accepted norm of moral behavior is intrinsic to man, or the result of ancient religious indoctrination.

If man is indeed hardwired to be moral, making it intrinsic to his nature, then self-discovery and moral realization are really the same thing. The more a person discovers about himself, the more he becomes aware of what he is capable of achieving and of the moral standard he is capable of living up to. His level of self-dignity increases.

If man's moral standards were "nurtured," or more to the point, the result of indoctrination, then moral sensibilities become personal hang-ups. They become like an overbearing parent, who is more concerned about what they want for the child than what is actually good for the child. At some point in time, the "child" will just ignore the "parent" and do what he or she wants instead.

This approach, of course, destroys all sense of objective morality. It states that there is really no objective level of right or wrong. It erodes a person's self-dignity because there is none, only what a person feels "comfortable" doing based upon their personal objectives which, of course, are yetzer hara generated. Society becomes a moral free-for-all, which is exactly why the yetzer hara has man going down this path in the first place.

It doesn't help that God does not verbally tell us otherwise. Prophecy is long gone, and history for thousands of years now has seemed quite random. It never is, but "hester panim" (hiding of God's face) certainly makes it seem that way, and this has served to spiritually disconnect the spiritually weak, and weaken the once spiritually strong.

It sure FEELS as if God isn't "here" today. People cheat and get away with it. Or it looks that way. The Talmud says that just because the Bais Din can't administer punishment does not mean Heaven doesn't. For example, a person who deserves stoning falls off a roof. Someone who deserves strangulation drowns. Etc. But, if no one notices or makes the connection, it does not seem like Divine retribution.

Recently an avowed atheist was brutally murdered. He even went out of his way to share his beliefs with others, and the way he dealt with people often reflected his lack of fear of Divine retribution. He probably made a lot of enemies, so when he was murdered, most people probably just assumed that one of them came back to make him "pay." They won't see it as God giving an atheist his due because who can know for sure that is what really happened, especially if so many other atheists live just fine.

So, as man revels in his accomplishments he does so without a sense of human pride. On the contrary, he is content to assume that he has descended from a lesser species, and that his intelligence and physical sophistication is random. If he lives in the image of anyone, it is himself. His self-dignity, for the most part, has died. R.I.P.

The further man goes down this path, the more extreme others, who do not do what he does, appear to him. He thinks of them as people who can't let go of a delusional past, who cling to values that were nurtured as if they are nature. Feeling such disdain, they don't notice that such people happen to have a lot of self-dignity as well.

And peace of mind, too. You see, if we were truly made in the image of God, if self-dignity is intrinsic to our being, then we can only be at peace with ourselves when we are pursuing and achieving it. Sure, it can be a lot more fun to just let go of conscience and do whatever makes our bodies tingle. But, at the end of the day, once the tingling stops, and it does, we have to look into the mirror and assess who we are and what we have accomplished.

It is frightening how, as society becomes more open, more people are taking anti-depressants. We've never had more to enjoy or more social freedom than we have today. Shouldn't people have less problems with depression and anxiety?

Yes, if that is what life is about. But not, if it is about living up to a higher moral standard and doing your best to act Godly. It is ironic how openness can be so enslaving, proof positive that we are NOT just another animal. Animals benefit from openness, but humans require discipline to accomplish. This is necessary to give meaning to their existence. So, we HAVE to be holy because God is holy, and because it is the only way to truly be ourselves.