

# CLOAKED IN DIGNITY

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

This week's two Parshios complete the Torah's presentation of the fundamental application of Kedusha - sanctity to the life style of the Jew.

First we were introduced to Shabbos. Shabbos frames time in sanctity and purpose.

We were then instructed in the laws of Kashrus. Kashrus frames our physical sustenance and existence in sanctity and purpose.

In last week's Parsha we were commanded the laws of family purity. Taharas Hamishpacha frames sensuality and family in respect, purpose and sanctity.

The sum total of all three applications of Kedusha is to set the Jews apart from the other nations.

The truth is that all Mitzvos provide focus and purpose to our lives. Therefore, all Mitzvos serve to set us apart from the other nations and make us holy. Acharei Mos and Kedoshim add further dimensions to our uniqueness by presenting a lifestyle of Halacha (Jewish law and custom) that infuses the daily life of the Jew with Kedusha - uniqueness and purpose.

Many other religions have religious observances and social expectations that involve time, person, and family. However, for the most part, the practices are divided between the devotional and the humanistic. Sure, parents should be honored and charity given. They are humanistic, sensitive, and proper feelings to have. Sure, places of worship must be built and certain devotional times designated. Religion requires the focus of time and place to give it structure and direction. However, only Judaism addresses every aspect of human endeavor and function by extending sanctity to the mundane and the daily.

In Yahadus (Judaism), the time and place for serving G-d transcends the boundaries of temple or Shul. Each home can resonate with the sound of study and prayer. Each meal prepared and enjoyed can be an invitation to sit at G-d's own table and partake of His bounty. Dress and adornments can be the accoutrements of protection and style or they can be elevated to appointments of dignity and royalty.

The limits of devotion and service that we assume in regards to the study of Torah and the performance of Mitzvos are our own doing. They are self-imposed limitations that are determined by personal initiative and energy, or lack-there-of. G-d's Judaism, on the other hand, does not impose any restrictions on our devotional, scholastic, or social potential. There is always something we can

do to properly express our recognition and appreciation of G-d in every arena of life. Such is the uniqueness of Judaism. Such is the Kedusha of the Jew.

In every system there should be clearly defined goals and expectations. As Rav Hirsch explained, the book of Vayikra primarily describes the service of the Kohanim in the Bais Hamikdash and was intended to present the goals and expectations of Judaism. We are the Kingdom of Priests and the Holy Nation. We serve humanity by facilitating humanity's relationship with G-d just as the Kohanim do so for us. Just as the Kohanim are separate from us by dint of their unique privileges and restrictions so too are we different from the rest of the nations by dint of our unique privileges and restrictions. The Kohanim are our role models just as we the Jewish people are role models for the other nations.

Acharei Mos begins with the Avodah (Temple service) of Yom Kippur that was performed entirely by Aharon Hakohain in his capacity as Kohain Gadol (High Priest). Aharon was the most unique within the most unique tribe (Layvie). Aharon was the most restricted within the most restricted tribe. Aharon, the High Priest was the most privileged within the most privileged tribe. Therefore, Aharon was the most unique, restricted, and privileged within the most unique, privileged, and restricted nation and therefore within the world. Therefore, Aharon was the role model who clearly defined for everyone else G-d's goals and expectations for His nation and world. Therefore, the Parsha begins with a detailed description of the Temple service being performed by the most unique human (the High Priest), on the most unique day in the year (Yom Kippur), in the most unique place in the world (the Holy of Holies). (Person, Time, and Place)

What happens when they (the role models) fail? What happens when we fail? Is it possible to establish expectations for G-dliness and devotion and never be disappointed in those expectation? Is there room for failure?

Acharei Mos begins by presenting the institution of Teshuvah (repentance). Yes! There is a tomorrow. Yes! Failure can be corrected. Yes! We are given a second, third, fourth, etc. chance to rework our relationship with G-d and society. We are given the chance to regain our closeness to G-d and the trust of our fellow human.

Acharei Mos poignantly presented Aharon Hakohain, the apparent although unintended architect of the Golden Calf, as the only one who could facilitate G-d's forgiveness. Atonement despite failure; forgiveness after failure. Aharon Hakohain, the one who could have averted the disaster of the Golden Calf but failed to do so, became the only one who could bring atonement and forgiveness.

Yes! The Torah was given to humans not angels! Yes! Not only are there expectations for devotion and G-dliness but there is the means for correcting the failures and disappointments. We never have to give up! There should never be despondency or depression over the sorry state of human affairs. Concern, regret, and shame yes! But never giving up.

How often do we tell ourselves, even convince ourselves, that certain behaviors are beyond our

control. Two years ago I heard on the radio that the supposed gene that predetermines intimate preference in men does not exist. The original study that made the claim has been debunked because it could not be replicated. (As reported on AM channel 980 at 7:35 a.m. on 4-23-99, Los Angeles) However, even if such a gene does exist it would not make a difference. It still would not excuse or permit acting out our prurient desires. We are still commanded to follow G-d's laws and commandments.

We are never allowed to give up. (18:22) The end of Acharei Mos states in unambiguous terms that our most profound and powerful desires are within our control. The fifteen prohibited intimate relationships as well as the other listed forbidden relationships frame and direct our animalism in dignity and purpose. "I can't" or "I couldn't help myself" should not be a part of our vocabulary.

A nation whose mandate is to model Kedusha must be responsible to its own free will. The fifteen prohibited intimate relationships are representative of all our natural urges and desires, and all of them were created to enhance our G-dliness. However, in order to do so, they must be framed in the law of G-d.

(It is interesting to note that the origins of our nationality at the time of the exodus from Mitzrayim is contrasted with the question of "G-d hardening the heart of Pharaoh.")

How many souls have been sacrificed on the altar of relationships? Intimacy is so central to the human animal that family and G-d run a far second behind. This week's Parsha confronts the entire spectrum of human needs and emotions and says, "You can do it! You do not have to give in! And if you do give in and fail, you still do not have to give up! You can do Teshuva!

The final topic in Kedoshim deals with the Ov and the Yidonei and the prohibition against engaging in practices of the occult. These two examples are contrasted with the previous verse that reiterates the essence of Kedusha and the chosenness of our nation. "Be holy... because I am holy, and I have separated you from all the other nations!" (20:26) Clearly, the Torah is forewarning us against ourselves. Do not underestimate the ability of humans to escape responsibility for their own decisions. The "I can't help myself" syndrome finds many expressions, even in the illogical and supernatural. Tarot cards, palm readers, and psychic hot-lines are the Ovs and Yidoneis of today. They are the antithesis of a free-willed nation who heard G-d proclaim, "There shall not be any other gods besides Me." Our Kedusha is in taking responsibility for our humanness and cloaking it in the dignity of control and restraint.

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