

THE PATH TO HOLINESS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This week's Torah reading makes a heavy demand upon us. It commands us to be a holy and dedicated people and to continually aspire to heights of piety and holiness. Some will say that this is an almost impossible task and is especially difficult since the Torah does not define for us how it is to be achieved. But that is only a superficial understanding of what this Torah portion is coming to teach us.

In this Torah reading there appears a large amount – in fact a plethora – of commandments. At first glance one could mistakenly believe that this is nothing more than a jumble of laws thrown together almost at random without any discernible pattern or overall construction. But upon careful examination one will come to realize that it is this wide variety of seemingly unconnected commandments and laws that form the ladder upon which one can ascend to the level of piety demanded from us by the opening verse of the reading.

Every phase of human life is covered by this very long list of do's and don'ts. They refer to personal behavior, the intimacy of marriage and the raising of children, commercial enterprises and all types of interactions between human beings. In effect, we are commanded to be as holy in the marketplace as we are in the synagogue and on a mundane weekday as we are on Yom Kippur. It is in fact the very reason why there are so many commandments and so many laws and seemingly small details that make up Jewish life and values. Because human life is covered by the perspective of the demand for holiness on a constant basis, that is the goal of Judaism.

We live in a society that has mostly given up on the concept of holiness and dedication and functions only in the present and for today alone. We do not see a reverence for human life any longer, especially for infants and the unborn, nor any aspiration for spiritual growth at the expense of physical pleasure and leisure. There was a time that people ascribed attendance at a house of worship as being an act that could lead to holiness and spiritual development. Now, across the board of all faiths in the Western world today, attendance at houses of worship has declined drastically and the worship service itself has become one of entertainment, political correctness, guitar playing and social activities at best.

Only by strengthening the observance of the varied commandments that make up the bulk of this week's Torah reading can we at least glimpse the amount of holiness that we are ordained to attain. The sheer number of commandments that govern every aspect of Jewish life emphasizes to us the proportion of the task that lies before us.

There are no shortcuts to holiness and there are no instant remedies to the healing of society.

Persistence and patience, repetition and tenacity remain today, as they have always been, the keys to Jewish life and to the fulfillment of the commandments that the Lord demands from us in order to be a holy and dedicated people.

Shabbat shalom

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