

WHY IS THIS PORTION DIFFERENT FROM OTHER PORTIONS?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape # 95, The Mezonos Roll: Does It Exist? Good Shabbos!

Why Is this Portion Different From All Other Portions?

"And G-d spoke to Moses saying: 'Speak to the entire Community of Israel and tell them You must be Holy, for I the L-rd your G-d am Holy.'" [Vayikra 19:1-2]

The Medrash comments on this verse, that it was said "be'Hakhel," namely, it was said to all the Jewish people together. In contrast, most of the Torah was taught to Moshe, who taught it to Aharon who taught to his sons, who taught to the Elders, etc., etc. This portion, however, Moshe taught in everyone's presence.

Why is this parsha different? The Medrash answers because most of the fundamentals of Torah are dependent on this portion, called "Kedoshim Teheyu -- You shall be Holy."

The simple interpretation of this Medrash is that since there are so many important laws that are contained in this section, it was said in the presence of everyone.

Perhaps, however, the Medrash means something else. Perhaps it means that the specific command 'You shall be Holy' is so important, and has so many of the fundamentals of Torah dependent upon it, that this Mitzvah itself was given publicly.

According to the Ramba"n, this Mitzvah is that one which tells us how to live and act as Jews. As the Ramba"n explains, if it would not be for this command, a person could conceivably be a "naval b'irshus haTorah," meaning, he could be an observant Jew, and simultaneously a glutton. He could live an obscene life within the parameters of the Torah. He could eat as much as he wants; he could indulge in all the physical pleasures of life; and it might all be 'glatt kosher.'

If not for this mitzvah, such a person could be called a Tzadik [righteous person]. However, the Torah tells us, "You shall be Holy" -- you have to abstain. You have to act with abstinence, with restraint, with holiness. Don't indulge. Don't be a glutton. That is what the mitzvah of Kedoshim Teheyu is all about. It is so vital that it had to be said to the entire nation together.

The Shemen HaTov explains that a person cannot be Holy unto himself. Even though the mitzvah is a mitzvah on the individual, the individual needs society's help. If one lives in a society which is indulgent, it becomes very difficult for that individual to remain a 'Kadosh' [holy person].

In order to achieve "You shall be holy," the cooperation of one's family, of one's city and one's nation is required. The parsha had to be given to everyone together. When everyone is involved in conspicuous indulgence it becomes almost impossible for the individual to act with restraint.

We see this very clearly in the society we live in today. The rampant hedonism that we see today -- gratifying their every whim and wish instantly -- surrounds us. We live in a society that doesn't know what kedusha [holiness] is about. The only way we can personally achieve this mitzvah of "You shall be holy," is if we not only work on ourselves, but we elevate and try to live among people who also share the ideal of Kedsohim Teheyu.

But it must begin with the individual. As the Chassidic Rebbe, Reb Bunim is quoted as having said, when he was young he thought he could change the world. As he got older, he saw he could not change the entire world, but at least he could change his city. As time went on he saw that even that was beyond his grasp, but he said "I'll at least change my neighborhood." When he saw that that was not working, he said "I'll at least try to change my family." When he saw that that failed, he said, "I'll have to try to only change myself."

But once he succeeded in changing himself, then he saw that his family was different, his neighborhood was different, his city was different, and in a sense the entire world was different.

That is how it is with this mitzvah of "Kedoshim Tiheyu." We cannot go it alone. We have to work on ourselves, and then our families, and then our neighborhoods, and then our societies.

Making Gods Out of Gold and Silver

The verse says [Vayikra 19:4] "Do not turn toward idols; nor should you make a graven god for yourselves". Rabbi Yeruchum Levovitz, zt"l, the Mir Mashgiach, pointed out an inconsistency in this verse. The verse begins by speaking of idols (elilim), which are worthless pieces of stone or metal or rock. Then in the same verse, the Torah continues and calls, that which, just moments ago, was a worthless inanimate object, a graven god (Elohei Masecha). How does a worthless stone become a Deity?

On the verse "You should have no other gods (Elohim Acherim) before Me" [Shmos 20:3], the

Medrash says 'Does that imply there are other gods? Rather, it means others (Acherim) make them into gods (Elohim).'

This Chaza"l is telling us an unbelievable thing: We can take and make a god out of anything. That which yesterday we created out of our own hands and was merely an idol (Elil), if we glorify it and praise it and give it honor, then we have made it into a god.

Don't turn to the Elilim -- because once you stray and give prominence to even the Elil [idol], that Elil turns into an Eloha [God]. It can be Deified. Our own actions can turn even the lowest of objects into gods.

Two or three thousand years ago, when people were primitive, they believed in such nonsense. They took items out of stone, out of metal, out of gold, and out of silver and they turned them into gods. They were stupid, backward and ignorant. But we are modern men!

We are just like them. We also take gold and we take silver, and turn them into gods! Except, instead of turning the gold into a god in the form of a little man or a little eagle, we turn the gold into a god, in the shape of a coin.

We also Deify inanimate objects. That which was an Elil yesterday, becomes an Eloha today.

Recently, when I was out of town, on my way home from shul, I noticed a fellow washing his car. But this fellow was not merely washing his car -- he was scrubbing the tires! He was sitting on his knees, with the brush and the water and the soap, scrubbing -- not the car, but the tires! Two minutes after he starts driving the car, what are those tires going to roll over? What will they look like? But you can make a god out of a tire.

The next day, which was Shabbos, I took a walk around Lake Washington, where I saw the pleasure boats in the water. (Pardon me. Calling them boats is not doing them justice.) There was a fellow sitting on his yacht, enjoying Olam HaZeh [the pleasures of this world]. What was he doing? Polishing his chrome. It was a hot day and he was making sure that the metal shined.

This fellow has his tires. This fellow has his yacht. Have we at all changed? Have we advanced any further from the "gods of metal you shall not make for yourself?" It is the same gold. It is the same silver. It is the same inanimate objects that we know are just inanimate pieces of wood and metal and rubber. But unfortunately, we have the power of turning them into our gods.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Glossary

Elil(im) -- idol(s)

Eloha -- God

kadosh (kedusha) -- holy, holiness
Kedoshim Teheyu -- You shall be holy

Personalities & Sources:

Ramba"n -- Rav Moshe ben Nachman (1194-1270); Gerona, Spain; Israel.
Reb Simcha Bunim of Pshis'cha (Poland) -- (1765-1827); Hassidic leader.
Rash"i -- Rav Sholomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105); France.
Rav Yeruchum Levovitz -- (1874-1936) Mashgiach of the Mirrer Yeshiva; Mir, Poland.

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