

PARSHAS KEDOSHIM

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Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Kedoshim, 5631

This week's parsha begins (Vayikra, 19:2): "... Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh ahni HaShem Elokeichem ..." (ArtScroll: "You shall be holy, for holy am I, HaShem your God.") Another word that we encounter in the English translations is "sanctify". Before beginning with the Sfas Emes, we should be clear what these key words really mean. Consulting a dictionary on the word "sanctify" does not help, for it merely tells us that "to sanctify " means "to make holy." Clearly, these words about holiness and sanctity are crucial. What do they actually mean?

In his commentary on our pasuk the Malbim tells us that "kedusha" means conducting ourselves in a manner "lema'ala min hateva" -- in a manner above above nature (teva). That is, living his/her life in accordance with "teva" a person would smack his lips as he ate non-kosher food, would happily engage in illicit relationships; and would revel in speaking ill of people behind their back. In telling us to live lives of kedusha, the Torah is enjoining us to abstain from such "natural" behavior.

The Malbim's definition of "kedusha" works well in the phrase "for holy am I, HaShem". HaShem is literally "supernatural" -- "lema'ala min hateva." This definition also dovetails well with a comment of the Toras Kohanim on this pasuk. The Toras Kohanim sees a reciprocal relationship between HaShem's kedusha and our kedusha. That is, if we live "lema'ala min hateva," HaShem will treat us in a like manner, enabling us to "beat the odds" in our own activities. An example comes readily to mind. Consider the remarkable case of a man who was hired by a multinational bank. "Remarkable" in what way? Remarkable inasmuch he had no MBA -- in fact, no BA; but nevertheless landed (and retained!) a banking job for which "ahl pi teva" (in the natural order of things) only an MBA would have been eligible. Note that in popular parlance, this man would have also been considered "lucky". Although both perspectives see this man as "beating the odds" a world of difference separates the two descriptions. Being "lucky" implies a random, mindless selection process. By contrast, selection via kedusha is the ultimate in purposeful, rational hashgacha peratis.

Clarifying the meaning of key concepts such as "kedusha" is helpful for understanding parshas Kedoshim. With this background in hand, we turn now to the Sfas Emes's first ma'amar on Kedoshim.

Parshas Kedoshim begins with a pasuk that is both truly memorable and truly puzzling. As translated by ArtScroll (and in a similar way by R. Hirsch), the pasuk says: "You shall be holy, for holy am I,

Hashem, your God."

The Sfas Emes articulates the puzzling part as: How can the level of sanctity attainable by a human even be mentioned in the same sentence as the sanctity of HaShem? Apparently, this question also bothered the Medrash and the Zohar. The Sfas Emes reports their response to this question. The statement "You shall be holy" is conventionally understood as an exhortation. But the Zohar (and the Sfas Emes) point out that this key statement can also be read as a promise. In other words, we have here a promise that HaShem can and will help us reach a proper level of sanctity. Why and how? Because of His special relation with Klal Yisroel, each of us has special chiyus from HaShem. And with that unique chiyus, "bekocheinu lehiskadeish gam be'olam hazeh" (That is: we can sanctify ourselves even in this world.)

The Sfas Emes takes us even further. Thus, he emphasizes that we can sanctify our lives even though we live our lives in the world of nature; that is, in a world in which HaShem's Presence is hidden. Continuing with this idea, the Sfas Emes cites the second paragraph of this week's Medrash Raba. The Medrash there works with a pasuk in Tehillim (92:9): "Ve'ata marom le'olam, HaShem." (ArtScroll: "But You remain forever exalted, HaShem.") The Medrash there comments: "Le'olam yadcha ba'elyona." (literally, "Yours [HaShem] is always the upper hand.")

The Medrash reads this pasuk as a tzidduk hadin (acceptance and affirmation of the justice of HaShem's judgments -- regardless of our own preferences.) By contrast, the Sfas Emes reads the text in Tehillim as: "All life and all existence come from You, on high and hidden". A fair question at this point is: how does the Sfas Emes's nonpshtat reading of this pasuk fit into the context and the flow of thoughts in this ma'amar? I suggest the following answer. The preceding sentences discuss our capacity to achieve kedusha. A person reading these sentences might get the erroneous impression that what we have here is a humanistic perspective on Man's greatness. For this reason, the Sfas Emes quotes the pasuk in Tehilim, to remind us that "Le'ola yadcha ba'elyona".

The Sfas Emes leads us forward,, pointing out that Shabbos gives us special access to kedusha, as evidenced by the Shabbos liturgy: "Vayekadesh oso" and "Vekidashto mikal hazemanim." That is, on Shabbos it is easier to be aware of HaShem's Presence, giving life and vibrancy to all creation. And because Shabbos is connected with vibrancy that is lema'ala min hateva (literally, "supernatural"), Shabbos can enable us to extend kedusha to the world of nature and time. More generally, the Sfas Emes emphasizes that we can also serve HaShem in our everyday activities. HaShem's mitzvos are performed only through action, not through contemplation. We know from the beracha said before doing a mitzva that mitzvos can sanctify us. The Sfas Emes now takes us a step further. He tells us that by doing mitzvos, we can impart kedusha "bama'aseh mamash" (to the very midst of our life of action). To conclude, we note that the Sfas Emes calls up a well-known pasuk (Vayikra, 18:5): "... chukosai u'mishpatai ... asher ya'aseh osam ... vechai bahem." By our performance of mitzvos, the mitzvos can give chiyus (vitality) to all our actions.

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