

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Kedoshim)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

The year, 2003. The sound of the train pulling in to the Kfar Saba station filled the air on another beautiful afternoon, as passengers made ready to embark on their journey...home?

Hundreds of people getting on and off a second train across the platform, beneath the beautiful new glass and stone ceiling of the modern, new station just opened only two weeks before.

An innocent scene, full of hellos and goodbyes, and the promise and potential of beginnings.

At the entrance to the crowded station any number of people coming in and going out, young and old, passing through the automatic doors, beneath the alert eyes of the security guard who, like thousands of other security guards across Israel, holds the line in the war against terror.

One teenager, a boy who looks like any other boy, with spiked, blond punk-style hair, perhaps on his way to a night out with friends, walks in the middle of the crowd towards the arriving train.

Was it his eyes? There is always something in the eyes... Or perhaps the raincoat, worn closed over a t-shirt on an unseasonably warm afternoon?

Eyewitnesses later could not be sure, but something makes the security guard take notice, and he approaches this teenager, who, as it turns out, is only eighteen years old. A brief exchange of words, and the guard reaches out to grab the boy's arm, an instant before this peaceful, sunny afternoon turns into a maelstrom of fire and death as an explosion rips apart the station killing him and leaving countless others wounded and fighting for their lives.

Police experts would later state that the alert actions of this brave guard, Alexander Kostyuk, a Russian immigrant living in Bat Yam, prevented what would most certainly have been the massacre of over 250 people milling about between the enclosed space of the two trains not forty yards away, who would have had no escape.

One week later, this scene practically repeats itself outside of a Tel Aviv pub (Mike's Place), as again, an alert security guard gives up his life while preventing a terrorist bomber from entering the crowded bar, saving dozens of people.

In our recent history, our heroes have come in the most unlikely shapes and sizes.

Whether a hitch-hiker at the Givat Tzarfatit junction who happens to notice a fellow listening to a cell phone which is upside down, or a father who stuck his head out of his window and spotted a terrorist reloading his gun in Elon Moreh, there is no profile for the unsung heroes who seem to be patrolling the front lines in Israel's war on terror.

Much like the innocent passengers who happened to be on an ill-fated flight on September 11th, they find themselves in the wrong (or right?) place at the wrong time, and somehow rise to the moment they were destined to meet.

Is there some lesson to be gleaned from these tragic events?

This week's portion, *Kedoshim*, begins with a powerful challenge:

"...Kedoshim Te'hiyu', Ki Kadosh Ani Hashem Elokeichem."

"...You shall be holy (Kadosh) because I, G-d, your G-d, am Holy." (VaYikra 19:2)

What does it mean to be holy? And why is this mitzvah seemingly tied to the fact that G-d is holy? If we are meant to be *Kadosh*, it should be enough that Hashem tells us this; why does it seem here that G-d has to give us a reason? Why does Hashem have to justify, so it seems, His commandment that we be holy by adding that Hashem is holy?

Indeed, if this mitzvah is somehow connected to our mission to emulate or imitate G-d (*Imitatio' Deos'*), how does one accomplish this, and is this really possible?

It is interesting to note that the above-mentioned verse actually begins with words of introduction not often found in the Torah:

"And G-d spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to the entire congregation of Israel, ("Kol Adat B'nei Yisrael") and say unto them you shall be holy (Kadosh) because I, G-d, your G-d, am Holy." (19:1-2)

One wonders why this particular mitzvah is stressed as meant for the entire congregation of Israel; isn't every mitzvah for the entire congregation of Israel? Why is this mitzvah different from any other?

Rashi here points out (based on the Midrash) that this mitzvah was given to the Jewish people in a congregated gathering (*Hak'hel*), because *"most of the body of the Torah is dependant on it."* (Rashi 19:2)

But this doesn't seem to help us much. Why is this mitzvah so crucial, and how does the fact that it is given to the Jewish people while they are assembled together, help us regarding its understanding or its fulfillment?

It is interesting to note that this very statement, referring to the sanctity of the entire congregation is precisely the claim of Korach, who, when inciting the nation to rebel against the leadership of Moshe suggests that:

“... *Kol Ha’Edah **Kulam** Kedoshim, U’ve’tocham Hashem.*”
“*For the entire congregation is all holy, and G-d is in their midst.*” (Bamidbar 16:3)

And if, suggests Korach, we are all holy, then why should Moshe be the leader? After all, if everyone is holy, and everyone is special, so we are all leaders!

There seems to be a basic underlying question here which necessarily requires our attention: Is this a promise, or a command?

Are we commanded to be holy, and is this therefore an obligation, or is it simply a promise? Perhaps G-d is promising us that we will, ultimately, be a holy nation? And if indeed this is so, is there then any obligation of action regarding this idea?

If this concept of a holy nation is a promise from G-d, it will result merely from our belief in that same G-d, and our willingness to align ourselves as members of His holy nation. Indeed, holiness then becomes a function of what we believe; it is a reward for a lifetime of faith.

Judaism however, does not see holiness this way. In fact, this is the essence of Christianity, namely that holiness is the result of faith alone.

Judaism views this as a misunderstanding of what holiness is all about. Holiness is not about what we believe; it is about how we behave. **Rav Abraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook** (in *Orot* pg. 32) suggests that Holiness (Kedushah) is not about sanctifying our will and desires; it is rather about elevating and sanctifying our actions.

And if holiness is in fact a mitzvah, then that means we are, all of us, capable of achieving it, and it demands of us many concrete and empirical forms of behavior. Which is why this entire portion proceeds to outline the modes of actual behavior that are expected of each and every one of us.

There are many who believe holiness to be the right or privilege of a select few, those elevated souls who are ‘the holy ones’. Not so, says Judaism; every human being has the potential and the ability, and indeed the obligation to become holy, simply by virtue of our actions in this world. *Kedushah*, holiness, is an obligation.

And yet, suggests **Rav Kook**, it is also a promise, because while the sanctity of the individual is the result of his personal toil and achievements, the holiness of the Jewish people is in fact a promise. Each and every Jew contributes to the holiness of the entire Jewish people, as we were promised long ago, actually at the foot of Sinai that we would be a “*Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation.*” (Shemot 19:6)

Which brings us back to what this Kedushah is all about. What does this mean, that we as a people are meant to be, indeed were promised we would be a holy nation? This seems to smack of a certain elitism, perhaps even of ethnocentricity. Are we somehow better than everyone else? Do we deserve what others don't? Indeed this question was somehow at the root of Korach's rebellion against Moses, with his contention that if the entire people are all holy, then why should Moses or anyone be above anybody else?

Perhaps in order to understand this idea we need to understand the difference between being holy, and being chosen. In addition to calling ourselves a holy nation, we also describe ourselves as the chosen people. Indeed, every morning when we make the blessings over the Torah, we utter the same phrase:

*“Asher **Bachar** Banu' Mi'Kol Ha'Amim...”*
*“Who has **chosen** us from amongst all the nations...”*

Are we really the chosen people? Are we better than everyone else? Could this seemingly elite attitude be at the root or at least partially responsible for some of the terrible anti-Semitism we have experienced and continue to experience as a people?

Doesn't this concept of chosen-ness smack of the very Nazi Aryanism that caused so much pain in this century for own people?

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

To be chosen does not mean to be better; it simply means to be different.

In fact Jews come in all shapes and sizes, with no reference anywhere in Jewish law and tradition to any difference whatsoever regarding a Jew's status be he or she black or white, or of African, Mexican, Chinese, European or any other racial origin. So obviously this idea of being chosen cannot be a racist concept.

Indeed, Jewish tradition even has a place in the world to come for the righteous amongst the nations, (see *Tosefta Sanhedrin* 13). It is actually a lot easier for a non-Jew to get into 'heaven' and certainly to keep his or her place there, than it is for a Jew!

And of course, *anyone*, regardless of race or nationality, who wishes to become Jewish and is willing to accept the Jewish way of life can do so, through a process known as *Giyur* (conversion). Obviously, then, we are not 'better' in the normal sense of that word.

To be chosen means to have a particular purpose, or mission in this world. In fact, everyone and indeed everything is chosen. The question is what they are chosen *for*.

What we thank Hashem for every day is what we have been given; our purpose for which we have been chosen.

You see, four thousand years ago, for some reason that remains a mystery to historians of all disciplines, monotheism burst onto the world scene, amidst a world wallowing in the morass of pagan idolatry. And, by definition, if a people, for whatever the reason, accept upon themselves not one, nor seven, but actually six hundred and thirteen different vehicles for relating to G-d (known as mitzvot), then the result will be a very different relationship with that same G-d.

Hashem, G-d, created all the nations of the world, so it would be challenging at best to imagine that any one nation is somehow better than any other. But at the same time, given that all peoples have taken different paths and have different approaches in their relationships with G-d and the world around them, it stands to reason that each nation has a different relationship with G-d.

We are all, in a sense, chosen, each of us born as individuals with our own special gifts. The real question is not *whether* I am chosen. The real question is what am I chosen for? What do I choose to do with the gifts I have been given?

The concept of being 'chosen' as a people does not mean we are better than anyone else. What it means is that we, (like any other nation) have our own special gifts and therefore our own special purpose. And this different (and not better) relationship with G-d is a result of the choices we have made. All of which now present us with the challenge of living up to the responsibilities those gifts and that different relationship entail.

But this is what chosen-ness (*Bechirah*) is about, which is very different from the concept of Kedusha (holiness), which people often confuse as being one concept.

Hence every Friday night when we make Kiddush over a cup of wine we say: "*Ki Vanu' Vacharta, Ve'Otanu Kidasha*" "*Because you chose us and sanctified us....*"

To be chosen represents the gifts we are given; to be holy is a statement about what we choose to do with those gifts.

Because who I am, ultimately, is a result of the choices I make, which means the actions I undertake.

It is precisely because we are a Kingdom of Kohanim (Priests), that we are challenged to live up to that potential in how we behave every day, and indeed every minute.

This is why this portion follows some of the laws of the Kohanim as seen over the last few portions, and leads to all of the mitzvot contained in this week's portion.

This now brings us back to our original question: why is this particular mitzvah given to the Jewish people as a whole congregation (in a state of assembly, or *Hakhel*, as Rashi points out) and why is this related to the fact that G-d is Kadosh?

If *Kedushah* is about how we behave in order to live up to our mission as a people, the Torah is telling us here that we can't get there until we recognize that each and every one of us has that same potential.

Every Jew can be *Kadosh*, if he or she so wills it, and the underlying theme of all that we do, and indeed all of the mitzvot in this week's parsha is to be able to recognize that very same fact.

The basis for understanding that every one of us is *Kadosh*, is the realization that we are all created in the image of G-d, and that we are all a part of G-d, and that there is a piece of G-d inside each and every one of us. And if we cannot connect to that simple idea, we will never achieve in ourselves, the level of *Kedushah* that this important mitzvah challenges us to achieve.

Take, for example, another critical mitzvah that is listed as one of the mitzvot in this week's portion:

"Ve'Ahavta' Le'Re'achah' Ka'mochah"
"Love thy neighbor (really: friend) as your self" (19:18)

Indeed, **Rabbi Akiva** suggests (Jerusalem Talmud *Nedarim* 9:4) that this mitzvah is a *Clal Gadol*, a major principle in the Torah, such that, again, all other mitzvot stem from this principle.

One of our greatest challenges as a people is how we interpret this particular statement in the Torah. Many understand this to mean that we are only commanded here to love those who are our "*Re'ah*" which some take to mean a fellow Jew who is following the path of goodness and righteousness. Thus, if I somehow perceive someone to be erring in his or her ways, or even pursuing a wicked path, I am not obligated to treat them as myself and love them in this manner.

In fact, **Maimonides** suggests that this mitzvah (to love your friend as yourself) means that: "*All the things you would want others to do for you, you should do for them in Torah and Mitzvot.*" (*Hilchot Avelut* 14:1) implying that this mitzvah applies only to those who fulfill Torah and mitzvot.

And yet, **Rav Aviner**, in his *Tal Chermon* points out that the Talmud in Sanhedrin (52b) seems to contradict Maimonides here, when it suggests that even in the case of a wicked person condemned to death by a Jewish court (i.e. a murderer), we must be careful not to cause him undue suffering based on the mitzvah of loving your neighbor as yourself!

So obviously, this mitzvah applies to anyone, no matter how wicked their deeds (perceived or real). In fact, the Rambam seems to contradict his own words elsewhere when he says that the mitzvah of loving your neighbor as yourself means, "*to love every person... as he is.*" (*Hilchot De'ot* 6:3).

Rather, suggests **Rav Bar Shaul** in his *Mitzvah Ve'Lev*, when Maimonides refers to this mitzvah as relating to “your brother in Torah and Mitzvoth” he does not mean that this mitzvah applies only to someone who actually fulfills Torah and Mitzvoth, but rather someone who shares the same mission (and thus the same obligation.)

The very fact that someone shares the same purpose and is chosen for the same mission obligates me to love that person as myself. This makes a lot of sense, because if love is all about giving, and we are promised by G-d that we will be a holy people, then giving to anyone who shares that same mission is simply a part of making sure we get there.

There are some who will ask why there is a mitzvah to love someone even though he may be following a wicked path? Why should I be commanded to love my fellow Jew even though he is a murderer? In fact, the Talmud (Pesachim 113a) tells us there is actually a mitzvah to hate (“*Lisnoh*”) the wicked! So how can we be commanded to love them at the same time?

And there is a mitzvah to unburden the ox of “*Sone'chah*” (one you hate, or the one who hates you). Maimonides himself (*Hilchot Rotzeach* 13:14) asks:

“How could a Jew hate another Jew? Especially since the verse commands us: “Lo’ Tisnah Et Achichah’ Bi’Levavechah”, (“Don’t hate your brother in your heart”)? The sages explain that this refers to when you actually see a person transgressing and warn him of the consequences and he nonetheless continues to violate the Torah, there is a mitzvah to hate him (“Li’snoh’ Oto”) until he repents and returns from his evil ways.”

So it seems that if a person refuses to relent from wickedness, there is actually a mitzvah to hate him! And yet as we have seen there is also a mitzvah to love him?! How can this be?

This, perhaps, is precisely what the **Baal Ha’Tanya** means when he says (chap. 32) that:

“Those whom there is a mitzvah to hate, there is also a mitzvah to love; you have to hate the evil part of them, and love the spark of goodness that is always there, however much it is hidden. Because that spark of goodness is actually the spark of G-d which sustains the G-dliness in each and every human being.”

In other words, we have to hate evil, and thus we have to hate all evil actions, but we are not meant to hate the person. We are rather, meant to find the hidden spark of goodness inside a person and love that at the same time. The Tanya adds that:

“The fact that the holy spark of G-d is somehow in exile in a person, and lost amidst all the evil a person can stoop to, should actually cause us pain, and encourage us to feel mercy, which will ultimately drown out any hatred we might feel amidst a natural arousal of love, even for such a person.”

We must sometimes detest a person’s actions, while at the same time continuing to love their soul. And in the end, since the soul is primary, our love will overcome our hatred and we will and should come to feel only love.

And this indeed, is the essence of the blessing the Kohanim make before they bless the people: “Blessed are you Hashem... who has commanded us to bless His people Israel with Love.” And the **Zohar** says (*Naso* 147) that a Kohen who does not feel love for the entire Jewish people is forbidden to bless. And of course the Kohen blesses all of the Jewish people, the righteous and the wicked all together.

The Midrash Halachah (*Sifra VaYikra* 19: 43, and see also the Talmud in *Arachin* 16b) quotes **Rabbi Tarfon** as saying:

“I swear if there be even one person in our generation who is able (worthy enough) to give Tochachah” (tell a person off for their transgressions),

and **Rabbi Akiva** who says:

“There is not even one person in his generation who even knows how to give Tochachah!”

And that was in the generation of Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva!

Which is why no less than the **Chafetz Chaim** (at the end of his *Ahavat Chesed*) rules that in our generation, it is forbidden to hate anyone; we are all obligated only to love each other. (And the **Chazon Ish** (*Yoreh De’ah* 13:16 and on the Rambam *Deot* 6:7) and **Rav Kook** (*Igrot Ha’Re’aiyah*’ 266) rule this way as well.)

All of which brings us back to our beginning. The reason we are given this mitzvah, to love even the wicked, is because the love we demonstrate (even while we do not learn to love wickedness itself) becomes the vehicle for uncovering the holy sparks hidden inside each and every one of us. Evil is after all an external part of a person, which merely covers up the good hidden inside. But when we spend so much time on the external evil, it becomes almost like baking it in; making it even more difficult for that beautiful hidden inner light to burst forth.

Rav Kook says (*Orot* 148) :

“Loving... is not just an emotional experience, but rather a part of the mastery of Torah, and a very deep and wide wisdom which we all need to develop...”

This then, is the sanctity we all seek to achieve. This was not a mitzvah that was given us as an entire people assembled together. Rather, this mitzvah *is* the challenge of seeing the entire Jewish people as assembled together, always.

Whether it is the esteemed Rabbi getting off the train, or the Russian security guard standing outside the station, we are all one people: soldiers and doctors, plumbers and Knesset members, Talmud scholars and janitors.

This week we commemorated Yom Hashoah, the Remembrance Day for those who perished in the Holocaust. We are reminded that if we don’t learn to live together, we will certainly learn to die together.

Only when we learn to really see each other as a people in this way, will we be ready to become the light that will allow us to see the entire world in the same fashion.

May Hashem bless all of us to discover the beauty of the gifts we have been given, and the ability and desire to live up to the challenge of all the responsibility that entails.

Shabbat Shalom,

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