



## **Acharei Mos-Kedoshim: Mastering the Self**

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

*“And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them, you shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.’” (Vayikra 19:1-3)*

It seems like a simple directive, “*Kedoshim Tihiyu*, you shall be holy.” So simple, yet so profound and complex. What does it mean to be holy? How do we actualize this holiness?

The commentaries advance many different ideas and insights as to the meaning and actualization of the holiness concept. Rashi explains, “*Separate yourself from immorality and sin.*” Core holiness is defined by one’s ability to fight against the urges and desires which cast us in the abyss of immorality. God can tolerate our shortcomings and mistakes, but we must strive to be a moral nation. Without morality (specifically sexual morality), we are no different than animals. Holiness is the ability to resist temptation and remain on the proper path of life.

Ramban (Nachmanidies) explains that holiness means moderation. Learn to limit yourself even with those things which are permitted to you. Just because something is permitted does not mean it is good or appropriate. Everything we do in life, every decision we make has a lasting impact and creates a ripple effect. When assessing a particular course of action, it is not enough to ask, “is this forbidden or permitted?” Sometimes, even if the action is permitted, it can still create negative repercussions going forward. The true indication of holiness is the ability to exercise restraint even in those areas in which one can technically overindulge.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch brings these two ideas together.

*“Kedusha (holiness) is the product of the completest mastery by the God-like free-willed human being over all his forces and natural tendencies, with the allurements and inclinations associated with them, and placing them at the disposal of God’s Will. This mastery over one’s self, the highest possible art which human beings can practice, does not consist of neglecting, curtailing, killing, or doing away with any of one’s powers or natural tendencies ... Virtuosity in this, the highest human art, is only attained, as in other art, by practice, by constant exercise in using one’s moral free will in mastering existing tendencies ... That is the work that everybody is called on to perform, each one according to his own individual peculiarities, the work that is done quietly, silently, known to no one but himself, on his own inner self ...”*

Holiness is self-mastery. Holiness is when you realize that you control how you act. Holiness is when you understand that you have control over the life you lead and the person you are. Holiness is the state of being, achieved when you realize that “the buck stops with you.” When a person exhibits “Rashi-like” strength and abstains from immoral and negative behaviors, and when a person exhibits “Ramban-like” strength and at times chooses to abstain from certain behaviors, not because they are prohibited but because they are not conducive to his ongoing growth – this person has become holy. We can control ourselves. Once we acknowledge that we each possess self-control, we become the master of our decisions and destinies. This is *kedusha*; this is true holiness.

We often think of holiness as the state of being which one reaches because of dynamic, positive, spiritual activity. While this is certainly true, there is an important first step: self-mastery. Holiness is achieved only when one becomes the master of his self. Too often, we are enslaved by our desires, passions, and proclivities. We feel we lack control over the direction and quality of our lives. We say to ourselves and others, “This is who I am!” The truth is, there is no such statement as “this is who I am” only, “this is who I choose to be.” We often cannot choose the influences which try to propel us in different directions, but we can make the final decision if we will act on them. The path to holiness is often long and challenging, but it all begins with a recognition that we each possess the control and mastery of who we become.



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