



Acharei Mos/Kedoshim: Morality, Moderation, Motivation – Finding the Path to Holiness

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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).

We strive for it, we yearn for it, yet, we find it difficult to define. We translate the word *Kedusha* as holiness – but what does it mean to be holy? How can holiness be measured? How do we know if we have been successful in becoming holy people?

The commentaries provide many insights. The Midrash explains that the definition of holiness is “*Divine emulation.*” Whatever God does we are charged to do the same. The Talmud elaborates, “*Just as God clothed the naked (Adam and Chava), so shall you clothe the naked. Just as God visits the sick (as He visited with Avraham after the bris), so shall you visit the sick*” The Talmud’s examples are focused on *chesed* (acts of charitable kindness) and so it would seem that the highest form of Divine emulation is to be a *Baal Chesed*, a kind, giving and charitable person. True *Kedusha*, pure holiness, lies in the ability to transcend the self and focus on the other.

Rashi provides another definition. “*Separate yourself from immorality and sin.*” Core holiness is defined by one’s ability to fight against the urges, desires and wants that often debase us. 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. The true indication of holiness is the ability to exercise restraint even in those areas in which one can technically overindulge. The trait of restraint is perhaps the most important ingredient in successful living. It is easy to lose one’s self in the (permitted) pleasurable pursuits of this world. I must learn to exercise restraint in the world of the permitted in order to ensure that I do not cross the line into the world of the illicit. I must learn to say that just because I can have it, doesn’t mean I should. This ability to exercise restraint ensures that I can master my wants and passions and not become a slave to them.

Rav Menachem Mendel of Vorka (1779-1848) looks at this command in a dramatically different fashion. The Rebbe asks, “*Is it truly possible, and is it fair to ask man to aspire to the level of holiness? Rather, God is not asking us to be like the angels – for this is impossible for physical, carnal man. God simply asks us, L’hiyos Kodesh b’madreyga she’hu omeyd bah, be holy wherever you are and wherever you stand, achieve holiness on whatever level you may be, in whatever state you may find yourself.*”

God is teaching us to find and achieve holiness in all we do. Often we compartmentalize holiness. We are holy in certain areas and mundane in others. We may be *kadosh* (holy) in Shul, yet mundane in the workplace. We may be holy when speaking to God, yet ordinary in the way we speak to others. The Rebbe teaches us that we must infuse holiness in all we do, *B’Chol Matzav She’Tihyu Bo, in every situation and state of being.* Everything we do in life can serve a higher purpose. When we are in the workplace we have the ability to make a *Kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of God’s name) by conducting ourselves with honesty and integrity. When walking on the street we have the ability to be holy by proactively greeting the other - Jew and Gentile alike. When we watch a sunrise we have the opportunity to see the greatness of God’s creation. Everything we do can be infused with holiness and meaning.

The Rebbe takes this idea one step further. The real definition of holiness is pushing yourself just a bit further. The enemy of holiness is not impurity or sin – it is complacency. *Kedoshim Tihyu, B’Chol Matzav She’Tihyu Bo, Hiskadshu V’Alu Kim’ah, be holy, in every situation, in every state of being – sanctify yourself and raise yourself even just a little bit – just a little bit.* All God asks of us is just to try a little harder. Wherever you are holding in life – try to nudge yourself a bit further along your personal, sacred path. God does not ask for perfection or even near-perfection. God asks for effort. ***You don’t have to reach the finish line to become holy – you just have to start running.***

Too often we shy away from life initiatives because we are not confident we can accomplish what we set out to do. Life is not about getting to the top of your personal mountain – it is about having the courage to begin the climb. And after you start the climb – success is defined by taking one step after the other. They may be small steps and to the outside world it may not even look like I am moving – but I know I am placing one foot in front of the other and my God knows that I am trying. Even if I don’t reach my intended destination or see the actualization of my intended goal, if I put in the effort and I advanced my cause to the best of my ability – I have been successful.

Kedoshim Tihyu, be holy – we must strive to emulate our Creator and think beyond ourselves. We must strive to be a nation governed by morality and self-restraint. We must strive to be individuals who find and infuse holiness into everything we do and every experience we have. We must each find the courage to propel ourselves forward and push ourselves just a little bit harder to actualize the great potential we contain within. Let us each find the strength to continue the journey, advance the climb and find the holiness that surely awaits.