Preserving the Tzelem Elokim and Being an Ohr LaGoyim

The pesukim in Parashas Ki Savo (28:9-10) state:

כַאֲשֶר נִשְבַע לָךְ כִי שְיַקִימְךָ ה' לוֹ לְעַם קָדוֹֹת ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ וְהָלַכְת בִדְרָכָיו. וְתִשְמֹר אֶת מִצְוָי נִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ וְיָרְאוּ כָל עַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ כִּי שֵם ה' נִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ וְיָרְאוּ מִמֶךָ.

The Lord will establish you as His holy people, as He swore to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your G-d and walk in His ways. And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the Lord's name is proclaimed over you, and they shall stand in fear of you.

The Gemara in Brachos 6a, derives from the verse “And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the Lord’s name is proclaimed over you, and they shall stand in fear of you” to refer to the tefillin shel rosh. Clearly, this is an additional level of interpretation and not the simple understanding. However, the Gemara in Sanhedrin 34a teaches us that “ein haMikra yotze midei peshuto” — the simple level of interpretation is also important.1

In Aderes Eliyahu, they quote the Vilna Gaon as saying that the simple meaning of the pasuk is that it refers to the end of the previous pasuk — “v’holachta bid’rachav” — that we have to emulate Hakadosh Baruch Hu, which the Rambam counts as a mitzvah asei (8). The Torah tells us that we should preserve our tzelem Elokim (image of G-d) by going in the ways of Hashem and emulating His attributes; then, when all of the nations of the world see that we have succeeded in preserving our tzelem Elokim, they will learn from us how to act with yiras Shamayim. The nations of the world also have tzelem Elokim, and they can preserve that tzelem Elokim by following the ways of Hashem. When they see that we were successful in preserving the tzelem Elokim inside of us, the Shem Hashem that we’re called by, and that they were also created with a tzelem Elokim, they will learn from us the concepts of yiras Shamayim and emulating Hashem.

This pasuk in Ki Savo is the source for what Yeshaya HaNavi (49:6) calls “ohr lagoyim” — that klal Yisroel has a duty in this world to show the nations of the world the path to follow. It doesn’t mean that we show them the laws of Shabbos, kashrus, and taharas hamishpacha. Those laws are not relevant to them. The idea is that we have to teach them to preserve their tzelem Elokim.2

The pasuk at the beginning of Parashas Kedoshim (19:2) states:

דַבֵר אֶל כָּל עֲדַת בְנֵי יִשְרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָ אֲלֵהֶם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם. שָׂקַדְשֵׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ בִּלְבָדָךְ שֵׂאִילֶה יְאָרָם בְּאֶלֶף. קָדַשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ בִּלְבָדָךְ שֵׂאִילֶה יְאָרָם בְּאֶלֶף.

Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your G-d, am holy.

We have to be kedoshim like HaKadosh Baruch Hu who is Kadosh, because we have a spark of kedushah in our neshamos. We have to preserve the kedushah that we were born with.
Incomplete Kedushah

There is a midrash, Vayikra Rabbah 24, that serves as the basis for Rav Shimon Shkop’s introduction to Shaarei Yosher, which states:

כדושת התויה والا ממון ולא יד זר.
Kedusha is only complete when all three components are included.

“You shall be holy,” perhaps this means that you shall be like Me? The end of the verse states “for I am holy,” My holiness is greater than yours.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu has a higher level of kedushah and we can’t achieve that level. While the observation of the midrash is true — we cannot possibly achieve the same level of holiness as G-d — the interpretation of the pasuk doesn’t seem to reflect the simple meaning of the pasuk. The simple meaning is that we should preserve the kedushah that’s already in us as a function of our being created with a tzelem Elokim. Where did the Tannaim learn that it teaches us that Hashem has greater kedushah?

Rav Avraham ben Meir Jacobs, in his sefer Maleh veChasser beTanach, suggests that the midrash’s drasha is based on how kedoshim tehiyu is written chaser (without a vav), while ki kadosh Ani is written malei (with a vav). Hakadosh Baruch Hu’s kedushah is complete, but the level of kedushah He demands of us is one that is incomplete.3

Kedushas Chesed

We have the minhag of reading Megillas Rus on Shavuos. Rav Soloveitchik said in the name of the Vilna Gaon that we read it on Shavuos since many details of Hilchos Geirus (the laws of conversion) are derived from the conversation between Naomi and Rus, and Shavuos commemorates the conversion of the Jewish People. Just like Am Yisrael entered the covenant with Hashem through milah, tevilah, and a korban, so, too, the convert requires these three components in order to convert (Kerusis 9a). Ma’amad Har Sinai was the geirus of Klal Yisroel, so we read about the geirus of Rus on Shavuos.

There’s a famous midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 601) that points out the message of Megillas Rus:

אמר רבי זעירא המגילה הזו אין בה לא שומעת אלא שומעת אל אוסי ול_mock

Rav Zeira said, this book has no [laws of] impurity or purity, no ritual matters of what is permissible or prohibited. Why was it written? To teach you the reward for those who perform acts of kindness.

Perhaps these two ideas are one. The primary attribute of kedushas Yisroel, which is brought about through gemilus chasadim, is total dedication of our energies and actions for Klal Yisroel.

Rav Shimon Shkop posits that kedushah is total dedication of our energies and actions for Klal Yisroel. When somebody always strives to take care of Klal Yisroel, then everything he does, even taking care of his own personal needs, becomes a part of the mitzvah of kedusha. By taking care of himself, he takes care of the rabbim who need him. When all of our actions are intended to help others, we partially emulate Hakadosh Baruch Hu, whose entire creation of the world was for the purpose of giving to mankind. That’s what He wants: That all of our actions should be sanctified for assisting others. At the same time, we shouldn’t crush our natural inclination to take care of ourselves, thinking that we can reach greater heights of Kedushah and emulating Hashem through total altruism. That is what the midrash teaches: Hashem’s kedushah is complete, and ours is not. We cannot fully reach that level.

Clearly, Rav Shimon Shkop thinks the main idea of kedushas Yisroel is gemillus chassadim, similar to what Hillel told the prospective ger about “veahavta lereiacha kamocha” being the whole Torah and the rest is commentary (Shabbos 31a). The Gemara (Yevamos 79a) also tells us:

There are three identifying characteristics of this nation: they are merciful, bashful and they perform acts of kindness.

One of the three identifying characteristics of the Jewish people is “gomlei chasidim,” and this is codified in Shulchan Aruch (Even HoEzer 2:2) as well. The Acharonim consider the possibility that lacking any of the three, not just all of them, can make one’s lineage suspect — maybe he’s lacking in his kedushas Yisroel.4

Endnotes

1. See Ginas Egoz page 186.
3. He makes a similar point about how the person who sprinkles the water mixed with the ashes of the parah aduma on someone who is tamei meis must be tahor — that the word “hatahor” is written chaser to indicate that even if his tahara is incomplete it is also acceptable. Even though this isn’t included explicitly on the list of Middos ShehaT orah Nidreshes Bahem, the Gemara does employ it in other places as well. In Kesubos 40b, the Chachamim hold that a ketanah gets kenas except for motzi shem ra, because usually the word “na’arah” is written chaser to include even a ketana, an incomplete na’arah. By motzi shem ra, na’arah is written malei, so ketana is excluded.