

"GESHMAK TO BE A YID": KEDUSHAS YISROEL AND OUR ROLE IN THIS WORLD

To frame the upcoming discussion of קדושת ישראל, it is important to note a rather famous observation of רב משה פיינשטיין זצ"ל as he was leading post-war American Jewry in the mid-20th century. As people made their way from Europe in search of a better life and to get away from the World Wars and the Holocaust, they were able to find refuge in America, the land of religious freedom. However, this ideal that has been around since before America was born did not manifest itself the way it should have been. Many Jews found jobs, and were told that if they don't come in on שבת, then they shouldn't bother coming in on Monday. Those who had to go through this struggle often remarked "עס איז שווער צו זיין א איד", "it is difficult to be a Jew". Rav Moshe said that this would cause the next generation to leave the fold, as they don't see the beauty of being a Jew.^{1,2} קדושת ישראל is not just about the unique status we have relative to the גוים, but to first realize the unique *privilege* that comes with it. I believe that this privilege manifests itself in three primary aspects, based on the תפילות we say every טוב יום. We introduce the קדושת היום by saying that הקב"ה chose us through קדשתו במצותיך (serving Him through [מצוות and] תורה), through וקרבתו מלכנו לעבודתך (the development of a relationship through תפילה, which is also referred to as עבודה), and שמך הגדול והקדוש עלינו קראת (the charge to be an אור לגוים). By understanding these three aspects, I hope to gain a better understanding of who we are, and what our purpose here is.

The first aspect of קדושת ישראל comes from the מצוות and תורה. The מדרש famously brings down how ה' went to each and every nation offering the תורה, and each one asked what was written in it. When they heard something they didn't like and went against their nature, they declined. They even rejected the מצוות בני נח that they were obligated in. When ה' got to the Jews, not only did they accept what was beyond the מצוות, but they even accepted that as well. The question we need to ask ourselves is, why would anyone voluntarily accept more responsibilities upon themselves? This is a phenomenon we often see by adolescents, who seek to prove themselves and be able to gain independence by showing that they are responsible. Is that what this is about? Are we trying to gain independence from ה'? As we will see, that is definitely not the case. Rather, as the משנה famously states, it is a זכות to have more מצוות.³ This is because we can get more reward both for avoiding that which we are forbidden from doing,⁴ or simply because we are doing that which we are commanded.⁵ As we seek more מצוות, we come to appreciate them. This attitude is praised by, or more accurately, this opposite attitude is frowned upon by חז"ל and הקב"ה Himself.⁶ With this in mind, we can understand why after all the nations rejected the תורה, the Jewish People embraced it. By undertaking the רצון הבורא to bring a תורה lifestyle into the world, ה' demonstrates His affinity towards us. It also holds us in the highest regard in His eyes. We see this from the other part of the גמרא in מכות. We said it is a זכות to have more מצוות and תורה. We explained why it is a זכות to have מצוות, but what about תורה? In this light, חז"ל explain that תורה gives us the unique distinction of being called אדם.^{7,8}

¹ Reb Moshe: The Life and Ideals of HaGaon Rabbi Moshe Feinstein [Mesorah Publications], pg. 73

² שו"ת אגרות משה יורה דעה ג. עא

³ מכות כג:

⁴ רש"י שם ד"ה "לזכות את ישראל"

⁵ קידושין לא.

⁶ עבודה זרה ג. ג-:

⁷ בבא מציעא קיד:

⁸ ברכות סג:

Evidently, a life of תורה ומצוות is the most elevated lifestyle one can enjoy. This is the first aspect of קדושת ישראל. It is "geshmak to be a yid" simply because a Jew lives the best lifestyle there is. While people think on the surface that we live the most restrictive lifestyle, the תורה acts as a moral compass to guide us to not live a life of הפקרות. There is no lifestyle freer than that.⁹ People often quote the משל of the man who pities the fish stuck in a little bowl, and brings it out to the open world. For a little while, the fish starts flopping back and forth, looking like it is having the time of its life. However, as we know, the fish needs water to survive, and the flopping around was really showing that the fish is dying. So too, תורה is our life source. It may appear that those that don't have תורה are flopping around and partying (quite literally), but really they are dying, because they are not attached to the source of spiritual life.

Because we realize that the תורה lifestyle is the most optimal way of living, we want to have a relationship with the One who bestowed upon us this wonderful gift. Yet, the second aspect of קדושת ישראל indicates that this relationship works both ways. We have seen how the Jewish People are unique in that they are referred to as "אדם". The משנה tells us that while every human is created with a צלם אלקים, the Jews are called בנים למקום.¹⁰ Not only are we the sons, but the Jewish Nation is also the firstborn son of הקב"ה.¹¹ One explanation of this is that the firstborn son is the most precious among all of the children.¹² Part of our end of the relationship we have with הקב"ה is that we wear תפילין, which not only is a מצוה, but the פרשיות inside describe our love for ה' and the good He did and continues to do for us. תפילין הקב"ה also wears, and the פרשיות in His תפילין profess our greatness as a nation, i.e. His love for us.¹³ On top of being referred to as אדם and בנים, we are also called a ממלכת כהנים by הקב"ה.¹⁴ We know the כהנים are a specific group within כלל ישראל who are given special rights and responsibilities, to the extent that one is חייב מיתה if he tries to do the עבודה or eats תרומה. How, then, can we all be considered כהנים? One approach is simply that כהנים doesn't mean "priests" in every context, and could also mean "noblemen".¹⁵ In order to introduce the second approach, I would like to share a story. I used to have a Hispanic friend who converted to Judaism. This change was brought about by his mother, who grew up Catholic, asking the priest why his connection to God is any better than hers. In response to this question, the priest threw her out of the church, and she went searching for a religion that would give her the answers she was looking for. She ultimately came to Judaism, and after getting that answer, she started her and her children's conversion process. What was that answer? Through observing the מצוות, Judaism believes that every person can have a unique relationship with ה'. In this light, God is not "reserved" for the elite, but is there for anyone who seeks Him.¹⁶

The final aspect of קדושת ישראל I would like to touch upon comes from one more interpretation of the aforementioned פסוק referring to us as כהנים. In this approach, we play the role of כהנים in being the teachers of תורה. It is our prerogative to go out and spread the שם ה' to the other nations.¹⁷ This is a charge that has been passed down to us from the times of אברהם אבינו, whose

⁹ חצות ו.ג.

¹⁰ שם ג.ד.

¹¹ שמות ד.כז.

¹² זכור שור שם.

¹³ זכרות ו.

¹⁴ שמות יט.ו.

¹⁵ רש"י שם.

¹⁶ שד"ל שם.

¹⁷ ספורנו שם.

name comes from the term אב המון גוים.¹⁸ The נצ"ב explains this title to mean someone who is an אור לגוים, and goes out to teach the world about God.¹⁹ However, the נצ"ב continues, there is an important caveat. He explains that the גוים are compared to water, and the Jews to fire. We know that fire can be helpful to water by making it hot, but only when there is something in between, such as a pot. If fire and water were to interact head-on, the water would extinguish the fire. Similarly, the "pot" which separates us from the גוים is תורה. As long as we have תורה, we are meant to be an אור לגוים. However, if the גוים were to take that from us, then they would defeat us.²⁰

As was stated in the introduction, these three aspects are really interconnected. One way to understand this is that we have a love and appreciation of מצוות, and when you love something, you want to share it with others. Because we are ambassadors of ה' in this world, we are זוכה to a special relationship with Him. Another understanding is that the love of מצוות drives the relationship, and that relationship is what we want to share with others. Whichever way you look at it, the idea is that ה' wants us to be מפרסם His Name, and gives us the tools we need to do it.

Knowing our specific role in this world is a difficult task. However, what we see from here is that our general role as the Jewish People is very much clearly defined. Why is this how we introduce every יום of תפילה טוב? Perhaps the end can reveal the beginning. We conclude every יום of תפילה טוב with מקדש ישראל והזמנים. Part of our role is to be active participants in the creation of the calendar. The ימים טובים and making of the calendar fall under these umbrellas of our relationship with ה', and our mission of bringing Him into this world, and obviously under the umbrella of תורה ומצוות as our life-force. We should be זוכה to be able to accomplish our roles in this world, both in the פרט and in the כלל, and spread שם ה' in the world to the point where ה' דעה את ה'.

¹⁸ צראשית יז. 7-ה

¹⁹ העמק דבר שם

²⁰ הרחצ דבר שם