

KEDOSHIM

TYPES OF HOLINESS

A

Cold Fire

The second *pasuk* in the *parsha* says, “*Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh ani Hashem Elokeichem*. You are commanded to be holy, because I, your God, am holy” (Vayikra 19:2). The Midrash writes that this *parsha* of Kedoshim is parallel to the Ten Commandments that were given to Jewish People at Har Sinai. Specifically, the command of *kedoshim tihyu* relates to the first commandment, “I am Hashem, your God, who took you out of Mitzrayim from slavery” (Shemos 20:2). Here, the first verse also says “*ani Hashem Elokeichem*, I am Hashem, your God.”

This connection must be more than linguistic. We find the phrase “*ani Hashem Elokeichem*” many times in the Torah. Why did the Midrash note the connection between these two particular circumstances? In what way does the command of *kedoshim tihyu* expand on the first of the Ten Commandments?

The Shem Mishmuel explains this based on an interesting Gemara (Pesachim 118a) about Nevuchadnetzar, the evil tyrant and emperor of Babylonia who destroyed the First Temple. Three Jews from his kingdom—Chananya, Misha’el, and Azarya—were accused of serving Hashem instead of the idols that Nevuchadnetzar had decreed, so Nevuchadnetzar threw them into a fiery

furnace. Sefer Daniel (3) relates that a great miracle happened and they were not hurt at all. Nevuchadnetzar beheld the miracle and freed them. From then on, he became a somewhat God-fearing person. The Midrash relates an intriguing discussion that took place between the angels and Hashem.

The angel Yurkemu is in charge of all ice in the world—the arctic ice caps, the Antarctic ice pack, hail, and snow. When he saw that Chananya, Misha’el, and Azarya were thrown into the fiery furnace, he asked Hashem for permission to cause a hailstorm. The storm would smash the furnace and put out the flames. He thereby proposed to save these *tzaddikim* from death. Gavriel, another angel, said, “This is not enough of a miracle. I am the angel of fire. If I would use my powers of fire, there would be an even greater miracle. If God wills it, we can make the flames cold. This will be a greater miracle, because fire itself will save them from the fire.” God accepted Gavriel’s proposal. He made it seem like there was a real fire consuming the wood and other fuel, but there was no heat. The fire was cold.

What is the difference between a hailstorm that would extinguish the flames and turning the fires cold?

B

More than Control

The Shem Mishmuel explains that there are two ways in which Hashem displays His control of the world. One is by having one force of nature overwhelm another. For example, water puts out fire. But this does not demonstrate God’s unique power as Creator; it merely shows that He can control different forces. It is still plausible, though, that the forces of nature exist on their own. A miracle such as a sudden hailstorm putting out the fire would demonstrate God’s control of the various forces, but it would not demonstrate His creation of those forces.

The reality is that everything in the world only exists because of the will of God. Fire will only exist as long as God wills it so. If Hashem would stop, then fire would cease to exist. The same is true of water. We need to know that God is not merely utilizing these existing forces. They are only in existence in the first place because He makes them exist. Just as He makes fire burn hot, He can make it burn cold.

With the ten plagues in Egypt, Hashem displayed this ownership of the world. He didn't just manipulate one natural force to overwhelm another. Rather, He changed the very essence of those forces. He changed water into blood and dust into lice. During the plagues in Egypt, Hashem demonstrated that everything exists only because of His exalted will. Nothing is independent of His will. He grants things their basic existence.

Most of the time, we are not aware of this level of God's control. We think that things have an essence of their own and an independent existence. We take their existence for granted, because God has hidden Himself from our perception. But the reality is that if He were to remove His hiddenness, we would see only His will. His will causes existence, and He can change anything in the blink of an eye. A demonstration of this is what Gavriel was arguing for. If the fire itself would change, this would save the *tzaddikim* and, moreover, it would demonstrate that the only thing that makes things exist is God's will. When God's will changes, it changes the very essence of things.

C

The Ubiquitous Will of God

This is the main lesson of the first of the Ten Commandments "I am God, Who took you out of Egypt." Through the Exodus from Egypt, we learned that nothing exists other than Hashem's will. Everything is an expression of His *ratzon ha'elyon*. He can change

things to make them be or not be. He can change the very nature of anything in an instant.

All of our perceptions are what God wants us to perceive. When I walk down the street and breathe the air, it is God's will that this air exists. When I see the birds, it is God's will. When I see the beautiful trees blossoming in springtime, it is God's will. It's all God's will taking on different forms. "*Melo chol ha'aretz kev-odo*" (Yeshayahu 6:3)—everything is filled with God's will. His will is the *only* way that things can exist.

Chassidus focuses on this idea. "*Shivisi Hashem l'negdi samid*. I must feel Hashem's presence at all times" (Tehillim 16:8). Nature is a deception, and Hashem can instantaneously change it, as He did in Mitzrayim and as He did for Chananya, Misha'el, and Azarya.

The Jewish People knows this secret, the ability to see Hashem as if the mask has been removed. We can see Him in the water, air, ground, inanimate objects, growing things, and people.

D

Holy People of a Holy God

The *pasuk* we began with commands us to be holy because Hashem is holy. What kind of comparison is this? How can the Torah compare a humble, lowly, and infinitesimal human being to the almighty, exalted, infinite, limitless, holy God? All of the Chassidic masters raise this question. The Kotzker Rebbe, the grandfather of the Shem Mishmuel, says the *pasuk* gives us the answer. "Be holy, because I, Hashem, *your God*, am holy." The answer, says the Kotzker, comes from our relationship with Hashem.

A person with his natural limitations certainly cannot be compared to the holy God in any way. Humans are pulled by their lower parts, the desires of our physical bodies. How can we become holy and spiritual, detached from the physical? The answer

is that Hashem is holy. The Jew has the ability to attach himself to Hashem. *Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh ani Hashem Elokeichem*—I am holy and I am your God. Let Me become your God, attach yourselves to Me, and you will discover a miracle. The physical will become spiritual, because everything is My will.

God wants us to begin life with a lot of pull towards physicality. *Ki kadosh ani* teaches us that if we cling to Hashem, He will make us *kedoshim*, spiritual beings. He can take us away from the physical, even turn our physical sides into something spiritual!

What does the Torah want? The goal is to convert our physicality into spirituality. Every simple action that we do in this world—such as helping someone else or eating a meal—can become a spiritual event, as long as it fulfills God’s will. Eating is a basic biological need for the human organism to stay alive, but the Torah makes it into a *mitzva*—a holy, spiritual act. The physical becomes spiritual. We celebrate Pesach, when eating crackers is a profound spiritual experience. The *mitzvos* can change us from physical beings into spiritual beings. Incredible! This can happen because we are attached to Hashem. We eat the *matza* because we know it is Hashem’s will. When we eat the *matza* and thereby fulfill God’s will, we become more spiritual.

The Kabbalists have said that since the *matza* was baked as Jews rushed out of Egypt, it exemplifies Jewish faith in Hashem. Bnei Yisrael had the faith to march into a desert with nothing but a few *matzos*. The *matza* contains within it the spiritual force of belief. The Zohar refers to *matza* as *nahama d’meheimnusa*, bread of faith. When we eat *matza*, we grow in our faith, becoming more deeply believing Jews. We know how much strength the *matza* of Pesach gives us. We gain absolute faith in our Creator. He will help us march through the troubles of our day just as He helped the Jews who marched through the Red Sea.

We continue to have this incredible faith. We eat *matza* and turn a simple, physical food into a meaningful, spiritual event.

This is *ki kadosh ani*. In His holiness, God imbues the physical *matza* with spirituality, and we gain spirituality from eating it.

E

Two Forms of Holiness: *Kedusha* and *Tahara*

We find two Hebrew words to describe great holiness: *kadosh* and *tahor*. The *kohen gadol* on Yom Kippur is described as being both holy and pure. He pronounced the name of Hashem *b'kedusha* and *b'tahara*. What is the difference between these two words?

Tahara is the ability to overpower evil, for the spiritual to overwhelm and control the physical. At the level of *tahara*, the physical side still exists, but the spiritual side is able to control it. This is a great level. But there is an even higher one. A *kadosh* has no physicality at all. His physicality has become spirituality. His physical nature has become a vehicle for the spiritual. There is no conflict between the two parts of himself, because he has completely transformed his physical being into a tool for spirituality.

We have met people who have this *kedusha*. They don't have a struggle with their physical sides. They are totally focused on the spiritual, and the physical is their method to achieve spiritual heights. The physical has become an element of their holiness.

Shabbos is a gift of *kedusha*. Surprisingly, on Shabbos, the physical side is emphasized. We eat three meals instead of two. The meals are delicious and beautiful, and we drink wine. Really, though, it is all spirituality. This is the gift of the holiness of Shabbos. We call it *Shabbos kodesh*, the holy Shabbos. On Shabbos, the physical becomes spiritual. The Arizal said it is impossible for Shabbos food to make someone more physical. It can only make people more spiritual.

This is the lesson of *kedoshim tihyu*. It gives us tremendous hope and encouragement. We do not accept the premise that we are doomed to be slaves to our physical sides. We believe the

promise of this *pasuk*. “You will become holy,” says God. “You have the ability to become spiritual beings if you cling to My own holiness.” If we can see His will in everything, that nothing exists without it, then the physical will be converted into the spiritual.

F

Many Different Styles of Holiness

The Shem Mishmuel adds another interesting point about distinctly human holiness. The Midrash points out that when the angels speak about holiness, the expression used is *kadosh*, a single holiness. But when the Torah speaks about the holiness of people, it says *kedoshim*, in the plural form, meaning holies. There are many forms of human holiness. The Torah instructs us to “be holy in many ways.”

The concept of holiness means to be detached from enticements that pull us in the wrong direction, to be above them. A holy person separates himself from these physical attractions. But here is an incredible point. The angels of God are each created at a certain level. Angels cannot fall to lower levels of holiness. But angels have to be controlled not to ascend to higher levels. The angel doesn't have a physical side to entice him to fall. However, he does have a tremendous soul that yearns to go higher and higher, closer and closer to Hashem. But Hashem wants each angel to stay at his level. If his function is fire, he should stay with that. If he is responsible for ice, he must keep that responsibility. Angels don't get promotions.

Angels stand in place, on one level of holiness, as described in the *pasuk*, “I will give you the ability to walk among these standing ones” (Zecharya 3:7). The angels are standing; they do not move or progress. Man is a *mehaleich*, a mover and walker. He can fall—and he can rise.

Climbing Too Fast

As we hopefully climb the ladder of spirituality, we need two kinds of *kedusha*. We should avoid falling. We should separate ourselves from the things that will bring us down. Then, as we do go up in holiness, we must be careful not to go too high at one time. If a person leaps too high too fast, he can fall off the ladder and fall very far. *Kedoshim*, know that you require a double *kedusha*. Be careful not to fall and also not to leap too high too fast. Instead, climb the ladder of holiness step by step.

This is an important message. We have to be careful to take methodical spiritual steps, carefully and properly. I have seen this happen many times over the years. I have seen people who have gotten very excited about spirituality, and in their enthusiasm, they tried to take great leaps. But unfortunately, their leap was too large, and tragically, they fell. And when they fell, they fell very far.

We have to take spiritual steps with care. We should strive for the *kedusha* not to fall, but rather to rise at an appropriate pace. *Kedoshim* in plural teaches us these two kinds of holiness.

Parshas Acharei Mos deals with the problem of people leaping too high too fast. Nadav and Avihu got carried away with the ecstasy of spirituality and made a rush into the holy of holies. They ran too far too fast, and they died. Afterwards, Hashem told Aharon to be careful to go into the holy of holies only *b'zos*—with a certain procedure, at certain times, and under certain conditions.

Acharei Mos teaches us to have care in the climb upward. *Kedoshim* teaches us to be holy by not falling down. This is why the two *parshiyos* are placed back to back.

When the Jews came to Har Sinai, they were instructed to prepare for revelation by engaging in *prisha*—separation from intimacy—for a few days beforehand. This *mitzva* was designed to help Bnei Yisrael stay above the physical and not to fall. They also received a second *mitzva*: *hagbala*. Moshe instructed them not to

come too close to Har Sinai. He told the people not to approach the burning fire of Hashem, not to go too far beyond what was possible for them at that time.

We are continuously subjected to temptations of the flesh. We must be careful of them. The physical, however, can become spiritual but, in man's case, this requires a deliberate and steady process. We cannot make a headlong rush into spirituality. You can't wave a magic wand and turn instantaneously from a *rasha* into a *tzaddik*. It is usually a steady process with great effort and struggle before a person can say he is *kadosh*, spiritual and not physical.

The Torah expresses the word *kedoshim* in the plural form to instruct us about the two front lines in the attainment of *kedusha*. We must be deliberate, with an intelligent plan to climb the ladder of spirituality. We cannot jump too high. The Torah does not produce instant holiness. The Torah requires effort 365 days a year, 7 days a week, 12 months a year, for 50, 60, or 70 years and even more. "*V'hagisa bo yomam va'layla*. Study it and persevere day and night" (Yehoshua 1:8). It is a long process to achieve holiness, yet the Torah assures us that it is achievable.

H

Keep Strong

We should hold steady on this long and difficult road. We must maintain our persistence. Read the *shiurim* in this book steadily. Go to a Torah *shiur* once or twice a week. Maintain the steady pace, step by step, and you will accomplish much more than with the rash rush of intense exposure, which will necessarily be followed by a fall.

I always tell my students that they should plan a life that includes Torah study for two hours a day over the next fifty years rather than ten hours a day for only one or two years. The Torah

wants *v'hagisa bo yomam va'layla*, steady progress day in and day out. We climb the ladder of holiness step by step. We don't want to fall, and we also don't want to jump so high that we will fall.

Kedoshim teaches us to know our limits and where we can make progress. *Kedoshim tihyu*: Hashem assures us that we will be holy—He will help us be holy.

Let us take strength and inspiration from these words for our own progress, for the progress of the Jewish People and of the whole world. The world itself will surely become a holier and better place.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of cold fire?
2. According to Chassidus, what is the essence of all reality?
3. How are we compared to Hashem in holiness?
4. Give an example of a physical *mitzva* creating spirituality.
5. Define *tahara* and *kedusha* and distinguish between the two.
6. What is the difference between the *kedusha* of angels and of people?
7. Why does the word *kedoshim* appear in the plural form in the beginning of the *parsha*?
8. What is the lesson that we can learn from the story of Nadav and Avihu?

EXERCISE

1. Create a step-by-step program to develop your *kedusha* at a deliberate, steady pace—neither too fast nor too slow. Do this for a month. Keep a log of your progress.

