



*Parashah Insights*  
by  
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*Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom*

*Parashat Kedoshim*  
*The Gray Areas*

*You Shall be Holy*

“Speak to the entire assembly of the children of Israel and say to them, you shall be holy, because I, Hashem your G-d, am holy” (*Vayikra* 19:2).

The wording of this verse is unusual; Moshe was generally commanded to transmit Hashem’s instructions to the nation with the words, “Speak to the children of Israel.” Why, in this instance, was Moshe specifically told to address “the entire assembly of Israel?” (see commentaries of *Ibn Ezra* and *Kle Yakar*, who raise this question).

Our Sages explain that it was because of the special importance of the *parashah* of *Kedoshim*, which includes many commandments (*Vayikra Rabbah* 24:5). In addition, *Kedoshim* begins with the *mitzvah* to be holy and sanctified, a comprehensive commandment extending not only to all the *mitzvot* but also to a Jew’s every action. The very purpose of the *mitzvot* is the acquisition of sanctity. By fulfilling them, the Jewish people cleave to Hashem and are sanctified by His holiness. Our Sages teach that the Al-mighty bound the people of Israel to Himself, so to speak. In order to be worthy of this close attachment to Him, we are commanded to sanctify ourselves with His holiness through His Torah and *mitzvot* (*Tanhuma, Kedoshim* 5).

Let us try to understand more about the commandment of “You shall be holy,” so that we can better fulfill it.



## *The Sanctity of Mitzvot*

Our Sages explain the commandment, “You shall sanctify yourselves and you will be holy’ (*Vayikra* 11:44). If one sanctifies himself a little, he is greatly sanctified. [If he sanctifies himself] below, he will be sanctified from Above. [If he sanctifies himself] in this world, he will be sanctified in the World to Come” (*Yoma* 39a).

Rabbi Hayyim Vital explains this concept (*Shaare Kedushah*, Chapter 1). Every one of the Torah’s six hundred and thirteen commandments corresponds to a specific limb or sinew in man’s body. Each *mitzvah* has a two-fold impact: it brings about its own distinct rectification in the Higher Worlds, and also draws down sanctity from the lofty root of the *mitzvah* to the corresponding limb or sinew. We find this idea in the blessing recited prior to fulfilling a *mitzvah*: “...Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us concerning [the *mitzvah* we are about to fulfill].” The *Zohar* teaches that every *mitzvah* bestows sanctity on the limb used to fulfill it, so that one who fulfills all six hundred and thirteen commandments achieves complete spiritual perfection of his entire complement of limbs and sinews (*Tikune Zohar*, *Tikun* 18, p. 37b; *Tikun* 31, p. 76a).

In fact, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin writes that when we rouse ourselves to do a *mitzvah*, it makes an impression in the higher spiritual spheres even before we actually carry it out. We are clothed in an aura of light emanating from the spiritual world related to that particular *mitzvah*. This light envelops us and helps us bring the *mitzvah* to fruition (*Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Alef*, Chapter 6; *Ruah Hayyim*, *Avot* 1:1).

Our Sages teach that the Al-mighty bestows blessing and bounty on a lavish scale, giving fully and generously. This is why the Torah says, “You shall be holy.” If we make an initial attempt to sanctify ourselves, we will indeed “be holy,” because we will be rewarded with an abundance of sanctity from Heaven. Hashem imbues the world with sanctity in generous measure, so that even in our lowly world, man can attain holiness.<sup>1</sup>

The commandment to be holy teaches us that the purpose of *all* the *mitzvot* is to endow us with holiness, and that this should be our intent in fulfilling them. As we said, this idea is expressed in the blessing recited prior to doing a *mitzvah*. However, even when we fulfill a commandment which does not require a blessing, we should also have this intention in mind.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Parashah Insights on Shemini* for a fuller discussion of this topic.



Our task in this world is to achieve the greatest degree of sanctity we possibly can so that we will be worthy of being a Chariot for the Divine Presence, as we learn from the verse, “And they will make for Me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell among them” (*Shmot* 25:8). The *Alshich* comments that the Torah does not say, “I will dwell in it,” meaning in the Sanctuary, but rather, “I will dwell among them,” meaning amidst the people. The Al-mighty rests His Divine Presence primarily upon the people themselves, more so than on any building.

Our Sages teach that the commandment to build the Sanctuary and its vessels applies “in all future generations” (*Sanhedrin* 16b). Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin explains how we can build the Tabernacle “in all future generations,” even when the possibility of actually building a Tabernacle no longer exists. By making ourselves worthy of having Hashem’s Divine Presence dwell among us as it did in the Tabernacle, we build it even today (*Nefesh HaHayyim, Shaar Alef*, Chapter 4, note, “*l’zot*”).

### ***Technically Permissible***

How do we fulfill the commandment to be holy? Our Sages teach us, “Sanctify yourself with what is permitted to you” (*Yevamot* 20a). The Ramban explains that this means refraining even from what is technically permissible, as a means of distancing ourselves from lust and sin. If we train ourselves to refrain even from what is permitted, we will surely be able to separate ourselves from what is forbidden.

But there is much more to it as well. Mundane daily activities which are common to all mankind should also be elevated to the realm of service of Hashem. These permissible pleasures are the proving ground of sanctity. The Torah has positive commandments (obligations) and negative commandments (prohibitions). The commandment “you shall be holy” relates to a third realm, that of *reshut* (discretionary matters), what we may call life’s gray areas. These are activities and behaviors which are permitted; for example, the Torah allows us to marry, make a living, and consume meat and wine. However, this does not mean that we as Jews should spend our lives indulging in the pleasures of marriage, money, and food. We have two options: we can live in this world like animals and submerge ourselves in permitted pleasures. Alternatively, we can choose to live an angelic lifestyle even in the material world by sanctifying ourselves through restraint, transforming evil into good and impurity into purity. The choice between the two is the fundamental basis of service of Hashem.

In other faiths, discretionary matters have nothing to do with religious observance. One can be perfectly religious, while indulging without a qualm in the gratifying field of *reshut*. As Jews, we are bound by higher standards. We are commanded to be holy, sanctifying ourselves even regarding matters which are



halachically permitted. To do so is a *mitzvah*, and a very lofty level of service of Hashem.

In his commentary on the verse “You shall be holy,” the Ramban writes that one can be “a degenerate within the permitted bounds of the Torah.” These powerful words describe one who stays entirely within the limits of Torah law, yet lives like an animal (see also Rabbenu Behayye, Introduction to *Parashat Kedoshim*). He throws himself into fulfilling his desires to the utmost, taking care all the while not to cross the delicate line between permitted and forbidden. Approaching mundane activities in a holy manner and refraining from permitted excess is no easy task. It is in fact the greatest test we face.

When we fulfill a *mitzvah*, we are fully aware that we are involved in a religious activity and relate accordingly. For example, when we pray with *tallit* and *tefillin*, we clearly do so only because it is a *mitzvah* which bestows sanctity. Realistically, why else would anyone choose to wear a prayer shawl and phylacteries? So too, it will be easier for us to turn away from a tempting plateful of pork and beans than to exercise restraint when faced with a delectable glatt kosher smorgasbord. Black and white do’s and don’ts are more easily recognized as religious obligations. On the other hand, it is very difficult for us to recognize the need to serve the Al-mighty in the gray areas of *reshut*. This is why the Torah tells us, “‘You shall be holy.’ Sanctify yourself with what is permitted to you.”

### ***The Sanctity of Reshut***

We may say that this is the meaning of the verse, “When you go out to war on your enemies” (*Devarim* 21:10). Rashi explains that this refers to a “*milhemet reshut*,” a non-compulsory discretionary war fought for purposes of expansion or the like (Rambam, *Hilchot Melachim* 5:1). Although the Torah does not require us to undertake a *milhemet reshut*, it may permit it, if the Sanhedrin so decides.

The Arizal (*Sefer HaLikutim*, p. 60b) and the *Ohr HaHayyim* explain that we can also understand this verse as a reference to another type of “discretionary war.” Our personal “*milhemet reshut*” is the battle of the gray areas, which are not strictly defined as permitted or forbidden. The struggle is fierce, because it is exceptionally difficult to be aware of the sanctity in the ordinary physical deeds common to us and other nations, and even to animals. They all eat and sleep and reproduce, and so do we. What connection does any of this have to sanctity? The Torah instructs us to “go out to war on your enemies,” grappling with our evil inclination over matters of *reshut*, where we may not recognize the need for sanctification. In the words of our Sages, “Man should always incense his good inclination [to do battle] against his evil inclination” (*Berachot* 5a), “going out” to wage the war, so to speak.



This principle is also evident in our Forefather Yaakov's prophetic dream of "a ladder standing on earth and its head reaches the Heavens" (*Bereshit* 28:12). Yaakov had just spent fourteen years in the *Yeshivah* of Shem and Ever, engaged in unceasing Torah study and intensive spiritual labors. By their very nature, these endeavors were holy. They had an obvious connection to sanctity and the service of Hashem, with clearly defined demands and restrictions. Now, to his great anguish, Yaakov knew that he was on the brink of a totally new type of life. He would soon marry four wives and raise a large family, while surrounded by unscrupulous individuals – among them Lavan, his own father-in-law – who had not the slightest interest in spirituality. He would be forced to deal with the mundane realities of sheep, cattle, and slaves, and the pressing need to earn a living. As he saw it, these material pursuits threatened to consume him entirely, swallowing up his hard-won spiritual gains in the process. In no time, he feared, he would be fully immersed in the world of materialism and physicality.

In answer to his concerns, Hashem showed him the vision of the ladder, an allusion to the life of a saintly Jew in this world. From the physical standpoint, man is formed of "the dust of the earth" (*Bereshit* 2:7), and his feet are planted firmly on the ground. But he is also endowed with a G-dly soul, so that "his head reaches the Heavens." He can sanctify materialism and raise it to the level of spirituality by relating even to mundane matters as service of Hashem. Yaakov would eat and drink, marry, raise a family, and work for a living, as all men do. The difference was that Yaakov's actions would be in keeping with the dictates of *halachah*, and carried out for the sake of Heaven. When he awoke from his dream, he said, "Indeed Hashem is in this place, and I did not know" (*ibid.*28:16). This vision showed him something that he had not previously realized: Hashem is a constant presence even in the material world. Man can elevate mundane affairs to the level of spirituality, serving Hashem through his daily routine of permitted activities no less than he serves Him through Torah and *mitzvot*.

The foundation of a life where spirituality elevates even the sphere of *reshut* is laid shortly after birth, with a baby's circumcision at the age of eight days. The *mitzvah* of *brit milah* (the covenant of circumcision) consists of three stages, corresponding to the three types of commandments we fulfill: positive, negative, and those which sanctify mundane permitted functions.

The first stage of *milah* is cutting off the foreskin (*orlah*). The *orlah* is called the "portion of the snake," symbolic of evil. We remove it completely and bury it in the dust. Cutting off the *orlah* represents severing all connection with anything forbidden by the Torah's three hundred and sixty-five negative commandments.



The last stage of *milah* is revelation of the *atarah*, which is symbolic of holiness. This stage in the process of *milah* represents fulfillment of the two hundred and forty-eight positive commandments.<sup>2</sup>

There is also a middle stage: *periah*, uncovering the head of the organ by splitting the fine inner layer of skin and pushing it inward toward the body, symbolically directing it to holiness.<sup>3</sup> *Periah* represents elevating and sanctifying the discretionary activities which fill our lives – or in other words, the commandment of “You shall be holy.” *Periah* does not cut away this layer of skin. It pushes it inwards to reveal the *atarah*, rather than letting it fall back and cover it. So too, we do not “cut away” all permitted activities. We sanctify them by directing them to their proper place in the service of Hashem, rather than letting them go unchecked as a source of personal pleasure.

## ***Levels***

Positive and negative commandments have clear halachic guidelines. Rabbi Yosef Irgas raises an important question: how are we to classify and define our obligation to “be holy?” What must we do and how far must we go?

He writes that there is no one definitive answer to this question. Sanctification of physicality by separating ourselves from an excess of material pleasure has many levels. It is a highly individual matter, in keeping with personal spiritual stature; what is right for one is not necessarily right for another. This is so because life is growth – ideally, we should continue to progress and develop spiritually as long as we live. As we advance in spirituality, we should make equivalent strides in our level of separation from permitted pleasures. Just as there is no specified limit on achievement in spiritual growth, there is no limit on our corresponding level of sanctification and separation from worldly gratification. The greater we grow in the former realm, the greater the demands upon us in the latter (*Shomer Emunim*, Second Introduction to the Second Discussion).

Now we can understand why this *parashah* was read to the whole nation. The commandment to sanctify ourselves is not intended only for the very saintly; it is relevant to every Jew, bar none, whatever his level. It accompanies us throughout our lives in all we do, mundane concerns included. It is not a *mitzvah* which we fulfill and are done with; it grows as we do. “You shall be holy” was read to the entire

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<sup>2</sup> See *Parashah Insights on Lech Lecha* for a fuller discussion of this topic.

<sup>3</sup> The Arizal teaches that *periah* must be done as a separate step following the cutting of the *orlah*, rather than cutting off both layers of skin together (*Shaar HaMitzvot, Lech Lecha* 9a, cited in my work *Ateret Shalom, Ot Kaf*).



congregation as one, because it is a lifelong obligation for “the entire assembly of the children of Israel.”

## *Defined by Intent*

Man and animal have much in common: they both eat, sleep, and reproduce. Apparently, “man’s advantage over beast is nothing” (*Kohelet* 3:19).

What really makes man superior to an animal?

The difference lies in man’s thoughts and intentions as he does his deeds. If he eats in order to be healthy and strong so that he can serve the Creator, and is careful to consume only kosher foods with the required blessings before and after, his eating is imbued with great sanctity. We learn from the Kabbalistic intents related to eating that every detail of the consumption of food has great profundity (see *Shaar HaMitzvot, Parashat Ekev*).

The Arizal teaches that the same is true of sleep (see his explanation of the Kabbalistic intents for the blessings “Who clothes the naked” and “Who gives strength to the weary” (*Shaar HaKavanot*, p. 2b,c). With the proper attitude, sleep is more than a pleasurable break from the day’s demands. It restores and rejuvenates us physically and spiritually, preparing us for a new day of Divine service. Sleep also rectifies the soul; while we are asleep at night, the soul ascends to the Higher Worlds where it is renewed and rectified, as we learn from the verse, “They are new every morning, great is Your faithfulness” (*Echah* 3:23).

Although they may appear to be entirely physical, even marital relations have a lofty purpose: to bring pure souls into the world, and to fulfill one’s halachic obligation to his wife at the appropriate times. Engaging in marital relations in sanctity has a very great spiritual impact in all the Higher Worlds, bringing them an influx of bounty.

As we see, then, it is our thoughts and intents which transform mundane physical acts into pure, sanctified behavior. The *Malbim* illustrates this concept with a vivid parable.

Three wedding ceremonies took place one evening, complete with *huppah* and *kiddushin*, a festive meal, and joyous celebration in honor of the bride and groom. However, a discerning eye could see that these weddings were not really identical. One was essentially a business deal, contracted because of the bride’s promising financial prospects. The second was a license for lust, undertaken because of the bride’s exceptional beauty. Only the third was a true Jewish wedding, bringing the bride and groom together in sanctity to build a home dedicated to the service of



Hashem. Everything that went into this third wedding was a *mitzvah*. The couple's relationship would be a holy one, dedicated to the fulfillment of the Al-mighty's commandment to bring Jewish children into the world, and every aspect of their home would be enriched by the sanctity of Torah and *mitzvot* (see *Artzot HaShalom*).

It is up to us to choose. We can be upright animals on two, G-d forbid, or we can elevate even our most mundane deeds to the level of pure *mitzvot*, achieving lofty levels of sanctity. This is the *mitzvah* of "You shall be holy" (see *Rabbenu Behayye, Devarim 13:5*)

### ***Spiritual Bliss***

The sanctity attained through *mitzvot* is a source of unequalled spiritual bliss and satisfaction, which can be acquired in this world. As our Sages tell us, "One moment of repentance and good deeds in this world is better than the entire life of the World to Come" (*Avot 4:17*).

One who achieves this sanctity by serving Hashem in the area of *reshut* merits an exceptionally high level of spiritual pleasure. One can only appreciate light if he has emerged from darkness (*Zohar*, vol II, p.184a). Overcoming the darkness of material desire produces spiritual light of unparalleled brilliance, illuminating both the soul and the body of one who serves Hashem on this high level.

This may be the meaning of our Sages' injunction to "Sanctify yourself with what is permitted to you." While the commandment to be holy separates us from physical pleasures, the intense spiritual enjoyment derived from laboring in Torah and *mitzvot* is permitted, because it is sanctified and pure. We may interpret our Sages' teaching, "One who enjoys the labor of his hands is greater than one who fears Heaven" (*Berachot 8a*), as a reference to this principle. In this context, "one who enjoys the labor of his hands" basks in the spiritual pleasure of laboring in Torah and *mitzvot*. "One who fears Heaven" is the exceptionally pious individual who fears that this pleasure detracts from the element of fulfilling *mitzvot* strictly for the sake of Heaven, with no element of personal gain (see Introduction to *Egle Tal*). This is so even if the "gain" is the spiritual pleasure of basking in the Heavenly aura which envelops man in this world when he engages in Torah and *mitzvot* (*Ruah Hayyim, Avot 1:1*).

The greater person is the one who eschews all physical delights and takes pleasure only in spiritual delights. This lofty level is the product of serving Hashem with all one's heart and soul. The more we curtail our physical pleasures, the more capable we will be of enjoying spiritual pleasures.



King David said, “And for me, closeness to G-d is good” (*Tehillim* 73:28). Rather than seeking the dubious pleasure of worldly delights, we should strive for the ecstasy of closeness to G-d, achieved through the sanctity of the *mitzvot*. Not only is this pleasure permitted, it is actually a great *mitzvah*, as we learn from the verse, “Because you did not serve Hashem your G-d with joy and with a glad heart, when you had everything in abundance” (*Devarim* 28:47). “Everything in abundance” is the sanctity which derives from serving Hashem. When we attain it, we merit cleaving to Him, a privilege and a source of spiritual ecstasy even in this world, enjoyed by our nation alone (see Introduction to *Shaar HaMitzvot*, p. 1a, “*gam da*” and *Shaar Ruah Hakodesh*, p. 10b).

We can be holy. We can serve Hashem by elevating material endeavors to spiritual bliss, and by so doing, come close to Him. The Torah tells us, “And you who cleave to Hashem your G-d are all alive today” (*Devarim* 4:4). If we cleave to Hashem, we merit happiness while alive in this world, and blissful eternal life in the World to Come.

*This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.*