

PARSHA ACHAREI MOT KEDOSHIM

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SANCTIFY YOURSELF IN WHAT IS PERMITTED

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "You shall be holy, for I, Hashem your G-d, am holy" (Vayikra 19:2).

In Sefer Vayikra we find the commandment, "You shall be holy," which means "You shall be separate." Likewise in Parsha Shemini we read, "You are to sanctify yourselves and you shall become holy, for I am holy" (Vayikra 11:44). The Midrash explains, "As I am separate, so shall you be separate. As I am holy, so shall you be holy" (Vayikra Rabba 24:4).

We need to understand what the Midrash means by this. What human being can claim to have reached the supreme degree of holiness of the King of kings, Who is surrounded by angels that fear and tremble before Him? The evil inclination resides in the heart of man, trying to make him stumble with each step and doing everything it can to lead him onto the wrong path. Can we possibly think, despite all the difficulties that hinder our service of G-d, that we can lift ourselves to such high levels of sanctity? That being the case, how can our holiness resemble that of the Creator, and what comparison can be made with Him?

On the verse, "Every tongue shall swear" (Isaiah 45:23), our Sages explain that this refers to the day of birth, when a person is made to swear an oath: "Be righteous and never be wicked; and even if the whole world tells you, 'You are righteous,' consider yourself wicked. Always bear in mind that the Holy One, blessed be He, is pure, that His ministers are pure, and that the soul He gave you is pure. If you preserve it in purity, well and good; if not, I will take it away from you" (Niddah 30b). This oath, however, seems to be based on an erroneous assumption, for can a person know what awaits him in this world? Does he know just to what degree he must persevere against the evil inclination? When taking this oath, a person's soul is in the supernal worlds, where evil is absent. He is not subjugated to the evil inclination and obviously thinks that being righteous (not wicked) is the clear choice. He is thus clearly prepared to take an oath to this. Yet when a person comes into this world and is confronted by difficult trials, he seems to step back and regrets the oath that he made, for he did not initially realize that he would have to fight the evil inclination.

With G-d's help, I would like to explain that before a person's arrival into this world, and even before he takes an oath, everyone is shown all the difficulties and trials that he must face. Before a person takes an oath, he is warned that difficult battles await him. Hence he clearly understands what he is swearing to and what awaits him, and therefore it is not a false oath.

The Gemara tells us, "A light shines above the head [of the fetus], and it looks and sees from one end of the world to the other" (Niddah 30b). It is shown the whole world, along with all the trials it must face, so that it can understand where it is going. It is told that in order to win the battles that await it, it must ensure

that this light remains constantly shining above its head, meaning the light of the Torah. It is then assured of winning the war against the evil inclination. Thus even before taking this oath, a person is aware of what he must endure in this world, meaning that his oath is valid.

A person is made to take an oath precisely while his soul is still in the supernal worlds, where it is surrounded by holiness and purity, a place of sanctity and without blemish. This happens so that the soul can infuse itself with holiness, and so that – at the very instant, immersed by the tremendous forces of holiness found in the supernal worlds – this can serve as the impetus for a life of perfection, a life in which a person must confront the trials found along his path. Before descending into this world, G-d gives a person all the strength he needs to fight the evil inclination, providing him with the reserves of holiness and purity that he requires. Thus a person arrives in this world equipped with spiritual sustenance that serves as a weapon against the evil inclination. He also has the strength to keep his oath, for G-d does not send trials to people if they cannot overcome them.

This connects with the explanation of our Sages on the verse, "Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out" (Devarim 28:6). Here the Sages explained, "That your departure from the world shall be as your entry into it: Just as you entered it without sin, so may you leave it without [sin]" (Bava Metzia 107a). This is what is required of us: Since we came into this world infused with supreme holiness and possessing great strength, we must be careful not to lose these, for we must leave this world with exactly the same degree of holiness that surrounded us upon our arrival.

That is why G-d commands us, "Be holy." This does not mean reaching G-d's level, which is clearly impossible. We must be as holy as we were before descending into this world, to the time when we absorbed the purity that emanated from the Celestial Throne. If we draw this holiness to ourselves, G-d will provide us with additional holiness, as it is written: "I am Hashem, Who sanctifies you" (Vayikra 20:8). We understand what holiness this consists of, for we were infused with it even before being born. Such holiness is rooted deep within us, and G-d reminds us of the oath that we took to be righteous and not wicked. We must therefore carefully guard this holiness so as not to lose it, and we must use this power to eradicate the evil inclination and merit eternal life.

This is what G-d is telling us by the phrase "Be holy." The Zohar adds that all the mitzvot given by G-d constitute sage advice and implements that allow us to attain this level of holiness. That being the case, we have the ability to maintain this exceptional level of holiness. Indeed, the keys to achieving it are completely in our hands, for we have everything we need to succeed.

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Objects of Holiness

It is written, “You shall not round the corners of your head, and you shall not destroy the corners of your beard” (Vayikra 19:27).

Without a doubt, one of the ways of recognizing Jews around the world is by the sidelocks and beards that can be seen on the faces of observant Jews. Although the Torah only commands us not to completely shave the corners of the beard and the head, from the time of the Rishonim Ba’alei HaTosafot we have had the custom of letting peyot grow on children from the age of three.

We also find in the Gemara (Nazir 41b) that we must not even cut the corners of the head with scissors, for they are similar to a razor. People have therefore adopted the habit, when cutting children’s hair, not to touch the hair on the sides. We find an even clearer explanation later in the Responsa of the Tashbetz (3:93), which states: “Whatever the case, Jews must separate themselves from the other nations. They can be recognized by the way they are shaved, and everyone who sees them will realize that they are among the blessed offspring of G-d.” Peyot left on the sides of the head have, over time, become “objects of holiness,” so much so that Yemenite Jews adopted the custom of holding them while taking an oath. They considered them as a sign of belonging to the blessed lineage of G-d, Who separated them from the other nations of the world. Whoever did not possess this sign was not, in principle, considered a Jew.

Likewise in his book Tiferet Adam, the Chafetz Chaim remembers Jews taking an oath by swearing by their peyot.

I Have Never Shaved

The following story was told by Rabbi Stern, the Rav of the Ezrat Torah neighborhood of Jerusalem, after recovering from a severe illness:

“Even before starting chemotherapy, the medical team at the hospital told me about the chances of my hair falling out. I then went to ask for a blessing from Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, explaining to him that I would soon be losing my hair.

“The Rav asked me if I had already shaved in the past, to which I said no. He then advised me to go to the Kotel and tell G-d that up until now I have been very careful to keep my beard, but from now on I am appointing Him as my Guarantor.

“I left Bnei Brak for the Kotel, where I did exactly as the Rav told me.” Rabbi Stern concluded his story by describing the miracle that he experienced: “Thank G-d, as you can see, not a single hair left my face.”

Only the Peyot Remained

Still on the same subject, the book Aleinu Leshabeach recounts the story of a learned avrech who went to see the gaon Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky with his seven-year-old son to tell the Rav what had happened to them.

This small boy, who had been schooled in one of the talmudei Torah in Bnei Brak, had been struck by cancer. At a certain stage,

when the need for chemotherapy became clear, the parents told their son that he would probably lose all of his hair because of the treatment he would have to undergo. The boy wasn’t particularly afraid, but nevertheless said to his parents: “I don’t care about my hair. But will I still be called a ‘Jewish child’ if I lose my peyot?” At that point, he burst into bitter weeping. As the avrech told this story to the Rav, he added that his son turned to the wall and uttered a moving prayer to Hashem, a prayer that emanated from the depths of his heart:

“Merciful Father, I’m certain that everything You send me is for the good. I’m convinced of that. Nobody has as much pity on me as You. This is what my parents have always told me. That’s why I lovingly accept the illness that You sent me, and I’m even wholeheartedly prepared to undergo difficult treatments. In fact I’m convinced that You won’t abandon me or turn away from me during my treatments either. You’ll always be with me to protect me. I’m even prepared to sacrifice my hair, which will be very humiliating. I’m ready for everything. Really everything. But my peyot?” He then burst into tears. “My peyot? How can I possibly give them up? It’s what symbolizes a Jewish child! That’s what I want to continue being! I beg You, heavenly Father, just leave my peyot! Don’t let the chemotherapy take them away!”

The avrech then said, “He melted into tears and continued to pray like this for a long time, all the while we, his parents, stood next to him and wept along with him.”

He then pointed to his son and exclaimed, “That’s when a miracle occurred! I brought the boy here so you can see with your own eyes the incredible gift that G-d gave us! Just as a father has pity on his son, G-d listens to prayer that emerges from a pure heart. My son lost all his hair except for his peyot, which weren’t touched!”

With great emotion, the father recounted how the doctors had difficulty believing what they saw, and they affirmed that they had never read of such a case in medical history.

Very moved by this story, Rav Kanievsky summoned the members of his household and showed them the child who had been able to keep his peyot, just as he had asked Hashem.

Guard Your Tongue

Not the Right Approach

We may sometimes commit a sin because we have trivialized it. In fact when we see a sin being frequently committed by numerous people, who no longer treat it as a prohibition, we also become less stringent in observing it. However this is not the right approach to take. Even if we are sometimes confronted by prominent figures who do not control their tongues, we must not follow their example (however we must judge them favorably by considering that they don’t realize the gravity of what they are doing).

– Sha’ar HaTevunah

The Barrier of Shame

It is written, “With righteousness shall you judge your fellow” (Vayikra 19:15).

How can we lie to ourselves by judging people favorably in every situation if we see them doing the very opposite?

The explanation brought by the Maharil Diskin is the following: Our Sages affirm in the Gemara, “Any man who is insolent eventually stumbles into sin” (Taanith 7b). In fact shame serves as a barrier to sin. However if someone has already broken the barrier of shame, then nobody can prevent him from sinning. Furthermore it is said, “It is good to be timid, for then we are not quick to sin.”

The same applies to the influence that we exert on others. The first to commit a sin completely breaks the barrier of shame. As for the second person, he doesn't need to demonstrate as much brazenness as the first in order to sin, and as for the third person, even less, for this barrier has already been broken before them. This explains why the sin of profaning G-d's Name is so grave.

A person who sins in public weakens people's fear – the natural worry and shame that is embedded in each of us with regards to sin – and thus makes the community sin.

We can now understand that it is for our benefit that the Sages advised us to judge others favorably, in order to prevent us from finding an opening in our heart to break the barrier of shame. In fact if we infuse ourselves with the idea that all our neighbors are righteous, how could we possibly dare be the first ones to sin? On the other hand, if we try to find fault with others, we will be more inclined to sin in a moment of weakness or discouragement.

The Shechinah Never Leaves

It is written, “And so shall he do for the Tent of Meeting, which dwells with them among their defilements” (Vayikra 16:16).

Rashi comments: “Although they are unclean, the Shechinah is among them.”

The Zohar affirms that when the Attribute of Mercy awakens to descend into this world, the Shechinah takes on the guise of a woman, a mother.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin brings the following explanation: A father and mother both love their baby immensely. Both of them hug and embrace him with all their heart. Yet when their baby dirties himself, the father leaves because he doesn't have the patience to deal with this. At that point the mother takes the baby, washes and cleans him. She does not leave, nor does she stop kissing him even if dirty.

This refers to the verse, “which dwells with them among their defilements,” concerning which Rashi said: “Although they are unclean, the Shechinah is among them.”

In fact even when the Children of Israel dirty themselves by committing sins, the Shechinah remains with them. Yet at that point it takes on the guise of a woman, a mother, who tries to wash her children and cleanse them of their sins.

Worse than All Sins of the Torah

It is written, “Which dwells with them among their defilements” (Vayikra 16:16).

From this verse, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov teaches that the fault of arrogance is worse than all the sins of the Torah. In fact when the Children of Israel sinned, the Torah said: “Which dwells with them among their

defilements” – meaning that the Shechinah dwelled among them even when they were deeply mired in sin and transgression. Yet in regards to an arrogant man, we read: “One with haughty eyes and an arrogant heart, him I cannot bear” (Tehillim 101:5), and here our Sages state that G-d says: “I and he cannot both dwell in the world” (Sotah 5a).

In the Light of the Parsha

Israel's Deliverance Depends Solely on Tears

It is written, “For any man who curses his father or mother shall be put to death” (Vayikra 20:9).

Our Sages have noted, “Come and see how delightful the mitzvah of honoring parents is to the Holy One, blessed be He, Who rewards both the righteous and the wicked for the fulfillment of this mitzvah” (Tanchuma, Kedoshim 15). From where do we learn this? From the wicked Esav, to whom Hashem granted this great reward because he honored his father. Rabbi Elazar affirms that Esav shed three tears: One from his right eye, one from his left eye, and a third that coalesced in his eye but did not fall. When did this occur? When Isaac blessed Jacob. See how much tranquility G-d procured for him as a reward? Our Sages add (Yilmadeinu, Bereshith 126) that three conflicts broke out in Israel because of the three tears shed by Esav, as it is written: “You have fed them bread of tears, and You have given them to drink tears in large measure [dema'ot shalish – three tears]” (Tehillim 80:6).

The holy Zohar also states that Israel's deliverance depends solely on tears (Zohar II:12b). When the tears shed by Esav before his father will be compensated (by tears shed by Israel), and when the merit of the former will have ended, the Jewish people will be delivered, for these are the tears that brought it into exile. Thus we read, “With weeping they will come, and through supplications I will bring them” (Jeremiah 31:8).

However Esav did not fulfill this mitzvah correctly, and therefore he should not have merited such a reward! Furthermore, G-d seems to have dealt strictly with Israel because of these tears, which is difficult to understand. In reality, when Esav wept before his father Isaac, the Attribute of Justice presented itself before G-d and said: “Sovereign of the universe, is this wicked one crying because of a mitzvah that he could not fulfill? No! He's crying only because of the reward and blessings that Jacob took from him! Because he is afflicted on account of a material reward, the Children of Israel cannot be expected to be eager for mitzvot like this wicked one, who is only eager to be rewarded for mitzvot!” Upon hearing this, G-d granted a reward to Esav and the Jewish people were dispersed among the nations. They would not emerge from exile until the tears of that wicked one are annulled by the tears of the Jewish people. They will not be compensated by tears brought about by suffering – which result from harsh decrees – but rather by tears brought about by the suffering of the Shechinah. Likewise the Sages tell us (Bava Metzia 59a) that since the destruction of the Temple, the gates of prayer have been locked, as it is written: “Though I would cry out and plead, He shut out my prayer” (Eicha 3:8). However the gates of tears are never closed, as it is written: “Hear my prayer, Hashem. Give ear to my outcry – be not mute to my tears!” (Tehillim 39:13).