

Speak to the entire congregation of Bnei Yisrael and say to them, “You shall be holy for I am holy.” (19:2)

A while ago I received a call from a *Peninim* reader, concerned about the fact that I had distinguished between the focus of punishment meted out to a Jew and that meted out to a gentile. Hashem’s punishment of the Jewish nation is therapeutic, to elevate and improve the individual Jews. The punishment that Hashem metes out to the gentile world is punitive. Apparently, more is demanded of us. The caller took issue with the notion that I was differentiating between people. I apologized, but reality is what it is. At times, it might make us uncomfortable. In *Parashas Kedoshim*, we are presented with the injunction, *Kedoshim t’heyu*, which basically exhorts the Jew to strive for holiness. We are different; our lives are different; our goals and objectives are different. In order to achieve what is expected of us, we must maintain ourselves on an elevated status of morality, ethicality and holiness. This is why *Kedoshim t’heyu* plays such a critical role in Judaism.

Daber el kol adas Bnei Yisrael, “Speak to the entire congregation of *Bnei Yisrael*.” The *pasuk* emphasizes that this command should be delivered to the entire nation assembled together. *Rashi* explains that this section of the Torah was spoken to an assembly of the entire nation. This is because a majority of the essential elements of Torah are dependent upon it.

Rashi’s comment begs elucidation. Was not the entire Torah transmitted to the whole congregation? The Torah is not exclusionary. Its *mitzvos* apply to everyone. Why was this particular section of Torah presented in a communal setting? Indeed, *Rashi* details the dynamics of the teaching process to *Klal Yisrael*: The entire congregation received one lesson; the *Zekeinim*, Elders, received two; *Bnei Aharon* heard these lessons three times, and *Aharon HaKohen* heard it four times. Thus, everybody was taught the Torah. Why is *Kedoshim t’heyu* singled out to be taught to everyone at **one** time?

The *Sifsei Chachamim* explains that the other lessons were addressed primarily to the men, while the *mitzvah* of *Kedoshim t’heyu* was spoken to everyone: men, women and children. Alternatively, the people were normally taught the Torah in portions, allowing for these parts of it to be explained. *Parashas Kedoshim* was unique in that it was taught to the people in one continuous address. *Maharal* adds that whereas the nation was not compelled to attend the other Torah teaching sessions, the gathering for *Kedoshim t’heyu* was compulsory. Apparently, *Kedoshim t’heyu*, replete with its many *mitzvos* addressing *kedushas Yisrael*, the sanctity of the Jew, could not be missed. Moreover, these *mitzvos* could neither be heard in chapters, nor could the nation be broken into groups for its address. They had to **all** be **together**, to hear it all in one session. Why?

Horav Mordechai Miller, zl, analyzes what it means to have Hashem in our presence and the implications. He cites the *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avos* 3:7, “If ten people sit together and engage in Torah study, the Divine Presence rests among them, as it is stated:

Elokim nitzav ba'adas Keil, 'G-d stands in an assembly of Keil.'" The *Mishnah* continues that Hashem's Presence rests on a group of five people, citing the *pasuk*, "He has established His gathering upon earth." Using the *pasuk*, "In the midst of Judges He judges," *Chazal* say that the Divine Presence resides in an assembly of three. Two people also have the opportunity for Hashem's Presence to be in their midst, as it says, "Then the G-d-fearing people spoke, one man to his neighbor, and Hashem listened and heard." Last, they prove that this Divine phenomenon applies even when one person studies Torah, quoting the *pasuk*, "In every place in which I cause My Name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you."

This *Mishnah* evokes an obvious question: If a single, solitary person feels Hashem's Presence when he is engaged in a spiritual endeavor, why is it necessary to quote other *pesukim* to prove that larger groups sense Hashem's Presence as well? The *Mishnah* enumerates these *pesukim* by design. *Eitz Yosef* explains that each of the *pesukim* describes a different manifestation of Hashem's Presence as it rests among us. When a person studies alone, Hashem says, *Avo eilecha*, "I will come to you." *Avo* is a term used to describe a chance encounter. When two people study together, the usual expression is *Va'yaksheiv Hashem va'yishma*, "Hashem listened and heard." This indicates greater intent and an increased sensation of His Presence. As the number of people ascends to three, five and ten, the degrees of manifestation of Hashem's Presence likewise increases.

Rav Miller derives an important principle from the *Mishnah*: Hashem manifests His Presence in our midst, in varying degrees. The larger the group, the greater the intensity with which the members feel His Presence. A *minyana*, quorum of ten, feels Hashem's Presence more fervently and with greater passion than a group of five. Five people have a deeper awareness, a more profound knowledge of His Presence, than a smaller group of three, two or one. Additionally, the feeling of closeness to Hashem does not necessarily have to be inspired exclusively by Torah study. It may be precipitated by any gathering that is for the sake of Heaven, which increases *kavod Shomayim*, the glory of Heaven. Any assembly, whose focus and goal are to spread the light of spirituality in the world, earns the Divine experience. The larger the number, the greater the intensity and more potent the feeling of the Divine Presence.

Hashem never leaves us, regardless of our iniquitous actions. The problem is that when we sin, we become spiritually defiled, causing us to become numb. We are unable to sense the Divine Spirit within our midst. A great *Chassidic* Master said, "One can be for Hashem, or he can be against Hashem, but he cannot be without Hashem. The Almighty is always there."

If a Presence exists even when the individual is in spiritual decline, one may deduce that it certainly exists when he is on a lofty spiritual plane. Hashem's Presence is magnified in greater intensity when the entire nation gathers together for the exclusive purpose of hearing Hashem's Word. This was the nature of the *Hakhel* gathering. It was an experience that was without equal. Certainly, Hashem's Presence was felt in a manner that was unprecedented and unrivaled.

With this in mind, we must acknowledge something of which we are acutely aware deep down, but all too often ignore. Hashem is with us all of the time. His Presence is felt even stronger when we are in *shul*, with many other Jews. Yet, this awareness does not seem to accomplish anything for us. Does it change how we act, how we speak, how we interact with others? Does our mode of prayer take on a new fervor knowing that Hashem is with us – waiting, listening? We have an awesome responsibility to maintain standards that acknowledges the Company that is constantly accompanying us.