

You shall be holy for holy am I. (19:2)

Be holy because holiness means to be G-d-like. Ki kadosh Ani, “because I/Hashem am holy.” It is not enough to be observant -- or even to be virtuous or righteous. One must strive for kedushah, holiness, sanctity, because that defines Judaism. Kedushah means to be separate, distinct, different, to be unlike other peoples. Our laws are different; our definition of virtue and kindness is not subject to human rationale. It is all mandated by the Torah. Hashem sets before us the Law which, as interpreted by our Sages, defines what is right and what is wrong, what is virtuous and what is not. In other words, we are different because our laws, our way of life, are different. It is when we become like them that our kedushah suffers.

Horav Yaakov Meir Schechter, Shlita, explains that the greatest difference between a life of holiness and a life of impurity lies in our relationship with others. Sanctity manifests itself in a readiness to give to others, whereas impurity is reflected in our desire to take, to receive.

The Rosh Yeshivah explains that our soul's descent into this world is for one purpose: to give – to our families, our friends and community, both spiritually and materially. This includes our efforts to raise a moral, observant family, to spread faith in Hashem throughout the world, to promote Torah study and mitzvah performance to our people. Whatever we receive from Hashem is only for the purpose of sharing it and giving it to others. When we do this, we journey on the path toward holiness.

It is in this vein that the Zohar refers to tzaddikim, righteous Jews, as malachim, angels. Just as angels exist only to fulfill the ratzon, will, of G-d, by going where they are sent and giving as they are commanded, so, too, tzaddikim exist only for the purpose of giving to others. They live only to be mekayeim, fulfill, the tzivui, command, of Hashem. Indeed, even when a tzaddik works on perfecting himself, he does so because he, too, is part of the world which he is mandated to improve. Thus, he is not a receiver, but a giver. He is giving to the world.

Impurity, on the other hand, is quite the opposite of kedushah. It is a manifestation of selfishness and indifference, reflecting the desire to live without giving. Even when a selfish man does give (and, rare as it is, it does occur upon occasion), it is only in order to receive more. As Moshe Rabbeinu, the quintessential Jew, was about to take leave of this world, he made one last request of Hashem (cited in Devarim Rabbah 11:5), “Master of the world,” he pleaded, “there is just one thing that I ask of you before I die: let the heavens and depths split open, so that all of the people may see clearly that there is none other than You.”

Rav Schechter notes that every human action can be executed in one of two ways. A grocer, for example, can serve his customers for the purpose of earning a profit. Under such circumstances, his thoughts are obviously focused on himself. The customer is merely a medium for satisfying the grocer's needs. The customer means nothing to him personally. On the other hand, it is the grocer who is interested in the welfare of his customers that demonstrates a genuine sense of caring.

When the customers enter his establishment, he does something unique: he smiles and acts with sincere friendliness. Such an attitude reflects holiness. Marital relationships succeed or fail on the dichotomy of kedushah versus impurity. When each partner feels that he/she is giving more to the relationship than he is receiving, he/she has a problem. When each side wants to receive more – a problem ensues. The demands begin, followed by tensions, which create the sparks that, when ignited, leave the marriage in flames.

The bottom line of kedushah, and, indeed, of all successful relationships, is: If we want to bring blessing into this world, we must become givers. By giving, rather than receiving, we open up the Heavenly channels of grace.

Chazal (Gittin 56b) state: “There is an insignificant creation in My (Hashem’s) world, called the flea! [Why is it insignificant?] For it eats, but does not secrete. A flea takes, but gives nothing out. Thus, it is completely removed from kedushah. Rav Schechter observes a lesson which can be applied to ourselves as human beings created by Hashem: We must strive to be like Him. When we think only of ourselves, we become insignificant. I must add that there are two forms of taking. One who takes because he needs, such as in tzedakah, charity, does nothing wrong. This is the way he lives. One who takes because he has a problem giving has a serious character deficiency.

Kedushah is separateness. Kedushah defines our level of distinctiveness. I think that kedushah is a part of our spiritual DNA. In other words, every Jew has a proclivity for, a (sort of) gravitational pull towards being different. Let me take the initiative to define the term “different,” as I see it. Last week, I had occasion to witness what I felt were two (extreme) sides of the spectrum. I was in Meron to visit the Keiver of Rashbi, and I davened Minchah with about sixty young students (lower elementary) of the Satmar Cheder in Yerushalayim. It was an awesome experience, spiritually uplifting and emotionally inspiring to see these children, many of whom live in extreme poverty, daven at the top of their voices with passion, excitement and sincerity.

My next stop was the Keiver of the Arizal in Tzfas, where I once again met this lively group of boys (with their Rebbeim) loudly reciting Tehillim in unison at the keiver. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a young (I assume) non-observant young man, not wearing a yarmulke, bedecked in shorts and tee-shirt and state-of-the-art tattoos, walked up to the keiver, arranged about ten tea lights upon the blue stone cover, lit them and just stood there. No yarmulke, no prayers, perhaps some quiet mumbling. He then lay down on the keiver, embracing and kissing it, and then left. He was not fazed by the group that was present. He was at the keiver for a purpose. He was on a personal journey; his level of observance notwithstanding, he had an agenda, and this was how he executed it. As distant as he might be from religious observance, an element of kedushah in his DNA made him different.

We often come across young people who are quite distant from Hashem. This is not about why or how they gravitated to their spiritual level; rather, I feel it is incumbent upon the spectator not to group all of these kids together. The ones that are Jewish have different DNA. We may not write them off -- ever!