

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

*Rashi* explains that the concept of "Jewish holiness" refers to distancing oneself from immorality and idol worship. We see two extremes, each at an opposite end of the spectrum. On the one hand, we are enjoined to sanctify ourselves, our behavior and our thoughts; on the other hand, *Rashi* tells us that the opposite of *kedushah*, holiness, is immorality and degradation. We must understand how these two extremes co-exist. *Chazal* view *kedushah* as being the zenith of spiritual ascendance: How do you admonish someone who strives for that pinnacle of human behavior to distance himself from illicit relationships and debauchery? One would think he would be far removed from such degenerate behavior. Yet, we see that apparently this is not true. Why?

*Horav M.D. Soloveitchik, Shlita*, infers from here that there is no gray area in *avodas Hashem*. Either an individual strives for the zenith of *kedushah* or he is at risk for descending to the nadir of depravity. In his commentary to the *Tochachah* of *Parashas Bechukosai*, *Rashi* explains the seven-step chain reaction of sin which begins with a lack of *ameilus ba'Torah*, toil in *Torah* study, and regresses to the point that one denies the very existence of the Almighty. While we must accept this postulate, we ask what trait of our People demands that we either "are" or we "are not"? What is it that compels us to go from extreme to extreme? We have only to open up our eyes to perceive this reality.

*Horav Soloveitchik* cites his grandfather, *Rav Chaim Brisker, zl*, who approaches *Klal Yisrael's* "chosenness," the role *Am Ha'nivchar*, from two perspectives. One could posit that we are like all other nations, but with the added attribute of being the "chosen People." Alternatively, we might contend that being the *Am Ha'nivchar* totally changes our *metzius*, essence, and transforms us into a nation differentiated from all the rest. *Rav Chaim* explains that there are four types of creations: *domem*, inanimate objects such as stones; *tzomeach*, growing things such as plants; *chai*, living creatures such as animals; *medaber*, speaking, thinking humans. Each of these manifests its own unique characteristics which distinguishes them from the rest. The question that confronts us is: Does the growing plant have the qualities of the inanimate stone within it, with the added attribute of growth? Or, is it an entirely new entity, bearing no relationship whatsoever to the inanimate stone?

From the fact that if the plant loses its power to grow, it shrivels and eventually disintegrates, we infer that it has a different essence than the *domem*, inanimate object. In other words, each entity manifests its own individual essence. It is a "*cheftza bifnei atzmo*," a substance unto itself. This idea likewise applies to *Am Yisrael*. Our role as *Am Ha'nivchar* makes us a new entity, unlike other nations. Our individuality is our selectness, being chosen by Hashem to serve Him, creating from within us a new essence, a new *metzius*, the unit of *Am Yisrael*. Regrettably, there is one serious drawback to this orientation: When we lose our individuality; when our *kedushah* is sullied; when our distinguishing characteristic becomes tainted, we regress to the depths of humanity -

even deeper than other nations.

This is the juxtaposition of "*Kedoshim tiheyu*," the admonition to "be holy," to its extreme opposite: debauchery and idol worship. One is either all the way "up there," or he stands at a dangerous precipice from which he can fall to the depths of perversion. We have been given 613 *mitzvos*. If we are at liberty to choose those that are either more "rational" or more convenient, we are engaging in a dangerous compromise that can only have one conclusion: the converse of "*Kedoshim tiheyu*."