

PARSHAS

ACHAREI MOS—KEDOSHIM

תשפ"א

This week, we read parshas Acharei Mos-Kedoshim. The theme of these parshiyos is interesting. In the beginning of Shemini we read about the death of Aharon's sons, Nodov and Avihu. Immediately afterward, Aharon is told one cannot do the avodoh or pasken sheilos while drunk. Chazal tell us that Nodov and Avihu went into the Mishkan while drunk. It is very strange if these were the two gedolei hador. The verse tells us, one cannot make the distinction between kodosh and chol while drunk. Drunkenness is a contradiction to kedushoh and one cannot do the avodoh in such a state. It goes beyond the idea of not being confused. The context of the verse is that anytime you deal with kedushoh – in any dimension – you can't be drunk.

Then the Torah goes off to talk about kosher and non-kosher animals – seemingly forgetting about the death of Nodov and Avihu. Parshas Shemini concludes with the command to be kodosh because Hashem is kodosh.

This is a very important idea. We have to be kodosh in order to connect to Hashem. The only way to do that is to keep all these halachos that relate to kedushoh – not being drunk and not consuming forbidden animals. The reason why Hashem took us out of Egypt, brought us to Har Sinai, and gave us the Torah, was to make us kodosh. That is the goal.

Then we have Parshas Tazria-Metzora. The Torah shifts to taharas hamishpochoh and bris miloh. Then we have all the halachos of tzoraas which then comes back to taharas hamishpochoh. It concludes with the halacha of separating from one's wife on days that there is a reasonable chance that she will become a niddah. It is a protective fence for the prohibition of the Torah, set up by the Torah itself.

There is a phrase "zos Toras" for each of these groups of halachos – kashrus, tzoraas and tumoh.

The midrash comments that there is a specific order – first we have the Torah of the animals – it comes before the Torah of the human being.

Now finally, in Parshas Acharei Mos, the Torah is getting back to the death of the sons of Aharon and the special instructions of the avodoh on Yom Kippur. This section should have come right after their death in Parshas Shemini. Why this long interruption with halachos of kashrus, tzoraas and tumoh?

Then the parsha revisits the subject of forbidden foods and concludes with arayos. There is a connection between Yom Kippur and arayos. In the morning of Yom Kippur, the Torah reading is the section of the avodoh on Yom Kippur. In the afternoon, the Torah reading is the section of arayos. Chazal explain that since the women come to shul on Yom Kippur all dressed up, the men might get distracted by them and have thoughts of arayos. But this is strange. We are talking about Jews who have been fasting, standing barefoot and davening an entire day – focused on doing teshuvoh and trying to get kapporah! Chazal were concerned they will have thoughts of arayos specifically at Mincha time?

The verses then tell us a frightening thing: It is vitally important that we act differently than non-Jews regarding arayos – specifically in Eretz Yisroel. Arayos defile the kedushoh of the land and the land will not tolerate us. It will spit us out like it spit out the non-Jews who defiled it with arayos. There is a halacha of not walking in the ways of the non-Jews. In what way? I am allowed to wear shoes, shirts and pants – just like non-Jews wear these items of clothing. What distinction is being

referred to?

The next parsha starts with "Kedoshim Tihiyu". Rashi says it refers to arayos. Then there is a long list of mitzvos and it concludes with the command to be kodosh because we have been selected from the nations of the world to belong to Hashem.

Let us go back to analyze the three separate elements that were discussed in the previous parshiyos.

Chazal inform us that the sons of Aharon made a number of mistakes. They were drunk. They wanted to offer a korban that wasn't commanded. They ruled on a matter without consulting their teacher. They never got married. But Moshe Rabbeinu still declared that Hashem became sanctified by the death of His close ones. These were gedolei hador. How do we make sense of this?

The answer is that Nodov and Avihu were certainly great people who were on a superior level. But sometimes such people get taken with their superiority and make their own rules. They don't feel bound by the rules that everyone else has to keep. Nodov and Avihu felt they could fashion their own derech avodoh for their own special level.

The Netziv on Shir Hashirim comments on the verse – "tovim dodechoh miyayin." It was very common in ancient times to use mind-altering substances in rituals to stimulate their emotions and enhance their religious experience. The Torah has the capacity to enhance one's spirituality without recourse to anything exterior. One must dig into his inner resources and build his spirituality without anything external.

People who think they are superior feel the need to forge their own way. They weren't satisfied with the avodo that everyone else is operating with. But Moshe is told everyone must comply with all 613 mitzvos – no adding or subtracting – even for the elite.

The Netziv asks a question: why is there a commandment not to subtract from the Torah? It is obvious we aren't discussing someone who doubts the Divine origin of a particular observance. Because he can doubt the Divine origin of this commandment as well! If this command is addressing someone who already believes that the entire Torah came from Hashem and he should observe all the other mitzvos, why would he single out any one in particular and say it is not part of the Torah?

The Netziv answers: what if a person decides he wants to serve Hashem to his maximum potential and he decides that a particular mitzvah is standing in his way. Or he decides that he needs to do another mitzvah that isn't in the Torah in order to serve Hashem. The Torah is telling this person that he cannot make those decisions. He has to keep 613 and not one more and not one less. Even if you feel that this set of 613 mitzvos are holding you back from your complete connection to Hashem.

So too here, Moshe Rabbeinu is telling us that despite the greatness of Nodov and Avihu, they had no right to change the rules for themselves to reach higher levels of avodas Hashem. It is not acceptable to use substances or devise new darchei avodoh that are against the Torah.

Hashem doesn't want the extra enthusiasm and inspiration to come from artificial sources. It has to be worked on and developed from within you – then you get a clear vision of what the avodo is and what the Torah teaches us. Once you develop this higher dimension from within yourself, you will make the proper distinctions between what is

tamei and what is tahor.

But this is a step-by-step process. It starts with first being able to control all the aspects of your physical life. It begins with kashrus.

Yalta, the wife of Rav Nachman, said all the forbidden foods in the Torah have a kosher equivalent with a similar taste. The Torah doesn't want to deprive us. We are allowed to enjoy the world, but it has to be done in a disciplined way. You can't let it take over your life. Every time a frum Jew sits down to eat, he has to first ask a number of questions. Is it kosher? If it is a dairy food, did I eat meat recently? Which brocho do I make on it? He can't just dive in mindlessly to satisfy his hunger. He cannot be consumed by his drives. The Ramban says it is forbidden under the mitzvah of Kedoshim Tihiyu. The Rambam says it is under the mitzvah of Lo Sosuru. To take physical pleasure and make it one of your life's ambitions to enjoy instead of simply a means to spiritual goals is a violation of a mitzvah deoraisoh. We are kedoshim. We are a spiritual nation. Yes, we use the physical world, but it is kept in proportion.

There are a few instances where we find the Torah itself makes a fence around its own prohibitions. One is lo sik'rivu – not to even approach arayos. Another is separating from one's wife during certain times. Keeping kedushoh in family life is so important that the Torah made its own fence to protect it.

Another example is kedushas kehunoh and kedushas nozir – not to enter a house where there is someone on the verge of death. It is a 'siyog deoraisoh' for kedushas kehunoh.

We also know that the issur chatzi shiur – not to eat less than a kezayis of forbidden food – is assur deoraisoh. The Torah is making a fence around the consumption of forbidden foods to maintain our kedushoh – and possibly other areas as well.

Anything that is related to kedushoh is so important that the Torah itself made fences to prevent any possible defilement. The Rambam says in Hilchos Shabbos there is a mitzvah deoraisoh to make siyogim around Shabbos to prevent one from violating kedushas Shabbos.

There is another way to look at this. In next week's parsha we learn that the Torah commands adult kohanim to protect the kedushas kehunoh of minors. Normally, the mitzvah of chinuch – training children in Jewish life – is a mitzvah derabbonon. When a father buys a kosher lulav and esrog set for his young children to use on Sukkos, it is because there is a mitzvah derabbonon for the parents to train children in performance of mitzvos. But in three places, we find the Torah itself requires the adults make sure Jewish children do not violate certain aveiros. 1) Tumas kohanim, 2) Not doing melacha on Shabbos, 3) not eating non-Kosher food. The Rambam says that there is a common theme of these three areas. It is a mitzvah deoraisoh to train children in a life of kedushoh. As Jews, we live a life that is different than the rest of the world. We live a disciplined life.

The Torah took very seriously the inherent contradiction inside a human being. There is a struggle between body and soul. Hashem chose us to be kodosh and have a totally different lifestyle of kedushoh. Our physical self doesn't dominate. It doesn't dictate what we do, it doesn't pull us down. What pulls us up? What allows us to connect to Hashem? A spiritual life of kedushoh. This is what it means to be a Jew.

It starts with controlling your mouth. The control has to be in both directions – what goes in and what comes out – loshon horo, nivul peh, etc. The chapter of Tehillim about bris miloh refers to loshon horo as well as bris miloh. How a person talks and expresses himself reflects

his essence. The reason why nivul peh is so out of control in the secular world today is because the topic of arayos is constantly on their minds. The Ramban includes nivul peh in the mitzvah of kedoshim tihiyu because we can't allow this area of bodily functioning to take over our lives. We are a holy nation with holy goals and ambitions to get close to Hashem. So we speak in an exalted, refined manner.

All these parshiyos are telling us one thing: Being a Jew means being kodosh. That is the goal of my life. We can enjoy the physical aspects of the world, but it cannot dominate our lives – it cannot be the goal.

In the very beginning of these parshiyos the Torah tells us that one cannot be intoxicated when paskening a sheiloh. One of the biggest problems we have in the Jewish world is alcohol consumption. It is an epidemic. It used to be that alcoholism was non-existent in the Jewish world. It doesn't mean a Jew didn't have an occasional drink – but it wasn't the focus of his life. Classically, non-Jews were looked down upon by Jews because they were the alcoholics. Today, we have two types of problems with alcohol. Out of control consumption, and the un-Jewish fascination with high-class wine and scotch. People paying a thousand dollars or more for high-class bottles of alcoholic beverages – it is absolutely crazy.

The whole process to kedushoh begins with controlling alcohol. Then you can discern between what is holy and what is mundane. When we get to Parshas Sotah we see that when you start to indulge in alcohol, arayos is not far behind – because you lose sensitivity to kedushoh. This is why when a person sees a sotah being punished, he needs to stay away from wine. He needs to re-sensitize himself to the problem of arayos.

In our countdown from Pesach to Shavuot and kabbolas haTorah, we read all these parshiyos about kedushoh – kashrus, loshon horoh, tumoh and taharah, drunkenness, and kedoshim tihiyu.

On Shavuot, we stand to be mekabel the Torah. It is only after learning these lessons of what it means to be a mamleches kohanim v'goy kodosh. The outside world has no spiritual values. They don't have a concept of a life of kedushoh. It is a very difficult avodah in our times – to separate ourselves from this culture – we are so disconnected to what it means to live a life dominated by spiritual values.

The reality is that every society that lacks a spiritual base will inevitably collapse. This is what is happening today to the West because it is dominated by zhus and drugs and the obsession for pleasure. Hashem is shaking up the world because it is corrupt – and we need to realize the corruption and distance ourselves from it. We need to declare we are different. We are a spiritual nation.

There are many halachos about business that only exist between Jews. They don't apply between us and non-Jews. These halachos make us different and distinct. When we interact in the wider business world we have to make boundaries to declare to everyone we deal with that we are not the same as they are. It will surprise you, but experience has proven that they will admire you and respect you for standing for your values of spirituality and purity and are not joining them in the gutter. Sometimes you will need to be separate even from other Jews who have started to take on the mannerisms and low habits of the world around them. They also need to see that Jews should be different and elevated.

Kedushoh is the theme repeated over and over again. That is who and what we are and these are the parshiyos we read to prepare to become the mamleches kohanim v'goy kodosh.