

PARSHAS

ACHAREI MOS-KEDOSHIM

תשפ"ו

This parsha gets to the heart of what it means to be a Jew.

Hashem created a vast cosmos. There is one group of stars in this vast cosmos called the "Milky Way". In this vast galaxy, there is a sun with some planets. One of those planets is Planet Earth. So in this vast cosmos Hashem created, there is one place that holds the purpose of creation.

Hashem said that at the end of the process of creation of this entire universe, there will be a human being. That creature will be the reason for all that exists in the world. That creature lives on a planet with an atmosphere and seasons that can sustain life. No other planet we know of has this kind of atmosphere. There is plant life and animal life, and finally at the end, there is the human being – with a dual existence. One of the *guf* and one of the *neshomo*. And in exact parallel to the physical world, there is a spiritual world. In recent years, more and more physicists are coming to the conclusion that for everything that happens in this world, there is a parallel universe somewhere which is impacted by it.

The only creature who can straddle both worlds is the human being. As the *Nefesh HaChaim* emphasizes, only the physical actions and speech and thoughts of a human being can set off reactions in the spiritual world which then come back down to affect this physical world. The whole purpose of the entire process of creation is for the human being to use the physical world to develop his *neshomo* and elevate it and connect to Hashem.

Hashem communicated this purpose in this world to Odom Horishon. Hashem gave Odom the instruction to use the physical world only for the purpose of *ruchniyus* and *avodas Hashem*, and stay away from the *Eitz Hadaas*. But he flunked the test. He ate from the *Eitz Hadaas*, which caused him to value this world and its pleasures for its own sake. So Odom was kicked out of Gan Eden and now humanity has to undergo an entire process of history to correct this mistake. But instead of learning the lesson, humanity after Odom Horishon went on a downward spiral until Hashem saw that there was no hope. He had to wipe out the entire generation with a *mabbul* and start over again with Noach and his family.

And after the *mabbul* and all the destruction, Noach was supposed to teach this lesson to his descendants, but there was more failure. After ten generations of more failure, finally someone learned the lesson that the real point of existence is for *ruchniyus* and *avodas Hashem*. Avrohom Ovinu understood this message and started teaching it to others – to anyone who would listen. Avrohom's impact was so strong that he affected his whole civilization. But only one person really took on Avrohom's legacy to the deepest extent – his son Yitzchok. Although Yitzchok was also *mekarev* people, the only one to continue this legacy after Yitzchok was Yaakov and his family.

Now we are the only nation who carries this message and lives it in the world – representing Hashem.

The question is what is a human being? What is the reason he is living in this world? Is he an economic machine whose primary purpose is to consume things and enjoy as much as possible? Is he supposed to amass power and influence over other people?

Klal Yisroel were sent down to Egypt, which for them acted as a fiery kiln for purifying metal. It means Klal Yisroel had to go through a process of being embedded in the most sophisticated, wealthy

culture that was morally corrupt, and show that you can survive there and maintain your identity as a *ruchniyus*-oriented person. But not everyone went through that fiery furnace and emerged intact. 80% of Klal Yisroel preferred to stay and were lost to us. Those that survived were immediately put through test after test. The first test was one of *bitochon* – leaving Egyptian civilization for a totally barren desert with barely any provisions, trusting completely that Hashem will take care of them.

Then there was the intense *gilui Shechinoh* of *ma'amad Har Sinai*. They saw with absolute clarity that Hashem runs the world – there is no other power that exists. Then Hashem gave them an entire system of 613 *mitzvos* as a way to connect to Hashem and serve Him by doing things in the physical world. That was *Na'aseh*. Then on top of that, there was *Nishmah*.

Na'aseh alone requires mastering a tremendous amount of information – how to properly perform all 613 *mitzvos* with their numerous, complex details. But Klal Yisroel also said *Nishmah*. Doing *mitzvos* with one's body creates a connection between your physical existence and Hashem. *Nishmah* means having a connection to Hashem by letting Hashem's infinite wisdom of the Torah interface with your mind.

Then there is another *mitzvah*: *Kedoshim Tihyu*.

The Rambam doesn't count it as a separate *mitzvah* because it permeates the entire Torah. The Ramban says it instructs us on something specific.

What does it mean? Every Jew has to look at himself and identify as a spiritual being rather than a physical being.

When Yonah was on the ship and it was about to capsize from the storm, the sailors tried to look for the person on the ship who was responsible for the storm. How did they realize that it wasn't a natural storm? Chazal tell us that the sailors noticed that in the distance all around them, the sea was calm. Only the ship and the waters surrounding it were being tossed around by this storm. So they knew there was someone on the ship who was causing it. The sailors drew lots numerous times, and each time, the lot fell on Yonah.

So the sailors interrogated him to try to find out why he was being singled out. They asked Yonah the standard questions you ask in order to know who a person is. Where do you come from? What is your profession? But Yonah didn't answer any of those questions. He said, "Ivri anochi". It means he is on one side of the world, and everyone else is on the other. He is someone who fears Hashem Who made the Heaven and the Earth. He defines himself – not by his profession or the place he lives, but by his being an *eved Hashem*.

The parsha of *Acharei Mos* has an interesting progression. It goes from various *halachos* about *kodshim*, and then it sets up the concept of *Kedoshim Tihyu*. It tells us not to imitate the corrupt *arayos* behaviors of the nation you lived among – Egypt – and the nation you will live among soon – *Cana'an*. In Egypt, Klal Yisroel were enthralled by their culture and absorbed their culture. But why does the *posuk* emphasize that? Klal Yisroel of course knew they lived there – they were just there!

The *Ohr HaChaim* explains that the Torah is coming to prevent a person from making excuses to avoid being a *kodosh*. He might want to claim that the Torah's high standards of living a pure, moral life are just too hard when you are surrounded by a decadent society that influences you. The Torah is telling such a person that you already lived

in Egypt and Canaan – two of the most morally decadent societies in the ancient world, and it is still possible to demand this of you. It is not an excuse.

The Torah then goes on to list all the arayos that are forbidden. In the end, Hashem says He is throwing the Canaanites out of Eretz Yisroel because this land is kadosh and does not tolerate tumah and moral corruption.

The land is a living organism. Just as a living organism rejects foreign, harmful bodies and expels them when they penetrate, so too Eretz Yisroel will expel those who import arayos into the land and contaminate it. So you must keep away from arayos in order to remain in Eretz Yisroel.

Then it says Kedoshim Tihyu.

We live in a very strange society in Eretz Yisroel. On the one hand, there is limud Torah on a massive scale, and the concentration of people living in intense kedushah and taharah is unmatched anywhere on the globe. But on the other hand, there is a high concentration of tumah in Eretz Yisroel. It was announced that Tel Aviv will become the “gay capital of the world” with a massive parade. Even in the middle of a war! We are in a very dangerous period of history and it is our limud Torah which is allowing us to survive and remain here. But there is a counterbalance to our ruchniyus.

This parsha is telling us that we connect to Hashem with kedushah – that is the commonality between us and Hashem. Even though there will be corrupt and decadent societies that you will find yourselves in, you still have to maintain that high level of kedushah.

The Ramban explains this mitzvah as follows, and in the end, on a practical level, the Rambam agrees with him.

The Ramban says Kedoshim Tihyu is a chiyuv that goes beyond any technical mitzvah among the 613 mitzvos. It is a chiyuv to emphasize a lifestyle that defines what the human being is.

The Rambam put everything into 613 categories, so he fits the

Ramban's idea of קדושים תהיו into the issur of לבבכם ולא תתורו אחרי לבבכם ולא תתורו אחרי עיניכם. The idea behind this issur is that while we live in a physical world and have physical needs and enjoyments, and satisfying these needs are absolutely necessary for all human beings, we must still be a spiritual people. Take all these physical senses and sources of pleasure and elevate them instead of being preoccupied with them for their own sake.

The Ramban says it is possible to technically be a מנובל ברשות התורה, but this mitzvah forbids it. According to the Ramban, there is an absolute issur de'oraisah of nivul peh. Why? Speech is a way of defining who you are. In Egypt, the Jews still spoke loshon hakodesh to preserve their identity among the corruption of Egyptian society. And it isn't so much the language as the way you express yourself with language. Is your expression from the gutter? From the street? Or is it refined and subtle?

There is an issur gomur to get drunk. We have an alcohol epidemic in our society. It robs us of our Shabbosim and Yomim Tovim and our kedushas hachaim – people are obsessed with alcohol and all its cultural aspects. They pay thousands of dollars on fabulously expensive wine and scotch. Of course you can have tasty food and good wine. But is that what your whole Shabbos and Yom Tov revolves around? Is that all you look forward to?

Being in yeshiva means becoming a ben torah. It isn't defined by the externals of which hat you wear or which shoes you wear. It means you define your essence by the Torah. The purpose of life is to be a spiritual being. Externals are important as a way to influence the internal, but that's not the purpose.

We are here in this world to think about connecting to Hashem and His Torah. Getting preoccupied with luxuries and pleasures of the body means you missed the point of Torah and Yiddishkeit. Your mouth isn't for consuming food and drink or saying profanities. It is for kedushah. Don't say you have an excuse that you are surrounded by a morally decadent environment. The Torah is for all times and all places, and the chiyuv de'oraisah to live a life of kedushah is always present in every situation.