

KEDOSHIM: Holiness a Negative Concept, by Rabbi Harold Kanatopsky, zt"l

- Harold B. Kanatopsky zt"l.

Kedoshim commandments are couched in a negative mode, going beyond positive commandments which work on objects, to negative commands and disciplines which work on ourselves. That is the way to create kedusha according to the spirit of Judaism.

AHAREI MOT-KEDOSHIM

(With an application to Mother's Day)

(Based on a thought by Rabbi Harold B. Kanatopsky zt"l, and expanded. Rabbi Kanatopsky was one of the revered Rebe'im of the Brooklyn Branch of Talmudical Academy, a High School of Yeshiva University. Rav Peretz Yogel zt"l and Rabbi Kanatopsky were the two Rebe'im of that school as it began, and each year thereafter new classes and staff were added.)

At the very beginning of the portion we read the words *Ish imo veaviv tirau*. This is a negative concept. It requires us not to do certain things: not to eat in their place, not to sit on their seat, not to contradict them, etc. Isn't the positive *Kabed et avicha veet imecha* enough? After all, it is in the Ten Commandments, and it does indicate and express our love.

Kedoshim tihiyu. Can you do that without some outside force infusing you with kedusha? Can an individual acquire kedusha? Apparently you can. And our Rabbis felt this to be basic to Judaism.

Two views by our sages emphasize this. Rashi, Rashbam, and most commentators indicate that it means *perushim tihiyu*, separate yourselves from evil. Ramban appears to disagree, saying that this is a command to live, not only according to the letter, but also according to the spirit of the law. What does he mean by this? How is this an attainment of sanctity? How does he define holiness? Doesn't he like what Rashi and other sages had said?

Furthermore, our Rabbis sought to perceive in the first words of Kedoshim all of the Ten Commandments. They also sought to perceive in the Torah portion of Kedoshim, the most important themes and commandments and disciplines of Torah. They go to some lengths to do this. Why?

We would expect *Kedoshim tihiyu*, "Be holy", to encompass a series of steps by which a person can attain the condition of holiness, a series of acts or performances that would create the atmosphere or the condition of holiness. We would expect it to be a series of positive commandments. But that is not so. Instead, we get a series of "don'ts"! And we have only to read the portion to perceive this!

Apparently, Rashi and all the commentaries interpreted this to mean that sanctity is not a positive concept, but a negative one! You become holy, not by doing, but by not doing! By this

definition, then:

- Eating kosher does not make you holy, even though it is a mitzvah. Not eating tref – that makes you holy!

- Eating Matzah on Pesach night does not make you holy, but not eating Hametz does!

- Very often a person will tell me, about Sabbath that they keep the Sabbath, light candles, have Sabbath dinners and make such a beautiful kiddush. They go to shul and pray. That is commendable and does create a Sabbath atmosphere. But by Rashi's definition, it does not create holiness. Not violating the prohibitions of the Sabbath – that makes you holy! Making kiddush on Shabbat is a mitzvah, but not working on Shabbat – that is kedusha, that will lead to holiness. How so?

Even tzedaka, a mitzvah which captures a great deal of the spirit and the essence of Judaism, and in fact, is the hallmark of the Jew – as Rambam says, ... hatzedaka siman latzadik, zera Avraham avinu (Hilchot Matnot Aniyim 10:1) – even that, by Rashi's definition, is not enough. Open your hand and give – that doesn't make you holy. Don't close your hand against a request, also a command in the Torah – that does lead to kedusha!

Isn't this strange? Why would Rashi say that? What bothers Rashi that he should seek to couch the attainment of holiness in a negative fashion, even though Rashi certainly appreciated the vast importance of the positive commandments as well?

So that doing a favour to someone, lending money, visiting the sick, are all vastly important mitzvot. But they are positive, so they may make a person righteous, but not yet holy. Not slandering my friend, not gossiping, not bearing evil reports, that is going to lead to kedusha! Why?

Even the commandment to honour your father and mother, appears in our Torah portion again but in a negative fashion, Ish imo veaviv tirau, “Each person shall revere his mother and father”, and our sages are quick to point out that this means, he shall not sit in his seat, he shall not eat on his place, he shall not contradict him, or her, This is kedusha! Why?

Apparently Rashi has a deep message. He wants to teach that in giving a charitable donation, I am dealing with an object, in this case money. It is a thing. Sometimes, like when making kiddush, it can be more abstract. But it is still the same idea. I am using words to sanctify the Sabbath. I am drinking wine at the table and elevating the table to the status of an altar. In that sense I am dealing with objects or concepts outside of myself.

But by not working on Shabbat I am dealing with myself! And that is much harder. It is much harder to deal with myself, to discipline myself, restraining my passions, my drives, than to do something to objects around me, even to give them away.

That is the message of Rashi and all the commentators. Kedusha requires more than transforming the environment. You can do that with mitzvot. It also requires transforming ourselves. And that

is done in many ways, but chiefly by the disciplines and restraints that the Torah demands.

Now we can better understand the comment of Ramban. Why does the Ramban disagree? He does not! He also agrees that kedusha deals with self. But he shows us how negative concepts only achieve kedusha if we learn the spirit of those concepts and live according to them.

What, says the Ramban, achieves kedusha? How can a person be commanded to become sacred? Is not holiness given as a gift to a person by a supernatural being? "No, of course not", says Nahmanides. Not according to our belief. But rather, this command teaches that we must live in the spirit, not only in the letter of Torah. For indeed, if not for this command, a person could have, theoretically, observed all the commandments of Torah and yet been a terrible person! For instance, he could eat only kosher food and, nevertheless, could eat like a pig! He could drink only kosher wine and get drunk as a sot, wallowing in alcohol! He could live with only one woman, marrying her first with due pomp and ceremony, great choir and cantor, long speeches and wonderful food, and then for the rest of her life he could treat her like an object, acting the lecher towards his own wife, disregarding her needs and desires and expressions of personality, and in fact practicing rape upon her within the family, keeping to the letter of the laws, refraining from all adultery and other illicit relations, and he might have thought he is fulfilling the Torah thereby! Not at all! For this commandment Kedoshim tihyu, teaches that it is not enough! Be holy! Observe the spirit of these commandments too! Work on yourselves! The negative commands, and the positive ones as well, the whole Torah system, in fact, is to create a noble personality, a good person, a righteous man and woman, and that is attainable by living according to the spirit of the law, not only the letter of the law!

So Ramban really agrees with Rashi that to become holy a person must not only deal with things around him, but must work on himself! And then he proceeds to give cogent illustrations about what this means in practical terms. And that is a dimension Ramban adds to Rashi. He does not contradict him. And Rashi would indeed agree with every one of his examples.

A week from tomorrow is Mother's Day. We could well apply this to one of the first commands of this portion, "Each man should revere his mother and father". It isn't enough to honor them. It isn't enough to give them a gift, a remembrance, a token. It isn't enough to say kind words, and visit them if they are far. That is all very important, but deals with objects. It doesn't yet create a feeling within us sufficient to touch the very core of our personality, sufficient to add kedusha to our souls! Each person must revere his or her mother and father. Not to sit in their place, not to contradict them, not to eat before they do, are negative concepts, but are also disciplines that work on our very souls, teaching that the purpose of mitzvot is to remake our deep, inner personalities. These disciplines teach the meaning that can be attained if we recognize what ought to lie behind the gifts, the tokens, the visits – a love and devotion that comes from the heart, that is part of the great positive and negative commands, "Honor your father and mother". "Each person must act with reverence in his conduct towards mother and father". It is a set of commandments, that if properly followed, gives sanctity to the person himself, and to his or her home.

And perhaps that is why, of all the commands that tell of the future deeds of Elija the Prophet such as announcing the Messiah's coming, harbinger of times of holiness everywhere on earth,

the most important, perhaps, is to truly unite the hearts of parents and children, veheshiv lev avot
al banim velev banim al avotam.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)