

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Kedoshim

An often misunderstood concept in Judaism is the concept of "*kedusha*". Usually translated as "holiness", it is a bit of a challenge to define the term. Context alone fails to reveal its true meaning.

At the beginning of our parsha we find the following enigmatic verse: "You must be *kadosh*, since I, G-d your Lord, am *kadosh* (Vayikra 19:2). (The Torah is reiterating here a point that was made in Vayikra [11:44]: "For I am G-d your Lord, and since I am holy, you must [also] make yourselves holy and remain sanctified".) At the same time that G-d calls upon us to be *kadosh*, He describes Himself as *kadosh*. Although this does parallel the familiar idea of *vehalachta bidrachav* (Devorim 10:12), i.e., imitatio dei, however, *kedusha* still remains undefined.

It is in situations like this that we recognize our debt to our great sages and commentators. For centuries, this verse has been the subject of discussion and debate by the masters of Jewish tradition. It is our privilege to be privy to this ongoing conversation.

Rashi (R' Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105), quoting the midrash, understands that the mandate to be holy is simply a mitzva to refrain from sin, particularly the sins of sexual immorality. G-d is saying, "refrain from sin, for I, G-d, do not sin". According to Rashi, *kedusha* is not an advanced spiritual level of holiness; it is merely purity from sin.

Ramban (R' Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270), quoting other *midrashim*, disagrees with Rashi, and proposes an original approach to the meaning of *kedusha*. The Ramban makes the observation that it is quite possible for a person to indulge in a materialistic lifestyle without transgressing any Torah law. Within the framework of *halacha* (Jewish law) there is plenty of room to indulge in every pleasure that life offers. For example, as long as the food is kosher you can eat to your heart's content - and beyond. There is no halachic limit that restricts how much one can eat or how much one may spend on food. Furthermore, as far as the Torah is concerned, polygamy is permitted. (There is, however, a rabbinic decree passed by Rabbeinu Gershom [906-1040] that prohibits it.) A man can theoretically marry many women as he likes and lead a hedonistic lifestyle without transgressing any Torah law. The list goes on. As in any legal system, loopholes can be found and the spirit of



JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

continued ...

the Torah can be bypassed. It is for this reason, says the Ramban, that the Torah instructs us to be *kadosh*. The Torah is making here a broad and fundamental statement that touches on all areas of our physical lives. Do not indulge. It is unholy.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, a leading Jewish philosopher of the early 18th century, agrees with the Ramban in principle, but for an altogether different reason. R' Luzzatto believes that indulgence is technically permissible. The numerous teachings of our sages that frown on indulgence are not halachic statements; rather, they impress upon us the importance of going beyond the letter of the law. If we do not restrain our physical desires, if we get used to satisfying our every whim, then we will have a hard time controlling ourselves when we are confronted with a real challenge. We need to regularly exercise our spiritual muscles so that when G-d presents us with a test that has halachic consequences we have the fortitude to resist temptation and stand by our principles. If we are weak then we are at risk. According to R' Luzzatto, the reason that we should avoid indulgence is not because it is inherently wrong, as maintained by the Ramban, but because it will reduce the likelihood of our transgressing Torah law (Path of the Just, chap. 13).

Rabbi Luzzatto goes on to make a very important and basic distinction between satisfying our needs and refraining from indulgences. Citing midrashic sources, he shows that it is in fact sinful to abstain from satisfying our physical needs. (Judaism differs here radically with the position of many Catholic theologians.) Any and every need must be recognized and satisfied. This, of course, is not at all indulgent. Indulgence, by definition, refers to that which is not needed.

It takes a high level of self-awareness to know where our needs end and our indulgences begin. No two people's needs are the same and each individual's needs are subject to change. It is a deeply personal struggle to attain a degree of self-knowledge that informs us how to live our lives comfortably without excess. The futile attempt to satisfy our inner thirst for spirituality with material indulgences is more than foolish. It is unholy.

Shabbat Shalom!

