

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Shemini

The last section of Parshat Shemini details the laws of kosher and non-kosher animals, both in terms of whether or not one may eat them, and in regards to the contamination that one may receive by eating or even touching them. The Torah repeatedly refers here to the *tumah* (impurity) of these animals, and therefore warns that we not become *tameh* (impure) through them. It would seem what we eat affects us only in some metaphysical way, similar to the law that touching a dead body makes one impure in a metaphysical way.

However, at the end of the passage, when the Torah describes the positive effect on the person when he keeps kosher, it does not refer to it in terms of purity, but rather in terms of holiness. “You shall make yourselves holy...and you should not contaminate yourselves through any teeming thing that creeps on the earth.” This begs the question why the Torah singles out this mitzvah as a mitzvah that sanctifies more than other *mitzvot*. After all, we know from the end of the Shema that all *mitzvot* make us holy, as it says “You shall do all of My *mitzvot* and you shall be holy to your G-d.” Why do our eating habits, more than other *mitzvot*, make us into especially holy people?

Maimonides divides his work that delineates all of the laws discussed in the Talmud into fourteen books, each dealing with different specific areas of Jewish law, and each with a specific name. He only names one of those books “*Kedusha*” (Holiness). The Book of Holiness deals with only three areas of the law, which are forbidden sexual relationships, forbidden foods, and the laws of kosher slaughtering. Why does Maimonides choose “Holiness” as the title for these three areas of Torah law?

We find the Torah talks about the holiness achieved by eating kosher also in the end of *Parshat Kedoshim*. There, the Torah first lists many forbidden intimate relationships (20:10-24) and only then mentions the prohibition of eating non-kosher animals (20:25). Finally, the Torah says “You shall be holy to Me. (20:26).” It would seem pretty clear that Maimonides used these two passages, from *Parshat Shemini* and *Parshat Kedoshim*, as the source that exercising self-control in the areas of forbidden relationships and food consumption makes one holy.

So then how do we reconcile this with the verse from Shema which says all *mitzvot* make us holy? In truth, holiness is something that can be achieved in a



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myriad of ways, as holiness exists in time, in place, and in a person. For example, Shabbat has a holiness that other days do not have, Israel has a holiness that other lands do not have, and the High Priest has a holiness that other people do not have. For a person to be holy means for him to transcend his simple physical existence and live in a way that his actions connect him to the spiritual realms, as described by the *mitzvot* of the Torah. Since Shabbat is a holy day, we are enjoined to refrain from certain forbidden activities, thereby elevating it by not being involved in creative, physical work. The High Priest, the person who performs the Yom Kippur service in the Temple, has certain restrictions that other people do not have, because the Torah demands of him a higher level of transcendence. The Torah says the sanctity of the Temple must be preserved by not allowing someone to offer sacrifices in it when he is impure, because it demands that we elevate it to a holier level. In short, holiness puts certain restrictions on people, at certain times, in certain places.

However, the restrictions necessary in order to achieve holiness are only half of the story. When a woman gets married, she is called “*mekudeshet*.” This is not to be viewed as a restrictive way of living. On the contrary, precisely the fact that she is forbidden to have a relationship now with another man is what empowers her to have a special relationship with her husband. Similarly, when the Torah puts certain restrictions on us, it actually liberates us from living simple lives and enables us to live a more refined, elevated life, one permeated with a sense of relating to the Infinite.

Maimonides, based on the Torah’s associating holiness with eating and relationships, is singling out those areas which sanctify our bodies in the most direct way, with the greatest amount of frequency, and with activities essential for physical survival and continuity. A person must eat every day in order to survive, so the laws of kosher enable him to make his body holy on a daily basis by eating according to G-d’s instructions. The human race can only continue to propagate through intimacy, and the laws of forbidden relationships elevate those activities so man can make himself more holy in the process of building the world. In these two activities, man is prone to forget about the Torah’s way and instead fall into the trap of living a purely physical life. Therefore, the Torah emphasizes specifically with regards to these two *mitzvot* how there is special potential to sanctify our bodies.

Shabbat Shalom

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