

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093 718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263  
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

## Parashat Qedoshim Part I On Holiness

### 1. Setting and Backdrop

Following the chapters promoting purity in key aspects of personal and national life, the Torah proceeds to the high point of the sanctuary program, to what appears to be the primary objective of Leviticus legislation. *Parashat Qedoshim* is a cornerstone of ethical and religious thought in that it extends the demands of holiness to all realms of human behavior and recognizes G-d as keenly interested in all its particulars. G-d's opening proclamation, *אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם* ("You shall be holy for I, Hashem your G-d, am holy," Lev. 19:2), provides the most sublime introduction to the legislation that follows. Its application of the holiness principle to the various spheres of human activity is a precedent-setting teaching designed to inspire its audience to act in a highly conscientious manner at all times.

This relatively brief code of law is closely associated with the Covenant that G-d contracted with Israel. The connection is established by comprehensive expounding and expanding of Decalogue commandments. In addition, it contains a distinctive mode of articulation that includes multiple citations of *אֲנִי ה'* ("I am Hashem") and *אֱלֹהֵיכֶם ה'* ("I am Hashem your G-d") – a total of eight times each in the chapter, obviously symbolic of a covenantal connection as we have often pointed out. We will discuss details of this in our next study.

Because of its relationship with G-d as expressed in the Covenant, Israel is expected to be super-conscious of its behavior (see Amos 3:2) and emulate Him in His characteristic of holiness in all it does. (The Sages articulated this concept as the doctrine of *imitatio dei*, to pattern one's behavior on G-d's attributes. "As He

is compassionate, you be compassionate, as He is gracious, you be gracious, etc.")

The goal of holiness for the nation had already been proclaimed twice in Exodus and once earlier in Leviticus. However, in the first of these instances, in the introductory passage to the Lawgiving, it was part of a general description of what the Israelites were hopefully to become. G-d declared: *וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְקַלְכֶת* ("and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," Ex. 19:6), but no specific application was provided. In the second Exodus attestation, the Israelites were summoned to be holy with the statement, *וְאַנְשֵׁי קֹדֶשׁ תִּהְיוּן לִי* ("And holy people shall you be to Me"), but the only application that was there made, in the continuation of the verse, was "you must not eat torn flesh [found] in the field," (22:30). Flesh in a circumstance that connotes violence having been committed is not fit for food for a holy people. Holiness includes reverence for life, and it would be inconsistent with its pursuit to partake of that which symbolizes the termination of life.

The earlier Leviticus attestation of holiness is at the conclusion of the first of the purity subsections and employs a locution similar to that of our *Parashat Qedoshim* superscription. Hashem states: "For I am Hashem your G-d; you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not make yourselves impure through any swarming thing that moves upon the earth...you shall be holy, for I am holy..." (Lev. 11:44-45). Once again, holiness was associated with refraining from eating the unacceptable, although at this point personal defilement was cited as causing the abrogation of holiness.

In Leviticus 19, however, the Torah goes much further than those three previous attestations in employing the

holiness concept and mandating its application. Here, after calling upon Israel to be holy for He is holy, G-d makes far-reaching demands from the Israelites. The concept of sanctity is now applied to a broad constellation of commandments, essentially promoting ethical and moral behavior in all areas of human interaction and significantly advancing the establishment of social justice. Laws prescribing obligations toward one's fellow man are now viewed as also laws between man and G-d.

As we shall see in our *Qedoshim Part II* study, our *parasha* subsumes virtually the whole Decalogue (if not the whole) under the rubric of holiness. As we have pointed out in several studies\*, the role of the Leviticus legislation in the larger picture of the structure of the Torah appears clear. Indeed, beginning with the instructions for construction of the Mishkan (G-d calling it a *שֶׁטֶרֶט*, a holy center) in Exodus 25, the sanctuary program was designed to enrich the Covenant and its foundational laws (the Decalogue and the attached legislation of Ex. 19-23) with a full measure of holiness. It was inserted at the point that the details of covenant finalization were underway but not concluded (Ex. 24), that is, just before the essence was to be inscribed on tablets and there would be a recital of blessings and curses.

In Leviticus 19, the context indicates that reference to G-d being *qadosh* (holy) alludes to His being totally removed from evil, injustice, wrongdoing and improper behavior of any type. His demand of similar behavior from the Israelites was revolutionary in the context of ancient Near Eastern religion. It broadened the meaning of holiness from the narrow confines of the temple to the broad arena of life in all its complexities. Connecting to the Decalogue and the Mount Sinai experience, our *parasha* should be viewed as filling in the details of Hashem's introductory proclamation "and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6).

## 2. Definitions

What precisely is the meaning of the word *qadosh* (holy), and particularly what does it denote in G-d's declaration that He is *qadosh* and (stated in second person) the people should be *qedoshim*? The Sifra defines "*qedoshim tihyu*" as "*perushim tihyu*," which

means, "be separated." It does not elaborate. Traditionally, *perushim tihyu* has been mostly understood in the sense of refraining from indulging in one's bodily desires, abstaining from pleasures. Upon citing this Sifra, Rashi comments: "separate yourselves from improper sexual liaisons and transgressions." Others have taken the Sifra to refer to the requirement that Israel be separate and distinct from the nations. But how is such a definition to be applied to G-d?

Many scholars agree that in its basic definition *qadosh* very likely signifies "to be separated." But in its original meaning it probably meant to be separated from the natural and ordinary, to be "supernatural," to belong to the mystical realm, to be unique. It does appear that it was in this sense, with varied nuances as suited each case, that the concept of *qedushah* (holiness) was used by pre-Torah polytheistic cultures for their many gods and, by association, for their places of worship. The fundamental notions involved are natural to religion and universal in scope. The Torah may very well have adopted this general definition to be broadly applied, including its use in reference to the one G-d. In this respect *qedushah* may refer to His transcendence or it may simply denote His being essentially different from everything else in existence.

In Isaiah's vision of G-d in His majestic glory (Isa. 6:3), the angels' tribute to G-d of "*qadosh, qadosh, qadosh*" appears to point to His being "above and beyond," distinct and separated from all other creatures and creations in every way. The heavenly court setting of that scene, especially with the continuation of the angels' praise, which proclaims, "the whole earth is full of His glory," further connotes the monotheistic principle. While He is transcendent He also is "present" in the world. Surely it is in this spirit, if not literally, that *Targum Yonatan* translates that threefold usage of our key word as, "Holy, in the high exalted heaven is the dwelling of His presence; Holy, upon the earth is the work of His strength; Holy, forever and ever."

Whatever is dedicated to the worship of G-d or officially associated with Him, is also called *qadosh*. Thus, the nation of Israel, the sanctuary for His dwelling and its furniture, sacrifices, Shabbat and

festivals and places of His revelation, all receive this designation. This may be because such items are separated, “set aside” from the ordinary and reserved for their elevated purpose. (Since what is “set aside” is “designated” for its special purpose, a number of commentators translate *qadosh* by this latter term, regardless of whether that for which the item is designated is holy.) Alternatively, it may be that whatever is dedicated to the “holy” is subsumed into the sphere of the holy and receives its own designation as holy from that association.

In Leviticus 20:26 we read: “Be holy to Me for I, Hashem, am holy, and I have separated you from the nations to be Mine.” Consistent with the idea of *qadosh* denoting “separation” and the thought expressed in this verse, some have concluded that Israel is termed a holy nation as a consequence of its being distinct from other nations. Others consider it more likely that a straightforward parsing of this verse indicates that Israel is called upon to be holy by virtue of its connection to Him who is holy, gaining its holiness through that identification, being a nation of G-d. It is only coincidental that the verse speaks about Israel’s separation from the other nations. The end of that verse “to be Mine” does naturally lend itself to the interpretation that Israel was separated from the nations so that it may belong to Him, who is holy, and it therefore should be holy.

Regarding the priests, upon their receiving certain laws exclusively designed for them, it states, “they shall be holy to their G-d and not profane His name, for the offerings of Hashem...they bring near and so they shall be *qodesh*” (Lev. 21:6). Here, what was already transmitted as a basic charge to all Israelites is specifically repeated for the priests and an explanation is provided predicated on their designation for special service. The point is made that they are expected to be devoted to Hashem and live with the consciousness of belonging to Him to a degree greater than that expected of the rest of the nation. The final clause *vehayu qodesh* (“they shall be holy”) reinforces the message. All members of Israel are priests, the nation is a “kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6), while *kohanim* are priests of priests.

Teaching people to focus on holiness, to prepare for contemplating G-d, as Moshe did at Sinai prior to

Revelation, is termed “sanctifying” them, as it states, וְקִדְשְׁתֶּם (‘‘and you shall sanctify them,’’ Ex. 19:10), and subsequently וַיִּקְדֹּשׁ אֶת הָעָם (‘‘and he sanctified the people,’’ Ex. 19:14). When Hashem instructs Moshe as to how one should relate to a priest, He states וַיִּקְדֹּשׁתוּ (‘‘and make him holy,’’ Lev. 21:8). Consistent with the previous, this may imply that those who are capable of doing so should instruct him and help him fulfill his status. But based on the context we must say that it surely seems to also connote that all should treat him in a manner consistent with his calling of serving in the sphere of the holy. Further in that verse it states, קָדֹשׁ יִהְיֶה לְךָ (‘‘holy shall he be for you’’), referring to recognition of the priest’s greater involvement in service of Hashem.

The Sages expounded the word *v’qidashto* as requiring practical measures by which non-priests are to recognize the priest’s exalted standing in the sphere of divine service. Thus, the non-priests should accord him the privilege in religious matters of “opening first [to read from the Torah], blessing first and taking a choice portion first” (BT *Ned.* 62a-b). By doing so the public engages in more deeply attaching itself to the realm of holiness, the *kohen* is constantly reminded of his special calling and the realm of service of G-d is glorified.

At the end of that verse (Lev. 21:8) Hashem states that “he (the *kohen*) shall be holy for you for holy am I, Hashem, who sanctifies you.” This is an extension of the basic principle in that having a priest living at a more exalted level of sanctity is another manifestation of emulating Hashem’s holiness. That Hashem sanctifies us apparently means that through the program He provided for us to fulfill and be attached to Him, who is holy, we become holy. Similar meanings may apply to all cases of His “making holy,” such as regards the high priest (Lev. 21:15) or Shabbat (Gen. 2:3) – He instituted the system that when properly implemented provides them holiness.

### 3. Survey of Deuteronomy’s “Holy Nation” Attestations

In Deuteronomy there are three attestations of the six-word clause, כִּי עַם קְדוֹשׁ אַתָּה לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ (‘‘for you are a holy nation to Hashem your G-d’’). Each time this clause is mentioned it is given as the explanation for a

statute, that is, the statute is based on Israel being a holy nation to Hashem its G-d. The first (Deut. 7:6) appears in conjunction with the commands to refrain from intermarrying with or showing any mercy to the idolatrous inhabitants of the Promised Land, etc., but to destroy their idolatrous artifacts. Moshe explains Israel's responsibility to be devoted to this task as stemming from it being a holy nation to Hashem that He selected to be his treasure from the nations of the world. By virtue of being in a special relationship with Him, Israel possesses a status of holiness that obligates it to comport in accordance with His plan for the world.

The second "holy nation" attestation in Deuteronomy is attached to the prohibition of engaging in bodily mutilation or making bald spots as signs of mourning (14:2). Such acts seriously violate the relationship of being the nation of G-d. This has been variously understood as ensuing from one or more of the following considerations.

- a) The previous verse introduced the paragraph with, "You are sons to Hashem your G-d," which means that in some ways He is your Father. Therefore, expressing grief for a departed human relative beyond a reasonable limit is inappropriate, given that G-d, your Father, is alive.
- b) Bodily mutilation constitutes ingratitude by the members of "His treasured nation" and His children to whom He granted the body as a gift.
- c) Desecration of the body is an affront to Him, as human beings were created in His image and although "image" in this usage refers to a non-material dimension, the body is the container and possesses an associated sanctity (see Deut. 21:23).
- d) These rites had idolatrous associations in the neighboring cultures linked to serving the dead or the gods of the dead.

The holy nation phrase is cited once again at the conclusion of the command to adhere to the dietary laws, specifically attached to the prohibition of eating an animal that died on its own (14:21). This case is similar to that of Exodus 22:30, while the larger dietary context parallels the holy nation attestation of Leviticus 11.

#### 4. Further Thoughts

Since "you shall be holy" of Leviticus 19-20 is a demand for living with the consciousness of G-d in the manifold realms of human endeavor and interaction, it is understandable that the underlying principle may be applied to whatever assists an individual to fulfill the Divine will. This includes practices that are not mandated by law but which may help discipline an individual to fulfill the commandments. Perhaps this was the intention of the Sifra in its comment "*perushim tihyu*" ("be separated.") As the Sages say (BT *Yeb.* 20a), קדש לך עצמך במותר לך – sanctify yourself in the realm of what is permitted, that is, one should utilize the sphere of the permitted for character-refinement and personal priming to achieve ever-greater levels of sanctity. (See Ramban on Lev. 19:2.) The ultimate guiding principle such an individual lives by is that in every detail of life he strives to be conscious of serving Hashem, כָּל דְּרָכַיךָ דַּעֲרוּ (Prov. 3:6).

A final point. Despite the frequency with which holiness is mentioned in the Torah and its importance in Biblical law and lore – and the same applies to purity and impurity – it should not be thought of as reflecting an actual, material state. Holiness is not a concrete reality that inheres in people, objects, places or times in an ontological sense, as was believed in the pagan world. As the Rambam commented:

...there is no difference between His asserting "be holy" or having asserted "fulfill My misvot"...and from this principle it also states "circumcise the foreskin of your hearts"...and "do not again stiffen your necks" (*Sefer Hamisvot*, 4<sup>th</sup> Principle).

He also wrote:

It therefore has become clear that the term "defilement" is used as a homonym in three different senses:

- of disobedience and transgression of commandments...
- of dirt and filth...
- of the above-named notions of the imagination such as involve touching and carrying certain objects, or to being

under the same roof with certain things. In reference to the third kind our Sages said, *The words of the Torah are not subject to becoming unclean* (BT Ber. 22a). Similarly, the term “holiness” is used as a homonym of three things corresponding to the three types of uncleanness (*Guide for the Perplexed III:47.*)

Holiness is an ideational construct of mental perception that involves the imaginative faculty; it

exists in human consciousness. Such a construct may greatly aid an individual in perceiving and relating to certain aspects of reality and achieving closeness to G-d.

#### **Endnote**

\* See our studies *Correspondences Between Leviticus 17-26 and Deuteronomy 12-28 and the Larger Picture*, and *On the G-d-Israel Covenant: Meaning and Format*.

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