

You Shall Be Holy

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ל"ה

Kedoshim

You shall be holy, for I, your Eternal G*d, am holy. (Leviticus 19:2)

Why should we need to be commanded to holiness? Does not observance of the Mitzvot result in holiness? After all, Judaism teaches that we establish and maintain our G*d-connection by our actions, our deeds. It seems, at first glance, to be superfluous for the Torah to command us to holiness. But our tradition teaches us that there is nothing superfluous in the Torah (although sometimes we must work very hard to explain repetitions of particular Commandments).

What, then, does this Commandment add? What does it mean to be holy? It is not just obedience to the Commandments; the tradition expects that of everyone. Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Berlin, called the Netziv, teacher of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, teaches that it means, beyond refraining from those things which are forbidden, also to refrain from too much of those things which are permitted.

The Netziv permitted his student, the future Rabbi Kook, to wear his tallit and t'fillin (prayer garments) throughout the day, a practice generally adopted only by a few individuals, "saints." The other students at the Netziv's academy approached their teacher to ask why Avraham Yitzhak, alone among them, was given this permission.

"Avraham Yitzhak," the Netziv replied to them, "is a tzaddik, a saint."

“But,” the students protested, “is it not written in the Torah, ‘All your people shall be tzaddikim’?”

“Indeed it is,” the Netziv said. “But Avraham Yitzhak is also yashar, upright!”

The future Rabbi Kook – and he continued throughout his life to wear his *tallit* and *tefillin* throughout the day – went beyond the mere observance of the Law to reach for (and, perhaps, attain) holiness.

The Netziv did not advocate asceticism. Our tradition declares that we will be called upon to answer to G*d for every legitimate pleasure which we declined. After all, the legitimate pleasures are gifts from G*d; are we to refuse to accept G*d’s gifts? Still, even though we are to eschew an ascetic rejection of the pleasures of this life, we are equally to avoid the excess of indulgence.

Balance, the Torah teaches us, balance. Too much even of a good thing is not necessarily good; the Torah does not share the philosophy of W. C. Fields, “Anything worth doing is worth doing to excess.”

Nahmanides observes that it is possible to be observant of all the details of Jewish religious Law and still be a repulsive human being, a “scoundrel with the full permission of the Torah.” One can keep kosher, for example, and still act the glutton. One can observe Shabbat and still fail to be courteous to others.

The Babylonian Talmud (*Yevamot* 20a) instructs us to sanctify ourselves through that which is permitted. It is not enough merely to observe and obey the Law; **you shall be holy!** In everything we do, we are to ask ourselves whither it takes us – along the path of holiness or away from it.

Shabbat Shalom.

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