

PARSHAS ACHAREI MOS—KEDOSHIM

תש"פ

Acharei Mos deals with two main topics—Yom Kippur and arayos. There is a lot of connection between these two parshiyos. Acharei Mos starts with the avodoh of Yom Kippur. It is a very special day of the kapporoh for all our aveiros. The most kodosh individual goes into the most kodosh place on the most kodosh day of the year. The parsha ends with arayos. Does this have anything to do with how the parsha began? It wouldn't seem so, but we know that the kriyas haTorah of Mincha on Yom Kippur is the parsha of arayos! How strange! The gemara explains that women tend to dress up nicely when they come to shul and the men may become attracted. This means, even in the midst of the holiest day where we are focused on kedushoh and taharoh, we can never let our guard down against the yetzer horo. The yetzer horo never takes a break—even on Yom Kippur. The human being is a very complicated creature. He can be in the middle of hislahavus and dveikus, but he must always be cognizant that the yetzer horo is lurking in the background. Chazal made a very strong point about this by setting up this specific kriyas haTorah on Yom Kippur.

This parsha of arayos has a very interesting introductory few pesukim. It says these abominable practices were commonly performed in Egypt—where you left, and in Canaan—where you are going. Isn't this superfluous? The entire narrative of Chumash from Sefer Shemos to Sefer Devorim is Klal Yisroel's journey from Egypt to Canaan. Of course we know that they came from Egypt and are going to Canaan!

The Ohr Hachayim provides a very crucial insight to this posuk. He explains that a person may be tempted to rationalize by saying: although the Torah demands kedushoh, the Torah simply doesn't understand the pressures of living in a morally corrupt society. The Torah can't really be talking about my situation where I am surrounded by pritzus and arayos—I can't be expected to keep that standard! To this person specifically, the Torah is saying no. These issurim and this obligation to be kodosh were given to Bnei Yisroel in their situation—despite the fact that they were living in Egypt for centuries. They were sunk in an environment of arayos. They are going to Canaan which is deeply corrupt in arayos. But it isn't an excuse.

The Torah knows that people are searching for rationalizations to lower their standards. People are impacted by their environment and feel a strong pressure to conform to the decadent norms of their neighbors and associates. It is very hard to be exposed to all the pritzus and arayos of the city streets and shops and the workplace and not want to adopt the behavior that everybody considers normal. The Torah says no. It is not an excuse. The human being has the capacity to resist and rise above his surroundings.

In addition, kedoshim tihyu is an absolute obligation on everyone to live his life on an elevated level—not only to refrain from the issurim of the arayos themselves. I must go beyond the absolute minimum the halacha requires—not to be a menuval birshus haTorah. I have to live a life of kedushoh. It is not a suggestion, not a piece of advice. It is an absolute obligation on everybody no matter your background and your environment.

Despite what people think, the Rambam and the Ramban have the same obligation, but use different pesukim as its source. The Ramban uses kedoshim tihyu, and the Rambam uses the posuk of lo sosuru, of Lo Sa'asei 47. He says the Torah forbids us to follow our thoughts of kefiroh and not to obsess about taivos haguf.

You are where your mind is. Is your mind always preoccupied with

enjoyment of olom hazeh—a good steak or a fancy wine, etc.? Is that really what you want out of life and what all your thoughts revolve around? This is the issur of lo sosuru. A Jew has to be preoccupied with olom haboh.

About 25 years ago there were no emails for bochurim in Yeshiva to use and faxes just were invented. People would come to my office to pick up faxes sent to the talmidim. One family sent a fax on Motzei Rosh Hashono describing their Rosh Hashono as being so great because of all the meat and delicacies they enjoyed over Yom Tov. Their mind was not on kabbolas malchus or the yom hadin. It was on the kitchen and the food all of Rosh Hashono. They missed the point. A Jew is preoccupied with Torah.

Tosfos explains why we only say birkas haTorah in the morning and not every time we sit down to learn. Tosfos says it is because a Jew is always thinking about going back to learning throughout the day. The Meiri says the reason we say kriyas shema when we go to bed is because the last thing we want before we drift off to sleep is to be thinking about Torah. This is the mitzvah of lo sosuru according to the Rambam.

The Ramban says a similar thing in kedoshim tihyu. Kedushoh defines who I am and what I am about. True, there is no issur to enjoy the greatest pleasures of the physical world. But if my life revolves around the constant pursuit of pleasure and I want to indulge in taivos haguf beyond what I need, I am no longer a kodosh. It is a violation of kedoshim tihyu.

This mitzvah encompasses all aspects of human life. It includes nivul peh. If I am a spiritual person with spiritual ideas and goals, then I will express myself in clean, pure language—not in terms that describe zhus, etc. My language reflects who I am and where my mind is, and my language influences how I think about myself. Each one influences the other.

Every human being is a guf and neshomo and I have to determine who I really am. I often talk about Yonah on the ship which was about to capsize. The sailors wanted to know—who is this person who is putting us all in danger? They asked, "What is your profession?" People think that we define ourselves by what we do and how we earn money. But Yonah corrected them. He simply told them, "I am a Jew who fears Hashem." That is who he was. That is how a Jew defines himself.

One of the problems people have in these times of lockdown is once they can no longer go out to work to occupy themselves with their work. They don't know who they are. They can't define themselves outside their profession and their occupation. They are completely lost in these times. But what do they do with themselves? Besides the one hour learning daf yomi, many people spend the rest of the day downloading movies from Netflix. They have no identity outside their occupation and they have to escape to movies all day. This is what Yonah was telling the sailors on the ship: I am a Jew—this is what defines me and nothing else. Really, Yonah was a fisherman. But he didn't mention it—that didn't define who he was.

This is the mitzvah of kedoshim tihyu.

There is a pull within the human being between the neshomo and the guf—the avodoh on Yom Kippur and the drive for arayos—and they are both pulling at us at the same time! Each human being has to be aware of this and decide which of these two pulls will define him at

his core. The Ramban and Rambam are coming from two sides of the same coin. The Ramban is emphasizing the mitzvah which says you have to identify with the neshomo and be kodosh. The Rambam is emphasizing the mitzvah which forbids us from identifying with the guf and the pleasures of the guf and having our minds preoccupied with them.

The Rambam elsewhere tells us how to break free from the pull of taivos and instead be pulled by the neshomo to dveikus in Hashem—by immersing your mind in Torah and being preoccupied by Torah.

I am surrounded by mitzvos—tzitzis is always on my clothing all day—to help remind me of the mitzvos. Every time I put something in my mouth, I have to stop and think about Hashem and His Torah and which brocho I have to make. The Raavad says we have so many mitzvos maasiyos in Yiddishkeit because it helps us become preoccupied with Hashem and His rotzon the entire day. That connects me to Hashem no matter what I am doing.

The Rambam says do not be preoccupied by taivoh. There is nothing wrong with a pleasurable experience. But to pursue it and make it a serious activity that I am always thinking about and waiting for is an aveiroh. It reminds me about the time I went to a certain city for a chasunoh. I was put up by a wealthy individual with a fancy home and four Teslas in the driveway. The first thing the host did when I came inside was show me his wine cellar and his schnapps collection. Later, his wife discussed with me the challenges of bringing up their children with spiritual values, and I'm thinking "What kind of role-model do these children have? How can they expect their children to aspire for anything in ruchniyus if their father is so preoccupied with his wealth and luxuries?"

This is what the Rambam says—we define ourselves by what we think about all day.

Parshas Kedoshim is a very interesting parsha—with a wide range of mitzvos starting with Kedoshim tihuyu and moving on to kibbud av vo'em and keeping Shabbos. What is the connection?

Kedoshim tihiyu tells me what my life goals are, but it also tells me that I need to connect to Hashem. Kibbud av vo'em is one of the aseres hadibros, but interestingly, it is among the first five dibros which means it is in the category of bein odom leMokom! Why? One reason is to provide a model of hakoras hatov towards Hashem. I owe so much to my parents because they gave me the greatest gift of all—the gift of life. They raised me and cared for all my needs until I became independent. The hakoras hatov one should have to parents is nearly infinite. Anyone who has any sense of hakoras hatov knows he owes them beyond measure.

The Chovos Halevovos says without a basic sense of hakoras hatov one cannot serve Hashem at all. The Ramban says the mitzvah of Anochi

Hashem Elokecho is that the basis of serving Hashem is recognizing what Hashem has done for us and that we owe Hashem our obedience in return.

This is expressed in the mitzvah of kovod—taking care of all your parents' physical needs. Then there is the mitzvah of yirah—having respect and awe of parents. They brought us into this world and they gave us everything. Why do we have these mitzvos? To be a model for how we must relate to Hashem. The way we relate to our parents and the way we relate to Hashem are inseparable. Our parents are the source of everything I have and Hashem is the source of everything I have. The only time my relationship with my parents takes a back seat is when it interferes with my relationship with Hashem. My ultimate source of everything is Hashem alone. If parents demand of me something that is against the Torah, I listen to Hashem—I owe Hashem even more than I owe my parents.

Kedoshim tihiyu is important, but it can be very ethereal. It can be abstract and difficult. How do I make it real? How to I achieve it? Look at the next mitzvos of the parsha. Look at kibbud av vo'em. Understand you owe everything to those who gave you existence. Then look at the posuk of al tifnu el ho'elilim. Don't turn towards meaningless things. The gemara in Shabbos says it means don't distract your mind from Hashem by getting involved in trivial matters. People get into all kinds of human-created activities and cultural accomplishments. Food and alcohol, even arts, music, sports, and theater. These things are tools but they often become ends in themselves.

Everything has to be kept in their proper proportion and not be allowed to take a life of its own. It slowly becomes who the person is, and Hashem departs from his mind. The more you get involved in it, it takes over and becomes an avodo zoro. This is an impediment to kedoshim tihiyu.

The parsha talks about matnos aniyim. Why are we obligated to give matnos aniyim? The purpose is to prevent people from allowing their money to take over their lives and let it dominate their thinking. Once that happens, you will lose that connection to Hashem and you won't become kodosh. If we become just physical beings and are preoccupied with our wealth and our physical existence, we will lose our connection. It is true with all human pursuits, money and luxuries. We have to become a kodosh in order to relate to Hashem. We say in davening that because we are kodosh, we can relate to Hashem who is Kodosh and give Him praise.

Parshas Acharai Mos and Kedoshim is an unbelievable juxtaposition of different parshiyos. The human being has many forces that pull at him simultaneously. Society is no excuse not to be a kodosh, the environment is no excuse. Even in the midst of the greatest hislahavus and dveikus we have to maintain awareness of the yetzer horo for arayos and remain kodosh.