

Parashat Kedoshim

Coming Out of Pesach and Keeping the Flames of Holiness Burning

Breaking Our Nature to Become Our True Selves

Coming out of Pesach offers a new beginning in our life routine. I indeed feel more pure, with a greater desire to serve Hashem and increase *Kedusha* – Holiness. The first day after Pesach, I got up excited to give *tzedaka* and pray, feeling so happy to start anew and work on holiness in every sphere of life, such as holy eating, more talking with Hashem and increased kindness toward others. Having a total break from our routine helps us get back on track in a new and better way. Today, I received a phone call from one of my very good friends here, in Israel. Her elderly father was hospitalized in the US and she immediately decided to fly out to visit him, despite having scheduled courses to begin this week. “It would have worked out much better for me to visit my dad in the summer, after I have completed teaching my courses,” she told me. “Yet, I feel I have to go now, as now is when my father needs me,” she explained. I was very impressed with my friend, for it is not easy to drop everything you have planned and suddenly pick yourself up and do the opposite of your routine because someone else needs you. This reminds me of a beautiful Torah I learned from Rav Shlomo on the last day of Pesach about the splitting of the Sea.

ספר שמות פרק יד (כז) וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת יָדוֹ עַל הַיָּם וַיָּשָׁב הַיָּם לְפָנוֹת בִּקְרָ לְאֵיתָנוּ...

“Moshe stretched forth his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea returned לְאֵיתָנוּ // *l'eitano* – to its strength” (*Shemot* 14:27).

According to the Midrash, when Hashem originally created the sea, He made a condition with the sea that it would split for the Israelites. We learn this from the phrase, “...the sea returned לְאֵיתָנוּ // *l'eitano* – to its strength,” which can be unscrambled to read לְתִנָּאוּ // *te'nao* – to its condition (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 5:5). Rav Shlomo asks, why is the sea described as returning to its condition only when it returns from being dry land to become the sea again? The condition was that it would split and become dry land, so it should have said, “It returned to its condition” when it split, rather than when it returned back to being a normal sea again. In his answer, Rav Shlomo explains, that in order to become who we truly are, and what we are meant to be, we need to be able to change ourselves 180 degrees when it is necessary to help someone else. The sea could only become the true sea it was created to be, in all of its strength, after it had split and transformed itself to become dry land – the very opposite of its nature. This is why it only states after the sea returned to become the sea again that it returned to its condition for which it was created. We are all created to be our true selves – to be who we are supposed to be. However, we can only truly be ourselves after we show that we can also become the opposite of our nature. Only then, can we return to become our very truest selves in all our strength.

Returning Back to Normal after Our Sea-Splitting Pesach Experience

This is exactly my experience from the entire weeklong holiday of Pesach, when we go out of our personal Egypt – the narrow, limiting routines that pull us down. We pack away half our kitchen and cover the rest. Then we take out new utensils, pots, pans and knives that we are unaccustomed to using- as if we are guests in our own kitchens. Now in the aftermath of Pesach,

with my regular, familiar cook wear and paraphernalia back on their shelves, I feel like the sea that split and reverted back to become sea again in its normal state. Now, I'm ready to be a truer and better me – a holier me- ready for this week's Torah reading – *Parashat Kedoshim*.

Simple Recipe for Holiness

פַּר וִיקְרָא פֶּרֶק יט (ב) דִּבֶּר אֶל כָּל עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדָשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:
 “Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel and tell them, You shall be holy for I the Eternal Your G-d is holy” (*Vayikra* 19:2).

So, what does it exactly mean to be holy? Some people may think that holiness is only appropriate for a select elite of ascetic individuals. Yet, any Jew who so desires is able to achieve holiness. This is why the opening Torah verse in *Parashat Kedoshim* is told to the entire congregation of Israel (Alschich, *Vayikra* 19:2). This *parasha*, about becoming holy, relates equally to all Jews, regardless of different social states, backgrounds and ages; whether a Kohen, a judge, a *ba'al teshuva*, a farmer, a FFB etc. Whereas, the commentators give several possible definitions of holiness, such as: separation from anything impure (*Vayikra* 11:44); keeping aloof from forbidden sexual relations (Rashi); keeping all the positive mitzvot and refraining from the prohibitions (Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuva* 4); I want to suggest that true holiness is to go against our inert nature and change ourselves in order to serve Hashem. This is what made Avraham, our Father, the first Jew. His nature was complete *chesed* (kindness), yet all his tests were in *gevurah* (severity). Only when he had proven himself ready to sacrifice his favorite son to Hashem and go against everything he had been teaching others, did he become worthy of becoming the progenitor of the Jewish people. Working on our *midot* (character) to go against our natural inclination to be gluttonous, jealous, and honor seeking fulfills the directive: **קַדְשׁ עַצְמְךָ בְּמַתָּר לָךְ** / “*Kadesh atzmecha b'mutar lach*” – Sanctify yourself through that which is permitted (*Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot* 20a).

The Piety-Personality-Twist that Keeps the Pesach Spark Ignited

While it is easy to measure particular actions and determine whether they are permitted or forbidden, the development of genuinely good character traits is harder to define as it goes beyond the letter of the law and. Yet, it is exactly the piety of this immeasurable temperament twist that engenders holiness. “Piety leads to *Ruach HaKodesh*” (Divine Holy Inspiration) (*Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah* 20b). *Netivot Shalom* explains that the entire purpose of our coming into this world is in order to perfect our character traits (*Introduction to Pirkei Avot*). This explains why we begin studying *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) on the first Shabbat following Pesach. Now that we have gotten a ‘kick-start’ of holiness by emerging from our limiting routines, transforming our natural inclinations, we have the opportunity to anchor our newly achieved freedom to become holy in our daily routines. After igniting the initial spark on Pesach, the challenge is to keep the fire going. Working on overcoming our natural inclination in order to perfect our character is the fuel that keeps the flames of holiness burning.