

The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim

What are the Conditions for Remaining in the Holy Land and Enjoying Its Blessings?

How does Secular Life Contrast with Living Holy Lives in the Holy Land?

In secular Denmark, where I grew up, the expression “to be holy” was often used derogatorily, implying someone arrogant, aloof, or antisocial. In truth, the Hebrew word **קָדוֹשׁ**/*kadosh* – holy – does indeed mean “to be separate.” It is first used in the Torah in connection with Shabbat: “Then G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because on that day He rested from all the work of creation that He had accomplished” (*Bereishit* 2:3). Shabbat was singled out and set apart from the six days of work. That’s why, during the Havdalah ceremony at the close of Shabbat, we declare how Hashem “separates the sacred from the secular, light from darkness, Israel from the nations, and the seventh day from the six days of creation.” Life is created through separation. Cells divide and differentiate to create and sustain life. Likewise, the Creator in His creating the world separated light from darkness, land from sea, woman from man, and Israel from the nations.

In contrast, the primeval state before creation was one of chaos and formlessness: “In the beginning, the earth was unformed and void, and darkness covered the face of the deep” (*Bereishit* 1:2). This was precisely the state I experienced during my teenage years among my hippy-dippy circle of friends – men and women, Jews and non-Jews, all blended together in one blurry mishmash. There were no boundaries. Everything was “allowed.” Even the language we used, like the all-inclusive word “guys,” erased distinctions. Although trendy, that confusing culture of blurring differences reflected a pagan yearning to return to chaos – to the formless void of pre-creation.

Parashat Kedoshim instructs us: “You shall be holy for Me, for I Hashem am holy; and I have separated you from the peoples to be Mine” (*Vayikra* 20:26). But what does it mean to be holy? How can we integrate holiness into our lives, and how does the mitzvah to be holy take on unique meaning in the Land of Israel?

Why Would a Person Refraining from Abhorrence be Considered Holy?

Maharal explains that holiness is essentially transcendent (*Tiferet Yisrael* 37). This is reflected in *Parashat Acharei Mot* which opens with the warning to the Israelites to separate from the pervert practices of the surrounding nations: “Like the practice of the land of Egypt, in which you dwelled, you shall not do, and like the practice of the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you, you shall not do, and you shall not follow their statutes” (*Vayikra* 18:3). The continuation of chapter 18, enumerating all the sexual prohibitions, teaches that holiness entails separating ourselves from the immoral sexuality in which these nations engaged: “You shall not defile yourselves by any of these things, for the nations, whom I am sending away from before you, have defiled themselves with all these things” (*Vayikra* 18:24).

In *Parashat Acharei Mot*, the sinner is portrayed as an offensive pervert, whereas in *Parashat Kedoshim*, the person who refrains from sinning is considered holy. It describes someone who keeps seemingly simple mitzvot – honoring parents, refraining from stealing, lying, or cheating – the kinds of basic moral expectations that even secular society upholds.

Yet the Torah considers the person who fulfills these basic commandments, which seem far from transcendent, as holy. The very same behaviors that *Parashat Acharei Mot* condemns as abhorrent are reframed in *Parashat Kedoshim*: not only must we avoid them, but doing so is itself a spiritual achievement, worthy of sanctity. In contrast, in *Parashat Acharei Mot*, engaging in these acts is viewed as utterly impure and repugnant – the very behaviors that the Land cannot tolerate, and it vomits out anyone who commits them.

Between the Earthly Exile Perspective and the Heavenly Land-of-Israel Perspective

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel (Steinsaltz) explains that the repetition of the section on forbidden sexual relationships in our double parasha conveys two different vantage points, respectively, regarding refraining from sin. *Parshot Acharei Mot* presents the heavenly view, which asks how it is possible to sink so low, whereas *Parashat Kedoshim* present the earthly view, which says that although corporal punishment and other severe penalties still apply here, still, one who guards himself against all these abominations is considered “Keep yourselves holy, and you will be holy.” (*Vayikra* 20:7). *Parshat Acharei Mot* speaks to us when we are on a truly high level, in that state there are things so unthinkable that we would never even consider committing them. But if we fall to a low level, withstanding the temptation to sin renders us holy (*Saintly or Simple? An Essay on Parshat Kedoshim*).

Thinking back on my teenage years, when it was unheard of to honor parents, stand up for a venerable person, or even desist from sexual immorality, anyone who would refrain from perversity can be considered a saint. Yet after I settled in the Holy Land as a *Ba'alat Teshuva* (returnee to Judaism), it was a completely different story. Here in the Holy Land, so much more is expected of us to be worthy of her holiness. The Land of Israel will not tolerate those who deviate even in the slightest way from living in a monogamous husband and wife relationship, as it states:

ספר ויקרא פרק יחפסוק כה וַתִּטְמָא הָאָרֶץ וַאֲפָקֶד עֲוֹנָהּ עָלֶיהָ וַתִּקָּא הָאָרֶץ אֶת יֹשְׁבֵיהָ:
(כו) וַשְׁמֵרְתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת מִשְׁפָּטַי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ מִכָּל הַתּוֹעֵבֹת הָאֵלֶּה הָאֲזָרָח וְהַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם:
(כז) כִּי אֶת כָּל הַתּוֹעֵבֹת הָאֵל עָשׂוּ אֲנֹשֵׁי הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵיכֶם וַתִּטְמָא הָאָרֶץ:
(כח) וְלֹא תִקְיָא הָאָרֶץ אֶתְכֶם בְּטִמְאַכֶּם אֹתָהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר קָאָה אֶת הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵיכֶם:

“Then the land became defiled, and I visited its sin upon it, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But as for you, you shall observe My statutes and My ordinances, and you shall not do like any of these abominations, neither the native, nor the stranger who sojourns among you. For the people of the land who preceded you, did all of these abominations, and the land became defiled. And let the land not vomit you out for having defiled it, as it vomited out the nation that preceded you” (*Vayikra* 18:25-28).

Is the Land a Person that can Vomit Out Unfit People?

In our double *parasha*, the Land of Israel is strikingly personified. Just as a person may experience stomach upset after consuming something unfit and find relief by vomiting it out, so too does the land react to being defiled by “spitting out” those who defile it. But this defilement has little to do with human interaction with the soil itself and everything to do with moral corruption. The land becomes impure when its inhabitants behave immorally, and it responds by expelling them. The Israelites’ ability to enjoy “a land flowing with milk and honey” as they inherit it from the Canaanites is conditional upon upholding the laws of the Torah. If they fall into the same depraved practices – idolatry and sexual immorality – they too will be driven out, just like those who came before them.

Why are Higher Moral Standards Required in the Land of Israel?

As the Ramban famously explains, the mitzvot were primarily given to be fulfilled in Eretz Yisrael, where Hashem’s presence dwells more fully. Here, the Shechinah is not distant or hidden but present and active, making the land especially sensitive to impurity and responsive to holiness.

Eretz Yisrael is imbued with intrinsic sanctity due to its direct Divine supervision. While all lands are ultimately under Hashem’s providence, outside of Israel, this supervision is carried out through His divine messengers – angels. In contrast, the Land of Israel is under Hashem’s direct providence. Connecting with Hashem through keeping the laws of the Torah is best fulfilled in the land that is most attuned to that

relationship, as the potential for experiencing G-d's presence is heightened in the land. Consequently, moral failures are less tolerated here in Israel than elsewhere. Although the immorality of nations throughout the rest of the world does not necessarily lead to their exile from their land, this is not so in the Land of Israel. Here, the nation that fails to live up to the Torah's higher demands for ethical and holy living is driven out (Ramban, *Vayikra* 18:25).

The inherent holiness of Eretz Yisrael is precisely what demands our heightened moral sensitivity. Its sanctity is a dynamic property that responds to our ethical choices. It offers the opportunity to experience G-d in a way that is more immediate and real than anywhere else – but that opportunity is not a guaranteed privilege. It is the sacred responsibility of those who dwell in the land (Inspired by Rav Michael Hattin, *Acharei-Mot - Kedoshim | The Sanctity of the Land*).

What are the Parameters for the Dedication to the Land Required in Eretz Yisrael?

The root of the word *kadosh* (ק-ד-ש) also implies readiness and designation. Just as a bride becomes *mekudeshet* – consecrated – through the commitment of marriage, so too do we become holy by designating our time, space, and energy for Hashem. In this light, holiness is not only about separating from impurity, but also about dedicating ourselves to clarity, intention, and sacred purpose. Nowhere is this designation more relevant than in the Land of Israel, where both the land and its people are set apart – not merely to be different, but to be devoted. In Eretz Yisrael, the call to holiness is not theoretical; it is carved into the stones and soil, calling us to align our lives with Hashem's presence.

In the Holy Land, even ordinary actions take on extraordinary meaning. In the Holy Land, even the most ordinary actions take on extraordinary significance. Planting a tree, harvesting a field, or eating its produce all involve mitzvot that fuse the physical with the spiritual. Living in Eretz Yisrael is a continuous encounter with the Divine. The laws of the Torah are not confined to behavior alone – they are engraved into the landscape of the environment surrounding us. The more we sanctify our lives, the more the land responds with blessing.

To be holy, then, is to live in covenantal awareness – to recognize that every moment and detail of life is an invitation to draw closer to Hashem. In Eretz Yisrael, this awareness is not optional. It is the very condition for remaining here, as the Torah reminds us: “You shall keep all My statutes and ordinances, so that the Land does not vomit you out...” (*Vayikra* 20:22).