

Acharei Mos begins with the avodoh of the Kohen Godol on Yom Kippur to atone for the sins of the entire Jewish People. We read this parsha on Yom Kippur morning in krias haTorah.

The posuk requires that on Yom Kippur, we achieve a level of taharoh lifnei Hashem. The Ramban considers this an absolute chiyuv, that we fulfil through vidui. We undertake five kinds of physical deprivation on Yom Kippur in order to loosen the grip of physicality and become more like malochim – spiritual beings. This is why on Yom Kippur, we allow ourselves to say 'Boruch Shem k'vod malchuso' out loud – just as malochim do.

At the end of the parsha, we have a list of arayos. We read this parsha of arayos at krias haTorah of Mincha Yom Kippur afternoon. Why? The gemara says we need to be concerned that the women come dressed nicely to shul and the men might get distracted and have thoughts about them. This is amazing! In the midst of all the fasting and davening and doing teshuvoh and becoming like a maloch, we still can't ignore human nature and the pull of our physical desires. Not even on the holiest day of the year!

This list is introduced by a very interesting posuk: do not follow the abominations of Egypt – the country you left, nor the abominations of Canaan – the country you are entering. The Ohr HaChaim asks, Moshe is talking to Klal Yisroel in the midbor. Klal Yisroel just left Egypt! Of course they know that Egypt is the country they left and Canaan is the country they are entering!

He answers that a person can have the attitude that if he was born and raised in a decadent society where immorality is so pervasive, how could the Torah possibly expect him to rise above his environment and be a complete tzaddik? He might think it's not possible! So the posuk tells this person that even though you came from Egypt and you are going to live among Canaanim – the two most decadent societies in the ancient world – Hashem is still demanding that you stay far away from arayos. There are no excuses. But there is more. 'Kedoshim ti'hiyu' isn't a middas chassidus. It isn't a high madreigah to strive for. It is a chiyuv gomur to live your life on a different level.

The posuk says one must distance one's self from any contact with ervah. Anything that might lead to ervah is forbidden, besides ervah itself. The Rambam counts this as a separate mitzvah d'Oraisoh. It is unusual for the Torah to explicitly make fences around the Torah. But here, the Torah itself is making a fence around arayos. The Torah understood the power of the yetzer horo for arayos, so it built a separate issur d'Oraisoh of 'lo sikrivu'.

At the end of the list of arayos, the Torah says the issurim of arayos are especially relevant to Eretz Yisroel because this land is sensitive to kedushoh and rejects tumoh. This makes living in Eretz Yisroel more dangerous than other places – when we have a secular society that is built on the foundations of hefkeirus and arayos. The land will not tolerate such a society for very long.

Arayos contaminates the person and contaminates the land the person lives on.

'Kedoshim ti'hiyu' is an absolute obligation. If you are living in a society steeped in toavos, it is not an excuse. You have to rise above it and live a life of kedushoh.

What does living with kedushoh mean?

The Ramban explains that after we are given a detailed list of specific issurim, the Torah gave a general principle to live your life by – which goes beyond avoiding technically forbidden acts.

Human beings are complex – we have a combined existence of guf and neshomo. And there is a basic question each of us has to ask: which aspect of ourselves is really in charge? The guf or the neshomo?

Hashem tells Klal Yisroel to be different than non-Jewish society. Your average non-Jewish society is obsessed with the physical body. Its appearance, its power, its enjoyment. The Greeks made statues glorifying the beauty of the naked human body. Jews are required to cover the body with clothing. Why? Because the body is holy.

There is a concept of tzniyus. Tzniyus allows two people to confront each other as complete human beings without the appearance of the physical body dominating the interaction. Without tzniyus, you highlight the guf to the exclusion of all else, and this is what non-Jewish society is built upon. The guf of a Jew has a higher purpose. It is there to facilitate the goals of the neshomo. The neshomo wants to do mitzvos and learn and daven, and it needs a healthy guf to do all these things. The identity of a Jew surrounds the neshomo.

The Ramban gives examples of how to elevate our lives above the physical world. Kedushoh comes from reduced alcohol consumption. Our society today is surrounded with abundant alcohol. Even from society has gone crazy, and in order to combat it we need to go to the other extreme. A nozir is considered kodosh because he doesn't touch alcohol or anything from grapes.

Kedushoh is not a suggestion – it is a demand for a Jew to identify as a spiritual being and not just a physical being. And the fact that he is surrounded by a decadent, vulgar, and hedonistic culture is no excuse. Nivul peh is also a problem for kedushoh. Your language is how you communicate what is on your mind and it has to be elevated.

The Jews in Egypt were able to be saved because despite all the assimilation, they kept themselves Jewish. They didn't sink to the depths of tumoh – they refrained from arayos and they kept their Jewish language and dress.

The Rambam has a similar concept as the Ramban – about the primacy of the neshomo over the physical body – but arrives at it from a different mitzvah: לא תתורו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם.

In Sefer Hamitzvos (Lo Sa'aseh 47), the Rambam writes as follows:

והמצוה המ"ז היא שהזהירנו שלא לתור אחר לבבנו עד שנאמין דעות הפך הדעות שחייבתנו התורה אבל נקצר מחשבותינו ונשים להן גבול נעמוד אצלו, והוא מצות התורה ואזהרותיה. והוא אמרו (במדבר טו-לט) "ולא תתורו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם". ולשון ספרי (שם) "אחרי לבבכם" זה מינות כענין שנאמר (קהלת ז-כז) "ומוצא אני מר ממות את האשה" וגו', "ואחרי עיניכם" זה זנות כענין שנאמר (שופטים יד-ג) "ויואמר שמשון אל אביו אותה קח לי כי היא ישרה בעיני", רוצה לומר המשך אחר התאוות הגשמיות והתעסק המחשבה בהן.

First, the Rambam discusses dei'os. We have to put limits on the human intellect in order prevent it from taking a person to places of kefirah. You need Torah ideas to place boundaries and not let your mind go to all kinds of dangerous thoughts.

Then he talks about znus, but it is a broader category which includes a preoccupation about pleasures and physical indulgence. A person has a choice about where his mind is occupied. That identifies the person.

You have to be a spiritual person. You can never think that you are just a body.

A non-Jew can only bring a korbon oloh – not a korbon shlomim. When a non-Jew wants to be spiritual, he can't handle enjoying anything physical because it will always take over. A Jew can bring a korbon shlomim because a Jew has the capacity to enjoy the pleasures of the world as a part of his avodas Hashem.

The Rambam has a mitzvah of והלכת בדרכיו, and one of the ways of Hashem is being kodosh:

כָּף לְמַדּוֹ בְּפָרוֹשׁ מִצְוָה זֶה, מֵהָ הוּא נִקְרָא חַנוּן אֲף אֵתָהּ הִיָּה חַנוּן. מֵהָ הוּא נִקְרָא רַחוּם אֲף אֵתָהּ הִיָּה קְדוּשָׁה.

There is the basic requirement for everyone, and then there are areas of middas chassidus.

הלכות דעות פרק חמישי

הלכה א קָשָׁם שֶׁהֵחֵכֶם נִכְרַ בְּחֻמְתוֹ וּבְדַעוֹתָיו וְהוּא מְבַדֵּל בֵּינֵם מִשְׁאָר הַעֵם. כָּף צְרִירָה שֶׁיְהִיָּה נִכְרַ בְּמַעֲשָׂיו בְּמֵאֲכָלוֹ וּבְמִשְׁקָהוּ וּבְבַעֲיָלָתוֹ וּבְעֵשִׂית צְרִיבּוֹ וּבְדַבְרוֹ וּבְהִלְכוֹ וּבְמַלְבוּשׁוֹ וּבְכֻלְכּוּל דְּבָרָיו וּבְמִשְׁאוֹ וּבְמִתְנֵנוֹ. וְיִהְיֶה כָּל הַמַּעֲשִׂים הָאֵלֶּה נְאִים וּמְתַקְנִים בְּיֹתֵר.

כִּי צַד. תִּלְמִיד חֵכֶם לֹא יְהִיָּה גֵרְגָרָן אֶלָּא אוֹכֵל מֵאֲכָל הָרְאוּי לְהַבְרוֹת גּוֹפּוֹ. וְלֹא יֵאָכֵל מִחֻמּוֹ אֶכִּילָה גָּסָה. וְלֹא יְהִיָּה רוֹדֵף לְמַלְאֵת בְּטָנוֹ קְאָלוֹ שְׂמִתְמַלְאִין מִמֵּאֲכָל וּמִשְׂתֵּה עַד שֶׁתִּפַּח כְּרֶסֶם... אֲכָל הֵחֵכֶם אֵינוֹ אוֹכֵל אֶלָּא תִבְשִׁיל אֶחָד אוֹ שְׁנָיִם וְאוֹכֵל מִחֻמּוֹ קְדִי חַיִּין וְדִי. הוּא שְׁאֵמֵר שְׁלֵמָה (משלי יג-כה) 'צדיק אכל לשבע נפשו':

Talmidei chachomim aren't gluttonous, they eat just enough healthful food to nourish their bodies to function properly.

What about alcohol?

הלכה ג קָשָׁה חֵכֶם שׁוֹתָה יֵין אֵינוֹ שׁוֹתָה אֶלָּא קְדִי לְשִׁרׁוֹת אֶכִּילָה שְׂבֻמְעִין. וְכָל הַמִּשְׁתַּכֵּר הָרִי זֶה חוֹטָא וּמִגְנָה וּמִפְסִיד חֻמְתוֹ. וְאִם נִשְׁתַּכֵּר בְּפָנֵי עַמִּי הָאֶרֶץ הָרִי זֶה חֲלָל אֶת הַשֵּׁם. וְאִסּוּר לְשִׁתוֹת יֵין בְּצִדְקָה וּבְאֶפְלוֹ מַעַט אֶלָּא אִם הִיָּה בְּכֻלְכּוּל הָאֶכִּילָה. שֶׁהִשְׁתִּיָּה שֶׁהִיא בְּכֻלְכּוּל הָאֶכִּילָה אֵינוֹה מִשְׁכָּרָת. וְאִין גְּזָהָרִין אֶלָּא מִיֵּין שְׁלֵמָה חַנוּן:

A chochom uses wine for proper digestion. But one who gets drunk is a sinner. It is degrading and it causes you to lose your chochmoh. If a talmid chochom gets drunk in front of an am ho'oretz, it is a chillul Hashem.

The Rambam is describing the hanhagos of a ben Torah. It is not about wearing the right uniform. It is a whole lifestyle of kedushoh – how we eat, how we drink, and how we act. It is an entire identity. It's what it means to be a Jew – be elevated throughout your day. Is your mind pre-occupied in Torah? Or in all the nonsense of the world?

Sports is an understandable distraction. As an American, I knew what it means to be absorbed in sports and all the stats as a young boy. But

the time comes when you grow up and you ask yourself: is it really an important part of your life to be enthralled by one 230 pound person tackling another 250 pound person? Is that what is supposed to occupy my mind?

The Ohr HaChaim makes two important points. One is that your surrounding culture has to be irrelevant. You have to rise above it. And it is an obligation – not a recommendation for tzaddikim. The Rambam included it under the lo sa'aseh of לא תתורו and under the asei of והלכת בדרכיו. You have to be a spiritual person and not be pre-occupied with physical pleasure.

Chazal understood that it is a difficult nisayon. They instituted the krias haTorah for Mincha on Yom Kippur to be about issurei arayos because they appreciated how powerful the drive for arayos is. The Torah understood it when it forbids us to even approach it with the initial steps towards arayos.

The Rambam in Hilchos Issurei Bi'ah expands on 'lo sikrivu'. It isn't just physical contact. It includes what you look at and what you read and what you say. Anything that brings you into the mindset of arayos is an issur d'Oraisoh. These are not minor parts of the Torah – they are essential. It requires a lot of avodoh – to be mindful to not get dragged into the whole culture of zhus, and to make gedolim for yourself.

A person has to stop and think about who he is. What are his values?

We live in a peculiar world today. I was once put up as a guest in a home of a very wealthy ba'al tzedokoh. When I walked into the house, the owner immediately showed off to me his wine collection, his whiskey collection, his Tesla collection, etc. He invested so much time, money and thought into all the details about these luxuries. And you wonder why they are having trouble bringing up their children with a Torah'dik mindset? When the whole ambition in life of the parents is to enjoy and indulge in luxuries and comforts, and you spend so much time and money with vacations and entertainment, there is no room for kedushoh.

A ben Torah is someone who knows he is a spiritual being with a guf which needs to serve the purposes of the neshomo. The Raavad quotes an interesting Yerushalmi which says that one day, everyone will be asked if they enjoyed everything in Hashem's world. He explains that everything in the world has the potential to be used for kedushoh and avodas Hashem. The Ramban says that human hands have incredible potential. They can create the most kodosh things in the world by writing a sefer Torah, and they can cause the deepest evil in the world by committing murder.

Everything in this world is available for being used for avodas Hashem. But when you get involved in what the outside world is preoccupied with – even the so-called frum society – you forget what the Torah is about. Our goals, our lifestyle, our very identity, surrounds spiritual goals.