

This week we read Parshas Emor.

Last week, we spoke of the mitzvah of Kedoshim Tihyu and what it means to be kodosh. A Jew in this world has a mission – a purpose which we state in Oleinu at the end of every Shacharis, Mincha and Maariv davening.

The Gra explains that when you finish davening, you are going out to a big, noisy, distracting world. To prepare for this, a Jew needs to be clear about who he is and what he is doing with his life. Only then is he able to maintain focus on his mission. This is why during the week, we say Oleinu after Shacharis, but on Shabbos and Rosh Chodesh we say it after Mussaf. And that is why on Yom Kippur after Mussaf before Mincha, we don't say Oleinu because we don't leave shul.

When you go out to the world, you have to know who you are.

In the morning, we begin davening with the brocho of shelo osani goy. When we finish davening we again repeat the fact that we have a different task than the non-Jewish nations. Yehoshua bin Nun composed Oleinu when Klal Yisroel entered Eretz Yisroel. They had to be clear that their Jewish identity didn't overlap with the identities of the surrounding nations they were going to be living among.

We explained that a Jew is kodosh. A human being is a very unique creation. He is not a well-developed animal. The main objection of Yahadus with evolution is not that one kind of animal evolved from another kind of animal – although it likely didn't happen. Either way, it makes very little difference where animals came from. What is relevant is where the human being came from.

The gemara talks about a Roman philosopher who spent 12 years of his life making experiments to try to figure out how long is the period of gestation of a snake. Imagine what a waste of time that would be for a Jew who is supposed to serve Hashem!

The human being is a carrier of a neshomo. And in order for a human being to be a carrier of a neshomo, it requires a higher, separate creation. The pesukim say the other animals were spawned by the earth alone. But when it came to the human being, Hashem directly took dirt from the place of the mizbeach. The Rambam quotes the mesorah that we have which testifies that the place of the mizbeach is where Odom's earth was taken from. Hashem took that dirt and made a tzelem Elokim – a very unique creation.

Chazal say Hashem created two parallel universes. A physical universe and a spiritual universe. And He created a human being that straddles both worlds.

What is our identity? The fundamental idea of the mitzvah of וּבְחוּקוֹתֵיהֶם לֹא תִלְכוּ is that the image I project to the world is that I am a Jew. When Yonah was asked by the sailors on the ship who he is, they expected to find this out by asking him about his place of origin or his profession. But Yonah doesn't answer which country he lives in or which profession he works in. He just says: וְאֵת ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִרְאָה. The identity of a Jew is that he serves Hashem.

The mitzvah of Kedoshim tihyu is that your life is surrounded by kedushoh and taharoh. This is a whole orientation to life. This is why the parsha continues with mitzvos bein odom lechaveiro. When you confront other human beings, you confront them with the full awareness that they possess a tzelem Elokim, and that in turn raises your awareness that you yourself are primarily a tzelem Elokim. If you

think about yourself as an animal running around trying to satisfy your needs and desires, then that's how you'll look at everyone else around you.

Next in this parsha, we move from who you are as a Jew, to the special kedushoh of a kohen. Rashi quotes the gemara in Yevamos which obligates the adult kohanim to see to it that even kohanim who are minors remain tahor and don't defile their kedushas kehunoh.

There is an aspect of the mitzvah of chinuch which is derabbonon and an aspect which is de'oraiso. When they were little, I bought my sons a kosher set of lulav and esrog as practice for when they will be bar mitzvah and chayav on their own. But mide'oraiso, I only needed to teach them Torah to inform them of what their obligations will be when they become adults. Inform them, but not train them – which is derabbonon. And this only applies to mitzvos aseil. What about mitzvos lo sa'aseil?

There are three mitzvos lo sa'aseil where the Torah says there is a mitzvah of chinuch to train children to keep. One is to keep kedushas kehunoh, another is training children to keep Shabbos and not encourage them to do melocho for you. And lastly, you have to make sure your children do not eat non-kosher food.

You would think these are three separate mitzvos, but the Rambam says they have a common theme: you are training them for a life of kedushoh. The Torah is telling us that even though there is no mitzvas chinuch de'oraiso to train your child to keep most mitzvos, there is an exception – kedushoh. And the Rambam quotes a posuk in Mishlei to support this – חֲנוּךְ לְנֶעֶר עַל פִּי דַרְכּוֹ. This means you need to train your child to adopt a path in life. Not simply to perform specific actions or refrain from specific actions. It is an entire lifestyle.

Most things people do throughout their day follow a certain routine – a set pattern of behavior. When the Rambam explains how to do teshuvah, he describes it with the posuk וְעִזּוּב רָשָׁע דַּרְכּוֹ. You need to alter your general behavior pattern of doing aveiros – not just stop doing this bad action in isolation. The reality of having bechiroh chofshis makes life hard. It creates an incredible responsibility. It means you can decide to change how you operate and change everything you do.

Rabbeinu Yonah says a surprising thing in Shaarei Teshuvah about bechiroh chofshis. Most people would say it is simply a reality – people have bechiroh. But Rabbeinu Yonah says bechiroh is a mitzvah. That means it doesn't happen automatically without thinking. Because most people can coast through much of their lives without actually choosing how to live. There is a mitzvah to make a conscious effort to use your bechiroh to take control of your decisions, stop living on automatic pilot, and choose the right thing to do.

The question is, let's say a person is an addict to certain forbidden behaviors and his habits are deeply ingrained. He lost control over his life. Is he obligated to stop his addiction overnight using sheer willpower? If you look at the Rambam's language carefully, you'll see that the Rambam views teshuvah as a process. A gradual adjusting of your habits little by little until you kick your bad habits completely. Having an addiction does mean a certain loss of control. So for this person, bechiroh chofshis means beginning to take the right steps to eventually get control over your life again by the end of the process.

An addict once claimed to me that he simply has no power of bechiroh

to stop his addiction. He is stuck. I told him he shouldn't flatter himself that he is such a rosho that he joined the exclusive club of super-reshoim who Hashem decided to punish by removing their bechiroh and preventing them from doing teshuvoh. He needs to have the emunoh that his bechiroh still exists and that he can still use it right now to slowly and gradually begin taking those steps until he takes his life back. You can always start a process of changing your derech.

This is one side of the equation – having a negative derech of behavior. The other side is the mitzvah of chinuch. There is a chinuch to train your child – and to train yourself – to set your behavior patterns on the correct path of living a life of kedushoh.

It is a very slippery slope, because once you are missing that behavior pattern of kedushoh, you are at risk of falling into negative behavior patterns that will easily fill the gap and eventually become deeply ingrained. You need to establish a derech of kedushoh of Shabbos right from the start. You need to establish a derech of kedushas achiloh. The Rambam includes shechitoh and ma'acholos assurah under the sefer of kedushoh. It is not an option. It is a chiyuv gomur. And it needs to start when you are young – the moment the child can understand there are things he may eat and things he may not eat.

This is one dimension of kedushoh. Another dimension is treating a kohen in a special way because of his higher level of kedushoh – וְקִדְשָׁתוֹ – and the Kohen Gadol with even a higher level of kedushoh.

The Torah is teaching us a lesson about how we need to function in our day-to-day patterns of behavior. Being a ben Torah isn't just wearing the right clothes and having the right physical appearance etc. It means your identity is Torah. You are deciding to live your life with the Torah defining who you are and everything you do.

When a kohen is in the Beis HaMikdosh doing the avodah, he has to be without any physical blemish. People are looking at him as someone who represents the ideal level of avodas Hashem. If he has a physical blemish which makes people look down on him, it will reflect badly on the avodas haMikdosh in general.

This concept applies in our own lives as a ben Torah as well. A ben Torah has to make sure that when people look at him walking down the street, they will admire him as a refined, dignified, elevated human being. This is what brings respect and admiration to the Torah. This is why the Rambam writes that a talmid chochom had to be distinct in his behavior and presentation, otherwise it is a chillul Hashem.

In Hilchos Teshuvah, making a chillul Hashem is one of the worst things you can do. Bringing disgrace to Hashem and His Torah happens when those who represent Him are acting in a lowly and disgraceful manner. This is the responsibility of a kohen and this is the responsibility of a ben Torah. Their public actions have to be superior and elevated.

There are all kinds of halachos about how a kohen has to conduct

himself. And the animal chosen for a korban also has to meet very strict, high standards. Kal v'chomer people need to meet high standards.

At the very end of the parsha, we have an interesting story about the megadef. It doesn't seem to belong in this parsha. There was a man whose mother was Jewish and whose father was an Egyptian. He was an anomaly. Klal Yisroel in Egypt were very careful about forbidden relationships. Even though they were powerless slaves, there was only one case of adultery and it produced this individual.

His mother was Shlomis bas Divri. She was overly friendly to her husband's taskmaster, and he realized that the friendliness of this Jewish woman created an opportunity to have his way with her. And she conceived a child with him.

There are strong gedorim we place on arayos and they are for a reason. Because there is a very slippery slope once those gedorim are breached and friendly relationships become more and more serious. One thing usually leads to another.

This product of the adultery had a serious life-long problem. He didn't belong to any shevet because shevotim follow the father. And because of this rejection, he was mekallel the Shem Hashem. Being mekallel is the opposite of making a brocho. As we know, making a brocho is a way to increase Hashem's influence and His presence into our world. Being mekallel means trying to push Hashem and His influence out of our world. Make Him distant from the world.

At the end of the parsha, we are taught that this mekallel is to be executed, and a murderer is to be executed. What is the connection? Chazal explain that killing a human being is a negation of the infinite value of his tzelem Elokim. When I look at another human being and assess his value, I have to recognize he is a guf carrying a neshomo. If I treat him just as a guf without a neshomo, then I give myself the license to eliminate him like an animal.

Valuing Hashem's presence in this world is also part of my mission in life. I want Hashem to be connected more and more to my world and my life.

Parshas Emor isn't just a bunch of technical rules for kohanim. It teaches all of us about the kind of life we should lead. Kedushoh is a whole way of life – it is a derech – not individual actions. It begins with training a child along this path at a very young age, and our bechiroh chofshis as adults requires us to consciously choose an elevated way of life. If we somehow got stuck in a negative pattern of behavior, we still have bechiroh chofshis at that point to start putting ourselves on a path that will eventually get us to regain control over our lives again. I can always change the derech that I am on.

This is why we make sure we train our children – from the very beginning – to live a life of kedushoh.