

TIMELESS TORAH

Acharei-Kedoshim: Sparks of Spirituality - Discovering Kedusha in Everyday Existence

Steps to Spirituality

The parsha of Acharei opens with a recounting of the death of Aharon's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, who offered an 'alien fire' before Hashem. The Ohr HaChaim, Rabbi Chaim ben Attar (d.1743), offers a profound insight into the reiteration of this tragic episode prior to the detailed description of the Yom Kippur service at the start of the parsha. He suggests that the tragedy serves as a potent reminder regarding the delicate balance required in our spiritual pursuits. Even in moments of profound closeness to the Divine, there remains a necessity for adherence to boundaries and a meticulous observance of Hashem's commands. Spirituality is not merely about fervent enthusiasm or a sense of nearness to the Almighty; it demands a disciplined approach, recognizing the sanctity of Torah law and the potential pitfalls of unchecked fervour.

Transitioning to the parsha of Kedoshim, we encounter a direct and powerful imperative: '*Kedoshim tihiyu* – You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy (19:2)'. This central command begs the question: how can mortal beings, imbued with human limitations and imperfections, aspire to such a lofty ideal? The 16th-century Italian commentator Rabbi Ovadia ben Yaakov Sforno (d. 1550) explains that this injunction is meant to convey the critical point that the multitude of prohibitions and commandments detailed within Sefer Vayikra up to this point are not merely restrictive decrees intended to curtail our freedoms. Rather, they are designed to refine our character, elevate our actions, and ultimately draw us closer to the Divine. The very act of observing these mitzvot, of consciously choosing to abstain from certain behaviours and actively engage in others, molds us,

shaping us to become more attuned to Hashem's will and more reflective of His attributes. The ultimate aim, according to the Sforno, is to emulate God's ways, to walk in His paths by embodying qualities of compassion, justice, and righteousness in our own lives.

Building upon this, the Chizkuni, Rabbi Chizkiyahu ben Manoach (d. c. 1240, France), draws a compelling parallel between the foundational principles encapsulated in the Ten Commandments and the practical directives outlined in Kedoshim. While the Ten Commandments provide the overarching ethical and theological framework, Kedoshim offers tangible, actionable steps for translating these lofty ideals into the fabric of our daily existence. It thereby demonstrates how holiness is not an unattainable state reserved for the select few, but a potential inherent in the correct performance of even seemingly mundane actions.

Fear of Heaven: An Internal Quest

A recurring theme within Kedoshim is the emphasis on '*Yirat Elokim* – Fear of God'. The phrase appears numerous times, prompting Rashi to offer a crucial interpretation (see 19:14, 19:32), one so important that he repeats it no less than five times in the Torah. Rashi explains that this phrase often accompanies commandments that govern interpersonal relationships and are as where external oversight is limited. . The implication is profound: the 'fear of God' serves as an internal compass, guiding our actions even when no one else is watching. It underscores the importance of our inner motivations and intentions, as Hashem perceives not only our outward deeds but also the thoughts and feelings that drive them.



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This internal accountability is paramount in cultivating genuine holiness, as it fosters a sense of integrity and responsibility that transcends societal expectations.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe (d. 2005, Jerusalem), expands on this concept, emphasizing that *Yirat Elokim* (fear of God) is not simply about being afraid of Divine retribution. Rather, it is an intrinsic quality, manifesting in a deep-seated reverence and awe for the Divine, that permeates all aspects of a person's being, particularly in terms of their interactions with others. This 'fear' manifests as a profound respect for human dignity, an unwavering commitment to honesty, and a genuine sensitivity to the needs and feelings of those around us. Rabbi Wolbe stresses that cultivating this 'fear of God' involves a rigorous process of self-examination and a relentless pursuit of truthfulness in our dealings with ourselves and with others.

The commandment to honour the elderly (19:32), which the Gemara in Kiddushin links specifically to one who has 'acquired wisdom', seeing the word '*zaken*' as an acronym for '*zeh she'kanah chochmah* (this is one who has acquired wisdom)', contains a powerful message along a similar line. Rabbi Itzela of Volozhin (d. 1849) explains that this analogy, likening the acquisition of wisdom to the purchase of a valuable item, teaches us that fulfilling the mitzvot requires self-sacrifice, effort, dedication, and perseverance, but that the rewards are limitless.

Shaping An Environment of Kedusha

The cornerstone of ethical interpersonal conduct, '*Ve'ahavta l'reacha kamocha* – You shall love your neighbour as yourself', is also prominently featured in Kedoshim. Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler (d.1953) offers a profound understanding of this mitzvah.

He suggests that the Torah, recognizing the inherent self-centeredness that can be part of human nature, instructs us to leverage our innate drive for self-betterment and well-being and extend that same concern and care towards our fellow human beings. Through understanding our own needs and desires, we can develop a deeper empathy and a more genuine capacity for love and compassion for others.

In a similar vein, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's (d.1888) has an insightful interpretation of the commandment concerning honest weights and measures. Rav Hirsch argues that this mitzvah transcends the simple prohibition of fraud and deception in commercial dealings. It mandates the creation of an environment permeated by honesty and integrity, one where even the slightest appearance of impropriety is avoided. This emphasis on establishing a culture of truthfulness underscores the holistic nature of holiness. It is not confined to ritualistic observance but extends to every facet of our lives, including our business ethics and our interactions with the broader community.

Kedusha, holiness, is therefore not an abstract, unattainable ideal, but a tangible reality that can be progressively realized through conscious effort, mindful observance of *mitzvot*, the cultivation of inner 'fear of God', and the establishment of an environment that fosters ethical behaviour and genuine care for others. By embracing the practical pathways outlined in the Torah and the wisdom of our Sages, we can indeed discover sparks of spirituality and strive towards a life imbued with true and meaningful holiness in our everyday existence.

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