

A-161 r

(KEDOSHIM)

"CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE"

(10-16-55)

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The theme of this morning's Sidra, kedushah, is the keynote and goal of all of Torah. It is a hard doctrine to preach. Kedushah is so out of place in twentieth century America. In the contemporary context of the Space Age holiness seems an almost hopelessly outmoded ~~theme~~ ideal. We often wonder: is not holiness more indigenous to the life of the semi-hermit, confined to his little Paradise where, in tranquil isolation, he can meditate and achieve the saintliness of the high-minded recluse? Is not the ideal of kedushah irrelevant to an age of missiles and a life crowded with inventories and taxes, commuting and socializing?

The answer is that the Torah's command "ye shall be holy" was specifically directed to ordinary men and women engaged in trade and business, medicine and law, administration and caring for children. Our Rabbis pointed out that when Daniel speaks of the angels, he mentions kedushah only once, whereas the Torah, speaking of the here-and-now (tachtonim) mentions kedushah twice.

התורה מדגישה את חשיבות הקדושה יותר מכל דבר אחר. היא מראה לנו כי הקדושה היא המפתח לחיים טובים ולשלום. כל דבר שאנו עושים חייב להיות מלווה בקדושה. זהו הדרך היחידה להשיג את המעלה הגבוהה ביותר. הקדושה היא לא רק מצוות, אלא אורח חיים. היא מלמדת אותנו כי חייבים להיות נאמנים לאלהינו בכל דבר. זהו הדרך היחידה להשיג את השלום האמיתי. הקדושה היא המפתח לחיים טובים ולשלום.

On earth and in the midst of life, where we are faced with the challenge of yetzer ha-ra, that of temptation and ambition, profit and greed, secularism and profanity, that is where true holiness can be forged -- in double measure, for here is the fiery test of kedushah growing out of the encounter with real life. Not only is kedushah needed as a weapon to do battle with the yetzer ha-ra, but the evil in life is the very "challenge" which elicits the "response" of holiness, to use the language of a modern historian.

Indeed if we consider the heroes of our history whom we have come to regard as our saints, we find that the great majority of them were people who were intimately concerned with and involved in the rigorous experiences of real, practical living; people who neither secluded themselves from their societies, nor allowed themselves to become completely absorbed and utterly overwhelmed by their mundane problems. Moses was the "man of G-d" not because he encountered a burning bush in the wilderness of Sinai but because he brought its message into the lives of impoverished, miserable slaves; because he presented its demands to an autocratic empire; because he confronted Pharaoh with its claims, and because he had to double as a general and legislator and judge. Rabbi Akiva engineered a revolution, Resh Lakish emerged as a Sage from a career as a Robin Hood of antiquity, Maimonides was a busy, prosperous physician. Many of our great saints of Eastern Europe were primarily tradesmen. Chief Rabbi Isaac Nissim came to his eminent post after 40 years as a successful merchant. From the ranks of statesmen and military figures, businessmen and bankers, scientists and men of affairs have we drawn our "holy men." They are twice holy -- for they are of this world and in this world -- yet not lost in it. They have known yetzer ha-ra in its thousand guises, have learned to live with it and overcome it -- and their conquest has added immeasurably to their stature as men of kedushah. They prove that not only can holiness thrive in a practical milieu, but that the challenges of mundane, prosaic living ^{are} the stone on which ^{we must} sharpen the blade of kedushah.

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This idea was probably uppermost in the thought of the Rabbi who, in commenting upon the opening verse of our Sidra, made this rather startling remark:

עבודת ה' היא עבודת ה' (אין עבודת ה')

What a disappointing definition of kedushah! Is this how Judaism reduces the lofty vision of holiness?

Yet this is precisely how kedushah is achieved! Holiness is not attained by those who insulate themselves from the harsh experiences of daily life, but rather ^{by} for those

who have to dirty their hands in the daily struggle with unbending reality -- and then can wash them clean! Kedushah is for those whose hands must come to grips with real situations -- cold, brutal, unattractive, unfeeling; and who can wrest from them cleanliness, warmth, pleasantness, kindness. When hands soiled by working through the grime of life can be washed by the goodness of the human personality; when such people can "come clean" and stay pure amidst the mud and slush and dirt of life's demands -- they are indeed kedoshim. Hands that are prophylactic and protected by the kid-gloves of self-interest need not be washed; their owners are pious, but not holy, devout but not saints. Hands that grasp life in the raw, ~~that are ready to take a firm grip even on painful situations,~~ and are cleaned by the scouring powder of mitzvot and the discipline of Torah -- they, when thus washed, make of their owners true saints, of this world as well as in this world, and worthy of all worlds, both elyonim and tachtonim.

That is why I am an optimist about the future of Orthodox Judaism in this land. We have always thrived on challenge and grown stronger from the confrontation with reality and the encounter with the unholy. The farmer in ancient Palestine ~~who~~ had to surrender one precious day out of seven in his harvest season for Shabbat and the dairy man who could not milk his few cows on this day -- they faced terribly real problems, certainly no less severe than we do in our industrialized but prosperous society, in their concern for Shabbat. They struggled, they refused to yield -- and they survived, with a double measure of kedushah. Kashrut was easily as difficult for Jews of old as it is in our day of restaurants and frozen foods. Yet difficulty did not defeat us. On the contrary, it preserved for us the religiously fittest.

The challenges of the Space Age -- to our observances and to our ideology -- will similarly play the yetzer ha-ra to our kedushah. The modern, secular world is the challenge G-d casts at us. Let us rise to it, accept it -- and ^erespond with twice ^Aas much kedushah.