

TORAH TABLE TALK – *PIRKE AVOT*

Kiddush Hashem: How We Make Life Holy

Parshat Emor, Leviticus 21:1 – 24:23

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

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The Book of Leviticus deals with the dimension of holiness in the life of the community and the individual. We learn in this book about the special responsibilities and restrictions placed on the *Kohanim*, priestly descendants of Aaron, as well as the mandate for the community of Israel to ‘be holy.’ Holiness, however, is not limited to one aspect of life or one particular group of people. *Kohanim* express and actualize holiness in the world by serving God, by separating themselves from the community and living by a unique set of standards and practices. Some of these laws trouble us; we learn that there are restrictions on who a *kohen* could marry even within the community of Israel and even on the standards of physical perfection to serve in the Tabernacle. The community of Israel expresses holiness by standing apart from the other nations of the world and living a life in which each moment is an opportunity for sanctification. In Parshat Emor we find special laws which set restrictions upon who a *kohen* could marry as well as laws for celebrating and sanctifying time on the Sabbath and holidays. We have seen that holiness is not just a matter of ritual practice or worship. Rabbi Elazar of *Modi'im* understood the quest for holiness as a life-long pursuit for the Jewish people which applied to every aspect of life. Our ultimate goal is to become a *mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh*, “a nation of priests and a holy people.”

Pirke Avot 3:15 Rabbi Elazar of *Modi'im* said: If a person profanes the sacred, or despises the holidays, or puts his fellow to shame publicly, or annuls the covenant of Abraham our father, or who incorrectly interprets the Torah, even though he has a knowledge of the Torah and good works, he has no share in the world to come.

Sources

Leviticus 22:32 – 23:2

You shall not profane My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the people of Israel – I am the Lord who sanctifies you. I, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God, I, am the Lord. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, these are the fixed times of the Lord, which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions.’

Pirke D'Rebbe Eliezer:

You shall not profane My holy name: the Torah was given for just this purpose – for us to sanctify the great name of God, as it is said, “And He said to me: ‘You are My servant, Israel in whom I glory.’” (Isaiah 49:3) From this verse we learn: a person should distance himself from robbery of a Jew, a gentile or even a person in the market place, for one who robs a gentile will come to rob a fellow Jew. A person who swears falsely to a gentile, in the end, will swear falsely to a fellow Jew. A person who lies to a gentile, in the end, will come to lie to a fellow Jew. One who spills the blood of a gentile will, in the end, spill the blood of a fellow Jew. The Torah was given for this reason – in order to allow us to sanctify God’s great name.

Jerusalem Talmud Baba Metzia 2:5

Simeon ben Shetah was a trader in flax. So his disciples said, "Master, give up this trade. We will buy you a donkey, and you will not have to weary yourself so much." They went and purchased a donkey from an Ishmaelite, which turned out to have a pearl entangled on its neck. They came to their master and said, "From now on, you will not need to weary yourself." When he asked them, "Why not," they told him, "We bought you a donkey from an Ishmaelite, which has a pearl entangled in its neck." He asked them, "Did its former owner know about the pearl?" They replied, "Of course not." So he said to them, "Go and return it." They argued with the master: "Even those who say that cheating a Gentile is forbidden nevertheless admit that an article lost by the Gentile may be kept!" "What do you think?" [Replied Simeon] "That Simeon ben Shetah is a barbarian? Simeon ben Shetah would rather hear 'Blessed be the God of the Jews' than gain any profit in this entire world."

Tanchumah Parshat Bo

These are the fixed times of the Lord, which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions: To what may this be compared? It can be compared to a king who had a special time keeping device. When his son came of age, the king said to him: My son, up until now the time keeping device was in my hands; from now on it is in your hands.” So too, at first God sanctified times and set the length of the years. When the people of Israel accepted the Torah he said to them, “Until now the calculations of the years and months were in my hands; from now on it is being passed to you.” As it is written, “You shall proclaim as sacred occasions.”

Commentary

Kiddush Hashem is defined as, “any action by a Jew that brings honor, respect, and glory to God is considered to be a *Kiddush Hashem*, whereas any behavior or action that disgraces, harms or shames God and his Torah is regarded as a *Chillul Hashem* which means a “desecration of God.” The ultimate act of *Kiddush Hashem* is when a Jew is prepared to sacrifice his life rather than transgress any of God’s three cardinal sins: Serving idols (belief in another religion), committing certain sexual acts (such as incest or adultery), or committing murder.” The basis of *Kiddush Hashem* can be found in a verse in this week’s Torah portion: “You shall not profane My holy name.” (Lev. 22:32) This principle was applied to a wide variety of life experiences from participation in prayer (to sanctify God’s name in prayer demands a Minyan) to ethical and moral standards which go beyond the letter of the law. In his passage in *Pirke Avot*, Rabbi Eliezer of *Modi'im* applies the idea of sanctifying or defaming the name of God to different circumstances: the temple service (profaning the sacred), time (despising holy days), moral decency (not embarrassing others), teaching Torah (in a way that brings honor to God) and passing on the covenant (of Abraham, circumcision).

Kiddush Hashem demands more than common decency; one must convey a deeper sense of purpose and respect to others. One becomes a model to others of holiness in the world and what one does is a reflection upon God. That is the common denominator of all the transgressions which Rabbi Eliezer mentions. One’s actions not only reflect negatively upon the person who performs the act but upon the God of Israel. *Kiddush Hashem* is another way of saying that “the medium is the message.” What we do and how we act becomes a larger statement of authenticity and dignity. Whether we are teaching Torah, praying, observing our holy days or greeting someone on the street, our actions reflect on the larger world. They either legitimate or de-legitimate who we are and what we believe in.

To say that such a person “has no portion in the world to come” is the strongest possible statement the sages to make. *Pirke Avot* begins by telling us that all Israel has a portion in the world to come. To suggest the opposite is to say that one who commits such acts forfeits one’s right to say he or she is a Jew!

Questions to Ponder

1. In what ways do our personal actions sanctify God’s presence in the world? Can you think of a situation in which your personal actions reflected positively on Judaism, the Jewish community and God?
2. ‘To profane the sacred’ means to improperly use something that has been set aside for the temple service. It applied specifically in the context of the temple in which people donated and sanctified food and animals for the service of God. What do you think this statement means for us today?
3. What does it mean “to annul” the covenant of Abraham? The original context had to do with not practicing circumcision. What larger meaning might this have for us?
4. The sources above offer two examples of *Kiddush Hashem*: the story of Shimon Ben Shetach and setting dates for the Jewish holidays. How is each act above an example of *Kiddush Hashem*? How are they similar to and different from one another?
5. The Jewish holidays were dependent on the sages who calculated the dates for the yearly calendar. *Shabbat* on the other hand was beyond human control since we do not set the schedule of weeks. How does each one reflect a different aspect of our relationship to God as human beings?

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