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Parashat Emor

The Two Levels of Kedusha (Holiness) *Halakha & Kabbalah*

*By Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok
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***“They shall be holy to their G-d
and they shall not desecrate the Name of their G-d;
for the fire offerings of HaShem,
the bread of their G-d they offer, they shall be holy.”
(Lev. 21:6)***

Parashat Emor deals with the issue of Kedusha (holiness) of the Kohanim (priests). The sons of Aharon were commanded by HaShem to be on a higher level of sanctity than the rest of the nation. The Kohanic level of Kedusha described in this parasha surprisingly does not contain any philosophical elements. The demands of Kohanic Kedusha are exclusively ritualistic. The sanctity of the Kohen limits for him his choice of marriage partners and prohibits his ritual defilement for death other than with the most immediate family. Indeed, the Kohen Gadol is prohibited to defile himself over the dead even for his immediate family. This strict set of ritual behavior sheds a light for us onto the real true meaning of Kedusha.

Although according to Pshat (the simplest of meanings), Kedusha is defined by one's perisha (separation) from forbidden things, nowhere is it explained why Kedusha means separation. For the answer to this question, we must delve into a deeper understanding of Torah concepts, where Pshat meets Sod (the mystical meanings of Torah). What better place to start an explanation of a thing than at the beginning of that thing. By this, I mean the Creation.

Our holy Sages teach us in Bereshit Rabbah (3:7) that prior to creating our universe HaShem occupied Himself with the creation and destruction of other universes. This spiritual activity on the part of HaShem was not happenstance but rather for a very good reason. One of the remnants of these pre-creation universes was a force that we, in this universe, have come to know as Evil.

This Evil was the primordial “*darkness over the face of the deep*” (Gen. 1:2). Darkness is not merely the absence of Light. Darkness is an independent creation of G-d (ref. Isaiah 45:7). It was from this darkness that HaShem said, “*Let there be light and there*

was light” (Gen. 1:3). The darkness was the Force of Evil; the Light was the Force of Good. Rashi refers to this Light as that which will be the portion for the righteous in the World to Come.

It is this concept of Good and Evil, Light and Darkness that underlies the existence of Kedusha and of Perisha (separation). For as G-d commanded the Light to be separated from the darkness (Gen. 1:4), so does He command, in many places throughout the Torah that Kedusha (holy – good) be separated from Tumah (uncleanness - evil).

According to the mystical teachings of the holy Zohar and the Ari’zal, the primordial separation of Kedusha and Tumah, wrought by the Hand of G-d in the act of Creation, was thwarted and unbalanced by the sin of Adam and Havah by their eating the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Good and Evil. As they partook of the forbidden Fruit of Good and Evil, so too did they merge the Force of Good and the Force of Evil inside themselves. The primordial Perisha was thus reversed.

We will not concern ourselves with the question if G-d was angered by this act; rather we will explore the actions taken by both G-d and man to restore and replace that which was lost. This act of spiritual repair and realignment of the worlds is called in Hebrew, Tikun. Tikun is a concept and a series of actions that lies at the very heart of all Torah Judaism.

The entire course of human events, from Adam to the present, has been predicated upon the fact that as a species we are in a state of imbalance, with our Creator, our universe and our Selves. Unless we rectify this state of imbalance and restore the Perisha (separation) between good and evil, we will forever have to suffer from the evil inherent within us. In order to accomplish this act of Tikun (rectification) HaShem has entrusted to Benei Yisrael (the Jewish people) His holy Torah.

The rituals of Jewish Law outlined in the Torah were Divinely ordained to be performed in a precise and specific manner. The performance of the 613 commandments unleashes the Torah’s powerfully concentrated spiritual energy. This concentrated energy is a spark of the Divine, Himself, dwelling within the observance of the practice. This Divine indwelling spark is called in Hebrew, the Shekhina. It is the source of what we call Kedusha. Kedusha is the Force of Divine Light manifest here within our universe. It repels the Darkness and assists in restoring the primordial state of spiritual equilibrium.

Our observance of the mitzvot, therefore, brings spiritual Light and thus Tikun to an imbalanced world. The more mitzvot we observe the faster the primordial balance is restored. When the act of Tikun is completed, then shall Mashiah come. It is in light of the necessity of achieving Tikun that we can come to understand the need for Kedusha and the role of the Kohen priest in Biblical times.

The Kohen priest is given a special commandment to be holy to G-d. Yet, before this, as seen in Lev. 19:1 (Parashat Kedoshim), the entire Jewish people were commanded to be holy. What then is the significance of the commandment of holiness being repeated here? Judging from the extra restrictions (perisha) placed upon the Kohen priests, it

appears that their required level of Kedusha is of a higher caliber than that of the layman Jew. Indeed, the Temple and priestly functions required to be performed by the Kohen priest does perform a greater Tikun than that performed by the layman Jew.

As the verse says, *“They shall be holy to their G-D . . . for the fire offerings of HaShem, the bread of their G-d they offer.”* This is an offering that no other tribe of Israel may perform. The burnt (fire) offering is so sacred that it is actually called *“the bread of G-d.”* This is a reference to a profound secret among the Mekubalim (Jewish mystics). The secret of performing Tikun revolves around a concept referred to in the Kitvei HaAri’zal as “MaN” Mayim Nokbin (feminine waters).

Without getting into too much depth and thus moving off our topic, MaN is a reference to the high aspirations and deep desires for spiritual change in the hearts of sincere, Torah observant, G-d fearing Jews. This purity of heart and desire of soul is offered up on the altar within the spirit of each and every sacrifice. Just as a fire (burnt) offering was totally consumed on the altar so must the individual heart of the Kohen priest be in a state of complete surrender before His L-rd. Not only was this spirit of sacrifice to be present during Temple service, the Kohen priest had to manifest this spirit even when his service to G-d took him outside the Temple and into the role of teacher and prophet.

Indeed, Moshe Rabbeynu’s blessing to the Kohen priests was that they *“shall teach Your (i.e., HaShem’s) laws to Jacob and Your Torah to Yisrael”* (Dev. 33:10). The prophet Malakhi (3:7) says, *“For the lips of the Kohen should safeguard knowledge and people should seek teaching from his mouth, for he is an angel (messenger) of HaShem of Hosts.”* It should be no wonder to us that the three greatest prophets after Moshe Rabbeynu: Yishyahu, Yirmiyahu and Yehezkiel were all Kohen priests. Indeed, the Kohen priest was the guardian of the prophetic traditions. Even Eliyahu HaNavi, according to Midrash, was a Kohen priest.

The role of the Kohen priest was to shine the primordial Light of Day One, hidden from all, except those who have a portion in the World to Come. The role of the Kohen priest was to inspire all Jews to do teshuva (repent) before HaShem and thus be worthy of the Light. The Kohen served as a selfless, tireless servant who completely surrendered his Self and lived for his people, who are G-d’s people. Thus, a Kohen priest is a messenger (angel) of HaShem. He brings to HaShem the offerings of the Jewish people and he brings to the Jewish people the three-fold blessing *Yiva’rech’kh’kha* from HaShem (ref. Bam. 6:24-27).

In our many sins, our holy Temple and Kohen priesthood was taken away from us. Today, a Kohen priest is but a shadow of his former glory. Nonetheless, the restrictions placed upon the bloodline Kohen priest did not end with the destruction of our holy Temple. These still remain in force and will so until Mashiah comes. However, today any male Jew who wishes to make a Kohen level of commitment to HaShem and His Torah can fill the role of Torah teacher. Indeed, every one of us has the obligation to fulfill the Kohanic role to shine the Light of G-d’s Shekhina by scrupulous performance of the mitzvot. Yet, there is more.

The Kohen used to be the guardian of the prophetic traditions. Today that sacred role has been passed down to the holy Mekubalim. It is they today, performing as spiritual Kohanim, that make peace between Benei Yisrael and their Father in Heaven. The relationship between Mekubal (Kabbalist) and Kohen should not surprise anyone. None other than Eliyahu HaNavi, a Kohen, taught the Holy Zohar to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai. Eliyahu HaNavi also taught the Ari'zal the Kabbalah. It is these two, the Zohar and the Kitvei HaAri'zal that define for us what Kabbalah is today. Both sets of teachings have their origins in with a Kohen, Eliyahu HaNavi.

The Mekubal, like the Kohen priest in Temple times before him, knows the secrets of Tikun. He knows how to restore the primordial balance and how to separate good from evil. Yet, this knowledge does not come to the Mekubal by merely opening up Kabbalah books and studying them. No, the Mekubal, like the Kohen priest, must take upon himself a stricter standard of life in order to draw to himself an “double-portion” of Kedusha.

This stricter set of standards have become like a Kabbalistic Shulkhan Arukh (Code of Jewish Law), of which many versions are in print. In order to merit merely the study of Kabbalah one must be scrupulous in the observance of all the mitzvot. This obviously requires of one to know and to practice all that is written in the standard Law Codes. Yet, for the Mekubal, this is not enough. Like the Kohen before him, the Mekubal is called to a higher standard, for he has higher Tikun to perform.

The Mekubal will, therefore be seen performing mitzvot that the majority of Jews might never have heard of nor seen. The Mekubal will arise early to recite Tikun Hatzot (midnight prayers). He will proceed to study Torah and/or perform Yihudim meditations until about an hour before sunrise. At that time, on a weekday, the Mekubal will don two sets of small Rashi and Rabbeynu Tam Tefillin simultaneously, one set always being concealed under his Talit.

The tefilah (prayers) of the Mekubal take much longer to recite than for the layman Jew. Although the prayers are the same, the Mekubal understands the secret order of prayer. The Mekubal knows that his prayers are arranged to serve as a spiritual sacrifice in the Heavenly Temple. He knows the secrets order of ascent, through the sefirot, the holy Names and the supernal worlds. Shaharit prayers might take a Mekubal up to four hours to finish, whereas even the slowest layman will finish in under an hour. Minha and Ma'ariv prayers are no different. At Minha prayers, however, the Mekubal dons a set of Shemusha Rabbah Tefillin which are not readily available in stores, (ours had to be made especially for us).

On Shabat, the Mekubal knows the importance of the day and, therefore, wears only all white clothing, regardless if everyone else in the community is wearing black (ref. Kaf HaHaim Sofer 262:26).

The Mekubal is stricter in his practices of Halakha in many more different ways. Indeed there exist today voluminous texts of the Shulkhan Arukh of the Zohar or of the Ari'zal. There are guides to observance for those who follow in the path of Rabbi Shalom Sharabi (Hasidei Beit El) and many other works for Ashkenazim who follow the Hasidic traditions. For Sephardim, the writings of Rabbi Yosef Haim, the Ben Ish Hai of Baghdad and Rabbi Ya'aqob Sofer, the Kaf HaHaim of Yerushalayim are the authoritative works on Jewish Law where Halakha has been defined by the Kabbalah.

This follows a ruling of Rabbi Yosef Karo, author of THE Shulkhan Arukh. In his larger work, the Beit Yosef, O.H. 141, he writes that regarding any law that is not clearly defined in the Talmud, even though all later Sages have a consensus regarding it, if that consensus disagrees with the Holy Zohar, then the practice of the Zohar is to be followed and not that of the consensus of the Rabbis.

There are some modern Sephardic Rabbis, such as the Gaon, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, who do not require that all observe Halakha in accordance to Kabbalah. This is, of course, most correct. The layman Jew should never be forced to live at a level of Kedusha that he is unable to handle. The Mekubalim, however, while respecting the man, nonetheless, pay no mind to HaRav Ovadiah whenever he decides matters of Jewish Law not in accordance to the Kabbalah. In other words, the Mekubal lives by a higher standard and the laws for the layman are not enough for him. The Mekubal exists in a different world, a higher realm. Today, Sephardic Halakha definitely has two tiers. There is the Halakha for the layman, which is easy and minimal. Then there is the path of the Mekubal, the modern day spiritual Kohen, which may only be traversed by the most serious and devoted servants of HaShem.

The Halakha of Kedusha for the layman Jew is the bare minimum for connection to G-d, Torah and Yisrael. The Mekubal, however, has the job to increase Kedusha in the world and this increase can never be brought about by the layman Jew or by those Rabbis who ordain Halakha for them. Our Sages have long ago taught, "*Ayn Am HaAretz Hasid*" – the layman Jew will not achieve a level of piety (Pirkei Avot 2:5).

What we learn from Parashat Emor about the Kohanim is not just the Halakhot for those individuals of that bloodline, we learn a great deal of mussar (morals) about how to live a higher calling. Our world today is in a sorry state of disrepair. The role of Yisrael is to act as a priesthood to all the nations to show them by example the Light of G-d (ref. Isaiah 42:6). The role of the Mekubal, the spiritual priest, is to show all Yisrael by example, the proper forms of Halakha that perform the primordial Tikun and separate between good and evil, light and darkness. In this way, as more layman Jews do teshuva and seek out the Torah and Halakha of the Mekubalim and Hasidim, to do them, the sooner Mashiah will come.