

Parashat Emor 5772, 2012:

Life: Sanctifying Hashem's Name

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Contemporary non-academic biographies of recent Torah Sages often present their subjects in a nearly angelic light. While these works may be inspiring and edifying, they often leave their readers with the sense that “He (whoever the *gadol* may have been) was a great and true *tzaddik* (righteous individual) who reached celestial heights. Yet, realistically, I know that I can never achieve 100th of what he accomplished or became.”

The truth, however, is quite different, i.e., past *gedolim* were real people who faced the challenges and vicissitudes of life with which we are all presented. They had families, hopes, dreams, successes, failures, and foibles. In almost every instance, the last thing they wanted was to be venerated as if they were saints who could do no wrong, or people who did not need to continually grow, spiritually and ethically. Allow me to share a wonderfully illustrative vignette that I once heard from the life of the Chafetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, 1838-1933):

One day during the *Aseret Yimei Teshuvah* (the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), a student entered the Chafetz Chaim's home and was greeted by an amazing sight. There he found his beloved rebbe face down upon the floor sobbing out the words: “I am a nothing, I am a nothing, I am a nothing,” and completely unaware of the presence of anyone else in the room. The student was beside himself with worry and consternation - and totally dumbfounded. Finally, unable to control himself, he blurted out: “Rebbe what's wrong, are you all right, what can I do to help you?”

At that point, the Chafetz Chaim said: “I am fine, I am working on my problem of *gaavah* (arrogance). You see, I have a tendency in this direction. Therefore, I have to always be vigilant to never allow myself to become arrogant. That is why you found me face down on the floor declaring, ‘I am a nothing.’ In this way, I can protect myself against these feelings and stop them before they control me.”

Yes, almost none of us will achieve the spiritual level and ethical sensitivity of our *gedolim*. Yet, each of us has the potential for greatness and holiness. We can achieve amazing things in our lives if we sanctify that which is normally thought of as being in the realm of the profane. All of the behaviors that we share with the animal kingdom can, and should, be endowed with the *kedushah* (holiness). Therefore, Hashem states in our *parasha*: “...I shall be sanctified amidst the children of Israel. I am the L-rd Who sanctifies you. Who took you out of the land of Egypt, to be a G-d to you. I am the L-rd.” (*Sefer Vayikra 22:33*, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own). This point is underscored by the Rambam (1135-1204) in *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 5:10*:

So, too, anyone who separates himself from a prohibition, or fulfills a commandment, not because of something in this world, neither visceral mortal fear nor [heart-stopping] awe, and not to receive honor [and glory], but, rather, solely because of the [will] of the Creator, may He be blessed, just like Yosef the Righteous held himself back from his master’s wife, be it known that he is one who sanctifies the Name. (Translation my own)

Each time we fulfill a mitzvah or refrain from a prohibition solely “because Hashem said so,” we sanctify His name. Every time we bend our will to His, and follow the Torah’s commandments, we declare our loyalty and total dedication to our Creator.

The above-found idea is elaborated upon, as well, in *Talmud Bavli, Yoma 86a* in clear and direct prose:

And Abaye says, as we have learned in the following *beraita*: It is written [*Sefer Devarim 6:5*]: “You shall love the L-rd your G-d.” That means, G-d's name should be beloved through you; that is to say, a man must read and study the Torah, and serve

Torah scholars, and speak kindly to his fellow man. What do people then say of him? Happy is his father, who taught him Torah; happy is his teacher, who has instructed him in Torah, and woe to those people who have not learned the Law! Behold, the one who has learned Torah, how beautiful are his ways, how just his deeds! Of him says the verse [*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 49:3]: “And He said unto me, ‘You are My servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’” (Based upon Michael L. Rodkinson’s translation with my changes and emendations.)

Herein we find some highly specific and accessible behaviors that each of us can emulate in our daily dealings with our fellow man:

1. We must fulfill the mitzvah of heartfelt and engaged Torah study
2. We must fulfill the mitzvah of honoring and serving *Talmidei Chachamim* (Torah scholars)
3. We must speak with kindness and sensitivity to, and with, our fellow man – regardless of his or her station in life or level of achievement. Everyone, after all, is created in G-d’s ineffable image.

The words of the Rambam and Talmud are exhilarating. Now, each of us has an opportunity to be “*mekadash shame shamaiim*” (“sanctify G-d’s name”) through our everyday actions. Each of these highly approachable mitzvot, when performed with integrity, purity, and seriousness of purpose, allows us to fulfill our *parasha’s pasuk* (verse): “*v’nikdashiti betoch b’nai Yisrael*” (“...I shall be sanctified amidst the children of Israel”). May Hashem give us the wisdom and discernment to listen to, and follow, His Torah. May we learn to be better individuals tomorrow than who we are today. In sum, may we learn to sanctify Hashem in our words and deeds. Then, He will be holy among us for, we, too, will be holy. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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My audio *shiurim* on *Tefilah and Haskafah* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sp5vt3>

*** I have recently posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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