

Sanctifying Our Lives to Serve Hashem

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and to the safety of the soldiers of Tzahal in their holy mission to protect the Jewish people.

Our *parasha* contains an abundance of *mitzvot*. One of them is the prohibition of planting a mixture of diverse seeds with grape seeds (*kelai hakerem*): “You shall not sow your vineyard [together with] a mixed variety of species, lest the increase, even the seed that you sow and the yield of the vineyard [both] become forbidden.” (*Sefer Devarim* 22:9, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon *Talmud Bavli*, *Berachot* 22a, explains the precise forbidden action associated with this proscription in the following manner:

[You shall not sow your vineyard together with] a mixed variety of species: [For example,] sowing in the same hand-throw [of seeds] wheat and barley, [the sowing together of which already constitutes one prohibition of כְּלַי'יִם (*kelai'im*) - “mixed variety of species” (see *Sefer Vayikra* 19:19)], and grape seeds [the total combination of which now constitutes an additional prohibition of sowing the two diverse species in a vineyard]

In many ways *kelai hakerem* is conceptually similar to other forbidden types of mixtures (*kelai'im*), such as *sha'anetz* (interwoven threads of linen and wool in a garment), *basar v'chalav* (kosher milk and kosher meat that is cooked together), hybridization of diverse animals and planting diverse species of seeds together in a field. In broad terms, each of these prohibitions may be placed in the category of *chukim*, *mitzvot* whose underlying reasons currently escape our understanding.

Man, however, is a curious and searching being. While we perform all *mitzvot* “because G-d commanded them and they are written in the Torah,” Judaism’s greatest thinkers have nonetheless been engaged in a ceaseless exploration of their meaning. This search is called “*Ta’amei Hamitzvot*.” Rabbi Ezra Bick, in his online article entitled, “Introduction to the Thought of the Ramban,” provided an excellent introduction to this topic:

Devising systems to provide the rationale for the *mitzvot*, and giving reasons for individual *mitzvot*, is a recurring theme in medieval Jewish philosophy, a theme that has continued to fascinate Jewish thinkers up to the present time. This is a quintessential Jewish occupation, because no other major religion has the body of detailed commandments that Judaism possesses, and no other religion places such an emphasis on the law and the commandments. The Torah is primarily the book of the commandments, and Judaism is primarily the way of the Torah.
(<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/ramban/09ramban.htm>)

Let us now turn to an examination of *kelai hakerem* in an attempt to discover its underlying rationale. Our journey of exploration begins with the Italian commentator and cabbalist, Rabbi Menachem Recanati (1250-1310), known in Torah literature as “the Recanati.” He explained the term “*kelai'im*” as being etymologically similar in kind to the word “*kilyon*” (“destruction”). At first blush, however, it is logically difficult to imagine the mere planting of wheat, barley and grape seeds together as constituting an act of destruction since, after all, what does such an admixture actually destroy? The Recanati answered that such a seemingly nonthreatening act actually changes the order of Creation (“*meshaneh sidrei Bereishit*”) since, “If a strong plant were to gain its sustenance from a weaker plant – the world [as we know it] would be destroyed, for a plant should only be sustained through another plant of its own species.” (Commentary on *Sefer Vayikra* 19:19, translation and brackets my own) In addition, he opined that an individual who would engage in the creation of any form of *kelai'im* would actually be challenging Hashem, for it would be as if “he thought the Holy One Blessed be He had not completed the creation of all that is necessary in the world.” Moreover, such a person would be acting with consummate *chutzpah* (temerity), since by his actions he would demonstrate that “he wanted to

create new creatures and ‘help’ in the Creation of the World” – the act *par excellence* that is uniquely reserved for the Almighty.

In his explication of the prohibition of producing animal hybrids, the anonymous author of the *Sefer HaChinuch* (13th century) discusses the rationale inherent in *kelai'im* in a somewhat parallel manner as the Recanati:

At the root of the precept lies the reason that the Eternal L-rd blessed is He, created His world with wisdom, understanding and knowledge, and He made and shaped all the forms, each according to what its object required, prepared to fit into the purpose of the world; and blessed is He who has [this] knowledge... Now since G-d knows everything He wrought is perfectly suited to its purpose, as is needed in His world. He commanded each and every species to produce its offspring of its own kind, as it is written in *sidrah Bereishit* (Genesis 1:11, 21, 24) – and the species should not be mingled, lest they become lacking in their perfection, and He will then not command His blessing for them. For this root reason, as it seems to our mind, we were forbidden to mate different species of animals and we were likewise adjured for the same reason, in conjunction with another reason that we wrote previously about plants and trees. (*Sefer haHinnuch*, translation, Charles Wengrov, Commandment 244, pages 91-92)

Once again, the rationale underscoring the purpose of the *kelai'im* prohibition is that G-d has already achieved perfection in Creation, and man may not alter that which is already perfect.

Closer to our own time, the great 19th century German exegete, Rabbeinu Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), in his commentary on our opening verse (*Sefer Devarim* 22:9) suggested a deeply insightful reason as to why G-d decreed a specific prohibition of *kelai'im* in regards to the vineyard:

Now there is one plant that one could imagine should not be allowed at all to be planted and cultivated in the soil of the Divine laws of morality [i.e. the Land of Israel] because the enjoyment of the product which matures on this plant entices men, more than anything else, to demoralizing excesses and lapses unworthy of human beings. On the soil dedicated to G-d's laws of morality, the vine, one could well think, should find no place. [One need only remember Noach's behavior upon leaving the ark when he planted a vineyard, became inebriated, and tragedy ensued]. But the Torah not only allows wine-growing in the Jewish Land, but uses the enjoyment of wine to be symbolic in offerings – as it used to be in inspired songs of praise of G-d to be expressive of – the loftiest feelings of joy before G-d: “Its libation shall be one quarter of a *hin* for each lamb, to be poured on the holy [altar] as a libation of strong wine to the L-rd.” [*Sefer Bamidbar* 28:7]

Hence the Torah surrounds the cultivation of the vine in the Jewish Land with a still greater increase of *kelai'im* laws, only allows the vine to be cultivated under quite special conditions of keeping afar any possible mixture of species... All this expresses the great thought so characteristic of Jewish Law: G-d's Torah not only allows but sanctifies even the highest material enjoyment of food, provided the eater keeps his enjoyment controlled by its laws... Wine obtained from vines planted under the regime of G-d's Law of "species" even comes into the Sanctuary to be used as offerings to symbolize the loftiest joys of life. (*The Pentateuch*, Translated and Explained by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, rendered into English by Isaac Levy, *Sefer Devarim*, page 438, explanatory brackets my own)

In a certain sense, then, Rav Hirsch has taught us that *kelai hakerem* is, in reality, another aspect of *kashrut* (keeping a kosher home) that has as its ultimate goal the sanctification of our lives - so we may serve the Master of the Universe in purity and holiness.

Whether we follow the Rekanati, the *Sefer HaChinuch*, or Rav Hirsch in their respective analyses of *kelai hakerem* and *kelai'im* in general, one thing is crystal clear: All of these laws were given in order to impress upon us the need to recognize Hashem as the one and only Creator of the Universe to whom we must dedicate the entirety of our beings. With His help, may we ever keep this goal front and center in our lives, so that we can truly be His loyal servants. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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