

Parashat Shemini 5782, 2022:

To Be Holy

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yeziel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The Laws of *Kashrut* comprise the final portion of our *parasha*, and are classified as “*chukim*,” *mitzvot* whose rationale currently elude us. My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, suggests that *chukim* should be viewed in this manner:

The laws concerning *chukim* were classified as unintelligible, enigmatic, mysterious... However, even though it is forbidden to ask for motivation, for the motives or the reasoning pertaining to certain Divine categorical imperatives, we may yet inquire into the interpretation of the law. There is a difference between explanation and interpretation. (This and the following citation, *Derashot HaRav: Selected Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, summarized and annotated by Arnold Lustiger, pages 226-227, underlining my own)

In addition, the Rav maintains: “I believe that regarding *chukim*...we must not ask the question of ‘why,’ because ‘why’ is in general a foolish question to ask, even in regard to *mitzvos* which in our opinion are quite meaningful.” Instead, “...the question of ‘what’ can be asked. What is the meaning of this *chok* as far as I am concerned? What does the *chok* tell me? Not why did *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* ordain that law? [Instead,] what is the spiritual message that I can assimilate in my world view?”

The “what question” is the driving force behind the genre of halachic literature known as “*ta’amei hamitzvot*—the quest for interpreting the commandments.” Some of its notable exponents include

the anonymous author of the *Halachot Gedolot* (Geonic period), Rabbi Eliezer of Metz (c. 1135-c.1165), the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204), the unidentified author of the *Sefer HaChinuch* (13th century), and Rabbi Menachem Recanati (1250-1310). In addition, many well-known Rabbinic luminaries emphasized this topic in their Torah analyses.

In his *Moreh HaNevuchim*, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) suggests that the Torah forbade all *ma'achlot assurot* (forbidden foods) because of their deleterious effect upon our physical wellbeing:

I say, then, that to eat of any of the various kinds of food that the Law has forbidden us is blameworthy. Among all those forbidden to us, only pork and fat may be imagined not to be harmful... With reference to the signs marking a permitted animal... know that their existence is not in itself a reason for animals being permitted nor their absence a reason for animals being prohibited; they are merely signs by means of which the praised [healthful] species may be discerned from the blamed [harmful] species. (III:48, translation, Dr. Shlomo Pines, page 599, brackets my own)

In general, the *Sefer HaChinuch* closely follows the Rambam's approach in *ta'amei hamitzvot* as we find in his discussion of *ma'achlot assurot*:

In the same way, if there is any loss or damage in the body, of any kind, some function of the intelligence will be nullified, corresponding to that defect. For this reason, our complete and perfect Torah removed us far from anything that causes such defect. In this vein, according to the plain meaning we would say we were given a ban by the Torah against all forbidden foods. And if there are some among them whose harm is understood neither by us nor by the wise men of medicine, do not wonder about them: The faithful, trustworthy Physician [Hashem] who adjured us about them is wiser than both you and them. (*Mitzvah 73*, translation, Charles Wengrove, vol. I, page 285, brackets my own)

The hygiene-based interpretation of *ma'achlot assurot* was not limited to Sephardic Torah giants such as the Rambam and the author of the *Sefer HaChinuch*. It was championed in Ashkenaz, as well, by the Rashbam (Rabbeinu Shmuel ben Meir, c.1085-c.1158):

In accordance with the direct meaning of the text, and in response to the heretics, all large animals, wild animals, birds, fish, the various kinds of locusts, and those creatures that creep upon the ground, that the Holy One blessed be He forbade to the Jewish people are loathsome indeed, and destroy and heat up the body—they are, therefore, labelled *tamei'im* (impure). (Gloss on *Sefer Vayikra* 11:3, translation my own)

The world of Jewish thought is dynamic and diverse. Little wonder, then, that the hygiene-based model of interpretation of *ma'achlot assurot* is not universally accepted. One of its best-known critics is the celebrated Sephardic Torah commentator Rabbeinu Don Yitzchak Abarbanel (1437-1508):

The majority of Torah *meforshim* maintain (*chashvu*) that the prohibited foods which the Torah forbids is to ensure the maintenance of the body and its continued good health...G-d forbid that one should believe such an idea! If this was the case, then the Torah of *HaElokim* would be on the level of a relatively insignificant work among medical volumes that are overly terse in their words and reasoning; and this is neither the way of the Torah of *HaElokim*, nor representative of the profundity of its intentions...Rather, the G-dly Torah does not come to cure the bodies and to seek their continued health, instead, it seeks the ongoing health of the soul (*briut hanefesh*) and to cure its afflictions. (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Vayikra* 11, s.v. *issur hama'achlim*, translation and underlining my own)

The Seforno (Rabbi Ovadiah ben Ya'akov, c.1470-c.1550) joins the Abarbanel in rejecting the hygiene approach in his summary statement regarding the laws of *ma'achlot assurot*. Instead of focusing on *briut hanefesh*, however, he interprets these laws as an “on ramp” to *kedushah* (holiness):

“And you shall be holy, for I (Hashem) am holy.” In order that you will be holy and ever recognize your Creator, [and long to] walk in His path, for this is My desire, namely, that you will emulate Me. “For I am holy” And all of this you will apprehend when you sanctify yourselves and guard yourselves from forbidden foods. (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Vayikra* 11:43-44, translation my own)

In sum, while the Rambam, *Sefer HaChinuch*, and the Rashbam, among others, advocate a hygiene-based interpretation of the laws of *ma'achlot assurot*, this is soundly rejected by both the Abarbanel (*briut hanefesh*) and the Seforno (“on ramp” to *kedushah*).

Closer to our own time, the Rav analyzed some of the same *pasukim* as the Seforno regarding *ma'achlot assurot* and arrived at a strikingly similar conclusion: “What is forbidden here is overindulgence in satisfying human corporeal needs and drives; these *mitzvot* belong to the

category of discipline of the body and its sanctification...The body must be sanctified and elevated...” (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Festival of Freedom: Essays on Pesah and the Haggadah*, Rabbis Joseph B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler, editors, page 137, underlining my own)

With Hashem’s help and our fervent desire, may we strive to live lives dedicated to the pursuit of *kedushah* in all that we do, and may we ever draw closer to Him. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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Please contact me at rdb718@gmail.com to be added to my weekly email list.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:
<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)