

Parashat Lech Lecha, 5774, 2013:

Avraham and the Pursuit of the Holy (Kedushah)

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, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Akeidat Yitzhak (the Binding of Isaac) is the most famous incident in our *parasha* based upon its prominent place in the Machzor of Rosh Hashanah. The second best-known narrative in Parashat Vayera, however, is that of the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Indeed, that story, coupled with Avraham's heartfelt pleading before the Almighty for the inhabitants of these wayward cities, captures our imagination to such a degree that the following introductory verses are often all but forgotten:

And the L-rd said, "Shall I conceal from Abraham what I am doing? And Abraham will become a great and powerful nation, and all the nations of the world will be blessed in him. For I have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of the L-rd to perform righteousness and justice, in order that the L-rd bring upon Abraham that which He spoke concerning him." (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:19, this, and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The original Hebrew of the phrase, "that they should keep the way of the L-rd to perform righteousness and justice" is "*v'shamru derech Hashem la'asot tzedakah u'mishpat.*" In his posthumously published work, *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, notes that the Hebrew words "*v'shamru derech Hashem*" refer to the pursuit of holiness (*kedushah*), whereas the expression "*la'asot tzedakah u'mishpat*" connotes "practicing righteousness and justice."

Thus, *Avraham Avinu*'s "... testament was twofold: keeping the way of the L-rd, which requires *kedushah*, and also practicing righteousness and justice." (Page 106)

There are many ways to classify the mitzvot of the Torah. One of the most oft-seen approaches is to view some commandments as referring to obligations between man and his fellow man (*mitzvot bein adam le-havero*), and others as divine directives that reference the G-d – man relationship (*mitzvot bein adam la-Makom*). The Rav notes that it is commonplace to view *tzedakah u'mishpat* as being related to the first category, and *kedushah* as referring to the latter grouping. In his view, this is erroneous:

The norm of *kedushah* is all-inclusive. It embraces the total structure of human activity. In fact, when the Torah speaks of being holy and enumerates the areas where one is called upon to exercise *kedushah*, most of them are *bein adam le-havero*. Indeed, the altar upon which one has to sacrifice his own selfish interests in order to realize the demand for *kedushah* is much larger than the altar built by the person concerned only with *tzedakah u-mishpat*. (Ibid. , pages 106-107)

Rav Soloveitchik brought several examples to prove the singular import of *kedushah* as the driving force behind the Jewish way of life. Allow me to share one of the narratives with you that refers to an incident recounted in the name of his illustrious namesake, Rabbi Joseph Dov Halevi (*Beit Halevi*, 1820-1892) of Brisk:

A story is told about Reb Yoshe Ber of Brisk that one *erev Shavu'ot*, late in the afternoon on his way to the synagogue, he noticed a flower stand that was still open. He went over to the woman and said: "My dear, it is late. We will usher in the *Yom Tov* pretty soon. Why don't you go home to your family?" "Yes, Rabbi," the woman answered, "but I haven't sold any flowers. The count sent in a wagon loaded with flowers, and everyone bought greenery from the count. In fact, his flowers and branches were much better than mine. What shall I do Rabbi, There is nothing in the house, no food, no wine, no candles! I have nothing to look forward to."

Reb Yoshe Ber told the woman to step aside. He took her place and began to announce aloud how beautiful the flowers were, how tender and green the twigs and leaves, People suddenly encountered a strange scene. Their world-renowned rabbi, in his festive garments was zealously selling flowers – and charging exorbitant prices. Of course, all the flowers were sold quickly despite the prohibitive prices. (Ibid. , pages 107-108)

The Rav noted that it is unclear as to whether or not the incident related in this story was true or apocryphal in nature. The point here, however, is not the authenticity of the story, but rather the deep and fundamental meaning that it represents:

Whether the story is true or untrue, the fact that such a folk-story is told is indicative of the demands the Jew makes upon his own conscience as regards *kedushah*. In other words, to help someone in distress, you must sacrifice not only your money but your very dignity and pride. This conception is the product not of the idea of *tzedakah*, but of *kedushah*. To help others is not only an ethical act but also a great experience through which you come one or two steps closer to the Almighty. (Ibid.)

From the dawn of Jewish history until our own moment in time, *Avraham Avinu* (our Father Abraham) has served as our guide in the pursuit of *kedushah*. May we be *zocheh* (merit) to emulate his heartfelt actions throughout all of the challenges of our lives so that we, too, may fulfill the words of our verse, “*v’shamru derech Hashem,*” and thereby become true servants of Hashem. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis,*” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have 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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