

Parshiot Acharei Mot - Kedoshim, 5772, 2012:

The Pursuit of the Holy: Imitating G-d's Ways

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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.

Our *parasha*'s verse: "And the L-rd spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them, You shall be holy (*kedoshim*), for I, the L-rd, your G-d, am holy,'" (*Sefer Vayikra* 19:1-2, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) is justly famous for its clarion call to the Jewish people to pursue lives invested with holiness. It is the only instance in the Five Books of the Torah where the exact phrase, "*kedoshim tiheyu*" is used. The variant "*kedoshim yi'heyu*" is found in *Sefer Vayikra* 21:6, while the expression "*v'heyitem kedoshim*" is utilized in *Sefer Vayikra* 11:44-45, 20:6, and *Sefer Bamidbar* 15:40. In all instances these verses may be accurately translated as: "(And) you (i.e. the Jewish people) shall be holy."

Allow me to ask a seemingly radical question: "Why should we be holy?" The Torah anticipated this very question, and in four of the six above-noted verses answered: "Because I [G-d] am holy," or "Because I am the L-rd your G-d." In other words, the explicit rationale inherent in the mitzvah "*kedoshim tiheyu*" is none other than *imitatio Dei* (*v'halachta b'drachov*, *Sefer Devarim* 28:9), the obligation to emulate Hashem's actions. There are a variety of classic rabbinic sources that focus on the content and intent of this mitzvah. Let us now examine a few of them:

R. Yishmael says: And is it possible for a man of flesh and blood to add glory to his Creator? It simply means: I shall be beautiful before Him in observing the commandments. I shall prepare before Him a beautiful Lulav, a beautiful Sukkah, beautiful Tzitzit and beautiful Tefilin. Abba Shaul says: O be like Him! Just as He is gracious and merciful, so should you be gracious and merciful. (*Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael* 15:12, translation, Jacob Z. Lauterbach with my underlining and emendations)

Abba Shaul's explanation of "zeh kali v'anvahu," ("this is my G-d, and I will glorify Him,") a secondary source for *imitatio Dei*, is discussed at length in a famous passage in

Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a:

Just as Hashem clothed the naked [in the case of Adam and Chava]... so, too, should you clothe the naked. Just as Hashem visited the sick [in the case of Avraham after his *brit milah*]...so, too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He comforted the mourners [in the case of Yitzhak after Avraham's passing]...so, too, should you comfort the mourners. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He buried the dead [in the case of Moshe *Rabbeinu*]...so, too, should you bury the dead.

Beyond a doubt, this passage represents a profound and practical formula for fulfilling the mitzvah of *imitatio Dei*.

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) codifies the specific mitzvah of "v'halachta b'drachov," i.e. *imitatio Dei*, in the following fashion:

We are commanded to walk in these intermediate paths - and they are good and straight paths - as [*Sefer Devarim* 28:9] states: "And you shall walk in His ways." [Our Sages] taught [the following] explanation of this mitzvah: Just as He is called "Gracious," you shall be gracious; Just as He is called "Merciful," you shall be merciful; Just as He is called "Holy," you shall be holy; In a similar manner, the prophets called G-d by other titles: "Slow to anger," "Abundant in kindness," "Righteous," "Just," "Perfect," "Almighty," "Powerful," and the like. [They did so] to inform us that these are good and just paths. A person is obligated to accustom himself to these paths and [to try to] resemble Him to the extent of his ability. (*Sefer Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot* 1:5-6, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, with my emendations)

The 13th century anonymous Sephardic work, known as the "*Sefer Hachinuch*," generally follows Maimonides' approach to the mitzvot. Little wonder then, that he introduces our mitzvah (number 611) in the following manner:

We were commanded to perform all our actions in a way of honesty and goodness with all our power, and to channel all our matters that are between us and others in a way of kindness and compassion – as we know from our Torah that this is the way of the Eternal L-rd, and this is His desire from His human beings, in order that they should merit to attain His good reward, *because He delights in loving-kindness (Sefer Michah 7:18)*. About this it is stated, *and you shall walk in His ways (Sefer Devarim 28:9)*. (Translation, Charles Wengrov)

The above-stated sources clearly reveal the import of the concept of *imitatio Dei* and its concrete expression in the mitzvah of *v'halachta b'drachov*. It remained for my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), however, to declare *imitatio Dei* the central commandment and cornerstone of the *Taryag Mitzvot* (613 Commandments). Thus, in his most famous work, *Ish HaHalacha (Halachic Man)*, Rav Soloveitchik stated: “The central mitzvah among the *Taryag Mitzvot* is the commandment to walk in the ways of the Holy One Blessed be He.” (Standard Hebrew edition, page 252, translation my own) This theme was forcefully repeated in Rabbi Soloveitchik’s collection of memorial lectures in honor of his father’s sacred memory, in an essay entitled, “*B’Inyan Birchot HaTorah*”:

Talmud Torah (Torah study) is the most elevated form of prayer that a Jewish individual is capable of putting forth (*l’sadere*). The truth of the matter is, and according to the view of Maimonides in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, we are permitted to utter words of praise [to Hashem] solely because through this modality a person is in consonance with the actions and ethical qualities of Hashem. [As a result,] he will come to emulate Him or imitate His actions – and they are the fundamental basis (*yesod*) of ethical halachic behavior and the light that illuminates the path of man in all of his conduct and actions, in accordance with the verse: “*v’halachta b’drachov*.” (*Shiurim l’Zacher Aba Mari*, Volume II, pages 8-9, translation, brackets, and underlining my own)

Rabbi Soloveitchik’s most extensive treatment of *imitatio Dei*, however, is found in the 10th chapter of his brilliant philosophical essay, “*U’vikashtem Misham*” (“And from There You Shall Seek”). Once again, the centrality of *v’halachta b’drachov* cannot be overstated:

In the practical realm, this conflict is embodied in the principle of *imitatio Dei*. Halachic Judaism placed this principle at the center of the universe. “And you shall walk in His ways” (Deut. 28:9) – as He is, so you shall be (see *Sotah* 14a). “This is my G-d and I will imitate Him” (Ex. 15:2) – as He is, so you shall be (see *Shabbat* 133b). (*From There You Shall Seek*, page 75, translation, Naomi Goldblum, underlining my own)

Rabbi Soloveitchik continued his examination of *imitatio Dei* and described it as a solution, and in my estimation, the solution, “to the contradiction between moral freedom and subjugation:

Between the two poles of aspiration for full moral freedom – which bursts forth and rises up from man’s yearning for G-d – and human subjugation and surrender to the divine decree, a decree that is imposed on man willy-nilly when he tries to escape from G-d, we find the desire to imitate G-d as a solution to the contradiction between moral freedom and subjugation. (Ibid.)

As foreshadowed in the previous statement, *imitatio Dei* serves a dual, and dialectical, function in Rabbi Soloveitchik’s spiritual and philosophical system: It is simultaneously a response to man’s terrible despair when he recognizes his inability, due to his intrinsic finitude, to truly join G-d in full spiritual union, and a glorious song to man’s ultimate intellectual and spiritual freedom:

The principle of *imitatio Dei* gives expression, on the one hand, to the terrible despair of the helpless man who is unable to realize his ideal – cleaving to G-d – which will grant him total and absolute freedom...The act of imitation contains a confession of failure in his arrogant attempt to achieve total cleaving to G-d: if he were able to do so, there would be no need to imitate Him.

Yet, on the other hand, man makes use of the idea of *imitatio Dei* in order to allow a supernatural decree to be grasped as a free intellectual experience and dress it in the glory of spontaneous human freedom... If it is impossible for man to join with G-d and thus become a partner in the act of creation, he can at least imitate Him by emulating His deeds, which symbolize total freedom. When man, animated by the hope and yearning, moves toward his Creator in order to attach himself to Him, he gradually frees himself from the bonds of necessity and compulsion, and begins to dream of wondrous freedom, as if he were G-d’s partner in legislating rules and formulating decrees and commandments... (Ibid. , 75-76)

Ultimately, for Rav Soloveitchik, *imitatio Dei* bridges the gap between the paradoxes inherent in man’s existential condition:

Through this dialectic of hope and disappointment, cleaving and departing, becoming closer and more distant, the idea of *imitatio Dei* arises. It reconciles the two contradictory positions: divine decree with free individual creativity, the yoke of compulsion with spontaneity, reverence for the revelational command with the glorious vision of absolutely free will, the revelational experience and experience of freedom. (Ibid . , 76-77)

Given the above, *imitatio Dei* emerges in Rabbi Soloveitchik's thought as the fundamental principle of all principles, and the mitzvah of all mitzvot, that enables man to reach the highest heights of connection to his Creator. As such, by emulating G-d's actions, we undertake the life-long process of spiritual self-actualization.

With Hashem's help may we be *zocheh* (merit) to fulfill the mitzvot of *kedoshim tiheyu* and *v'halachta b'drachov*, so that we may connect closely with our Creator, and thereby become active participants in *tikun haolam b'malchut Shakai* (perfecting the world in accord with the Kingdom of G-d). *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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