



## Are We Still a HOLY NATION?

# An All-Embracing *Kedushah*

By Mayer Schiller

We are repeatedly summoned in the Torah “to be holy.” The exhortation features prominently at the beginning of *parshat Kedoshim* where it is based upon the Creator’s own holiness. We are to be “holy” for He is “holy.”<sup>1</sup> In addition to this bold imperative, we are also informed by the *Torat Kohanim* that “by making ourselves holy it is considered as if we have rendered the Creator holy.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the final expression of this concept in the *parshah*<sup>3</sup> links the pursuit of holiness to the division between the Jewish nation and the rest of mankind: “And you shall be to Me holy for I, *Hashem*, am holy; And I will separate you from the nations to be for Me.” Thus, we are first to sanctify ourselves. By so doing, we attach ourselves as a people to the Creator who, in some manner, is rendered sacred by the process.

### Definition of Holiness

What is this oft cited, but seldom defined, quality (*kedushah*) that figures so centrally in our Jewish spiritual agenda? How can we, physical creatures living in this world, in a decidedly intolerant, secular age (at least in Western Europe and North America), achieve, what seems to be, a most lofty ideal? In *parshat tzitzit* we are told that “remembering” and “performing” the Divine commandments yield some standard of holiness. Yet, surely even the most punctilious observance of

*mitzvot* is but one aspect of, or contributing factor to, our pursuit of holiness. From other sources it seems that there is an important negative component to this Divine injunction as well.

In a well-known disagreement, Rashi and Ramban offer two definitions of *kedushah* that point us in the direction of this other factor. The former sees it primarily as the avoidance of lust and sexual sin. The latter broadens the commandment to forbid luxury and excess of any kind and demands that we do this in order that “we be worthy to attach ourselves to Him when we are holy.” What emerges from the foregoing is that both the meticulous observance of *halachah* and the shunning of this-worldly desires, (certainly those forbidden but extending even to the permissible if pursued with inappropriate and distasteful zeal) create *kedushah*. This is the formulation of Rav Elyahu Vedesh in *Reishit Chochmah* where he explains at length that fleeing evil and doing good creates within us the ability to receive holiness from Above. It is a Divine response to our actions. Holiness is a Divine quality of soul which people are granted in proportion to their devotion to the above dual agenda.<sup>4</sup> Thus, *kedushah* cannot be achieved if we are to be lax in the practice of any area of Torah, regardless of that area’s importance in our own particular version of Orthodoxy. The *kadosh* is focused on God, not communal acceptance. In Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch’s formulation, the *kadosh* is seeking an “attribute of My essence.”<sup>5</sup> The result of the pursuit of *kedushah* is attachment

to the Divine, the ultimate goal of all our spiritual strivings.

### *Kedushah* and the World

Is this aspiration realistic for the Jew who is not immersed in full time Torah study? Can he too escape “desire” and cleave to the Creator? Most importantly for many of our readers, what is the pursuit of holiness to those who value the totality of creation as it reveals itself in knowledge, beauty and human experience and who see work as possessing other than functional value? In sum, is there a contradiction between the pursuit of holiness—involving as it does a strenuous shunning, not only of the explicitly evil, but the sensual, needless and frivolous as well—and the notions of *Torah im Derech Eretz* and *Torah u’Madda*, *tikkun olam* and active engagement with the marketplace in pursuit of a dignified living? (Our concern is, at present, only with those whose Torah commitment is firm in all four volumes of the *Shulchan Aruch* and follow its strictures even when they conflict with comfortable citizenship in the secular cities of modernity.) Must the practitioners of these broader paths in God’s service exhibit less zeal for the holiness-agendas outlined in *Reishit Chochmah*, *Chareidim*, *Shaarei Kedushah*, *Shelah* and earlier and later works? On the contrary, it seems that the reverse need be true. These paths, by virtue of their engagement with the non-explicitly spiritual manifestations of existence, create the need for more powerful spiritual filter systems and far greater discipline of mind and soul

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*Rabbi Schiller is a maggid shiur at Yeshiva University High School for Boys in Manhattan.*

than do those of the Torah-only worlds, if they are to realize the goal of *kedushah*. Those who venture along these paths need a clear and unyielding commitment to avoid the occasion of sin, impurity and heresy, while coincidentally seeking that which uplifts and can be uplifted from the world.

### ***Kedushah*-Consciousness of the Divine**

The Nefesh haChayim points in the direction of this greater devotion when he posits<sup>6</sup> that the exemption from *devakut* granted during Torah study doesn't extend to the pursuit of one's livelihood. There the mind should allow for the mingling of "work thoughts" with those of Torah and holiness. As Rambam writes:<sup>7</sup> "The intellect which emanates from God is the link that joins us to God. You have it in your power to strengthen that bond if you choose to do so or weaken it." This focus on the Divine is achieved, continues the Rambam, by absolute concentration, during Torah study and prayer, upon the meaning of the words we speak. Then, after having linked ourselves to these twin sources of spiritual sustenance we are to occupy our minds during free moments "when alone by oneself or awake on your couch with the intellectual worship of God to approach Him and serve Him." Eventually, devoted study and prayer and occupying one's mind during "free moments" with thoughts of love, fear of and attachment to God will enable a man to realize a stage when "while speaking with others, or attending to our bodily wants, our mind is all that time with God; when our heart is constantly near God, even while our body is in the society of men."<sup>8</sup> This, then, is an

inking of the demanding task of the servant of God who seeks to pursue Him, who seeks *kedushah*, even outside of the confines of the *beit midrash*.

Is all this way beyond the reach of the "average Jew"? Actually, Rav Moshe Isserles makes it the very basis of the Code of Jewish Law, when he quotes extensively from the conclusion of Rambam's *Moreh Nevuchim* in his opening paragraph: "We are to con-

and evil. To pursue the good, or to uplift the neutral in existence, requires constant attention to filtering out the bad. The lust and luxury that Rashi and Ramban see as holiness' primary enemies, must be fearlessly defined and ruthlessly defeated before higher levels may be aspired to. This demands the ability to say "no," even when that "no" leads to social opprobrium. Indeed, it is the same Rambam who



*"Morning Light" by Ferenc Flamm\**

stantly think about being in God's presence." This awareness should cause us to be overwhelmed with "humility" and "fear [of Him]." All this is probably more easily achieved within the confines of Torah only-ism. However, it is the belief of many, this writer included, that given the bounty and beauty of creation, the diversity of mankind and the insights and marvels of man's creativity, that the Torah-only approach does not lead to a *kedushah* that is *l'mehadrin*. It denies far too much of the Creator's handiwork. How then to pursue God's world given its disfigurement at the hands of so many, Jews and Gentiles, over recent centuries? First, one must clearly understand the parameters of faith and heresy, and of good

pursued God through the philosophical and scholarly speculations of his generation who is the most adamant about the need to flee the negative influence of cultures, individuals and even family members who embrace evil.<sup>9</sup> Thus, there would seem to be little room on the agenda of the *Torah u'Madda* or *Torah im Derech Eretz oved* for almost all of contemporary popular culture. Obviously there are exceptions. Our concern is with the norm. The foundation stone of God's service is the truth of Torah. The seeker of *kedushah* would have no tolerance for the assorted Jewish heresies that today confuse so many of our people. Nevertheless, he would have love for those of our brethren captured by toxic doctrines.

### Tikkun Olam

Yet, we are summoned to spread the boundaries of *kedushah* beyond ourselves. Indeed, as we recite three times daily in *Aleinu*, we must “repair the world with the Kingdom of God.” Thus, the Torah Jew who seeks the spread of *kedushah* via *tikkun olam* would have much to say to Western nations stripped of soul, memory and faith by secularist intellectuals, educators, politicians and courts. The ideological assumptions of contemporary Western elites would be firmly abjured by the *kadosh*—not despite his *Torah im Derech Eretz* or *Torah u'Madda* beliefs but precisely because of them. He would find no solace or pride in public Jews embracing the legitimization of sodomy, feticide, or rejecting the God-ordained distinctions between men and women. His every engagement with mankind would be an attempt to protect and proclaim Divine truths among men, as

Rambam has it in *Sefer haMitzvot*, “to publicize the faith of God in the world.”<sup>10</sup> Among his natural allies would be like-minded Gentiles of all cultures, whether or not they be socially acceptable. And, in all his sallies forth under the banner of *kedushah* he would be imbued with and exude the “fear” and “humility” of which the Rambam speaks. Thus, before, during, and after his non-explicitly holy pursuits he would focus his mind on the Creator and how the activity at hand is to bring him closer to God. The exact division of day of the *kedushah*-seeker would vary. But, always he would subject his schedule to one criteria—Is this the best path I have to God? There are no answers to this question that will fit all men. But always it is the call of *kedushah* that motivates, demands and measures. The *avodah* of the *kadosh* is primarily internal, as Rav Hirsch writes, “each person, according to his own unique

qualities, should work on his inner self; and he should train quietly in a manner known only to himself.”<sup>11</sup> However, the impact of *kedushah* is felt by all who encounter it. This path may not be well trod in our age but its serene, God-centered dignity, integrity and purity beckon us all. **IA**

*\*Courtesy of Judaica Art Is...Ltd., 80 Surrey Place, Jamaica Estates, N.Y. 11432*

#### Notes

1. *Vayikra* 19:2.
2. *Kedoshim* 1:1.
3. *Vayikra* 20:26.
4. *Reishit Chochmah, Shaar Kedushah* 1.
5. Commentary, *Vayikra* 1:2.
6. 1:8.
7. *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:51.
8. *Ibid.*
9. See his Epistle to Yemen where this topic is expanded far beyond its exposition in *Hilchot De'iot* 6:1.
10. Positive Commandments: 60.
11. Commentary, *Vayikra* 1:2.



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# Judaism and Contemporary Spirituality

By Moshe Meiselman

The confrontation between Jewish life and values and the surrounding culture takes many forms and the ensuing conflicts have varied from generation to

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*Rabbi Meiselman is rosh yeshivah of Yeshivas Toras Moshe in Jerusalem and author of Jewish Women in Jewish Law.*

generation. At times, the conflict was practical, as it was in the American experience a century ago, when there were almost insurmountable obstacles to observing Shabbat and *kashrut*. At times, the issues have been cultural. The confrontation of Jewish ideas and values with Hellenism during the

Maccabean days, with Greek ideas and values during the Golden Age of Spain and with Western ideas and values following the Enlightenment have all provided serious challenges to the continuity of Jewish life.

However, Western life at the beginning of the twentieth-first century is