



אני ה' א-להיכם “I am the Lord your G-d”

Parashat Acharei Mot sets the framework of mitzvot that shape the Nation of Israel's path. This structure is presented under the headline: *“I am the Lord your G-d”* (Vayikra 18,2), as Hashem repeatedly instructs Moshe Rabbeinu to tell the Children of Israel.

Beneath this headline are listed the “sector boundaries,” borders that must not be crossed from either side:

כְּמַעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבַּתֶּם בָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ
וּכְמַעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְבִיא אֲתֶכֶם שָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ
וּבְחֻקֵּיהֶם לֹא תֵלְכוּ.

*As the deeds of Egypt, where you dwelled, you shall not do,
and as the deeds of Canaan, to where I am bringing you,
you shall not do, and you shall not follow their laws.* (18,3)

That is to say: You have left the land of Egypt so as to detach yourselves from their depraved customs, and you are now on your way to inherit the Holy Land from the Canaanites, so that you may introduce new, exemplary patterns of behavior to the Land.

This framework is the background for the prohibitions on eating certain foods, as enumerated in the previous Torah portion, Sh'mini, and also for the laws of incest mentioned in this portion of Acharei Mot and the following one, Kedoshim. As the Torah explains:

... אָנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הִבְדַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִן הָעַמִּים ...
 וְהִבְדַּלְתֶּם בֵּין הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּהוֹרָה לַטְּמֵאָה וּבֵין הָעוֹף הַטָּמֵא לַטְּהוֹר...
 ... *I am the Lord your G-d, Who has distinguished
 you from the nations. You shall distinguish
 between clean animals and unclean ones,
 and between unclean birds and clean ones...* (20,24-25)

Again: G-d differentiated us from among both the Egyptians and the Canaanites in order that we walk a new path in the Land of Israel. Why did Hashem choose specifically us for this mission? Apparently, He knows that Israel is the only nation equipped with the powers of endurance and fundamental character traits necessary for blazing G-d's path in the world, uprooting the errors of the idol-worshippers, and implanting the belief in One G-d and His path in the world.

Precisely for this reason, He forbade us to partake of certain animals, and regulated with whom we may and may not engage in physical relations, and under what conditions. G-d made sure to distance us from anything that might disturb us from fulfilling the mission for which we were chosen as G-d's Nation.

This, then, is the background of the concept of *kedushah*, holiness or sanctity, regarding both forbidden foods and illicit sexual relations. The levels of *kedushah* are proportional to the distance taken from both.

Let us clarify and delve into the concept of sanctity.

■ Three Sanctities

Three levels of holiness are depicted in the wondrous vision of the Prophet Isaiah, in which he saw Hashem and seraphim standing above Him:

וְקָרָא זֶה אֶל זֶה וַאֲמַר: קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ ה' צְבָאוֹת
 מְלֵא כָּל הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ.
*Each [of the angels] called to one another and said:
 Holy, holy, holy is the G-d of Hosts,
 Whose glory fills the entire world.* (Yeshayahu 6,3)

This is the structure of the *Kedushah* prayer that we recite in our daily prayers – a triplicate “holy” that serves as a prelude to the third blessing of the Amidah, *Atah Kadosh*, “You are holy,” which also lists three levels of

holiness: “You are Holy, and Your name is Holy, and Holy ones praise you every day.” Let us detail each stage of the blessing:

- ***Atah Kadosh, You are Holy*** – We open with the most primordial stage, when G-d was alone and the world had not yet been created.
- ***V'shimkha kadosh, Your name is Holy*** – This second stage is when G-d began “considering” creating the world. He gave Himself the *Havayah* name, referring to Being and Creating, and it was this name by which He chose to be known by His creations.
- ***Uk'doshim b'khol yom yehalelukha sela, Holy ones praise you every day*** – This final stage refers to the Nation of Israel, sanctified by Hashem.

This three-rung ladder is emphasized in the expanded *Atah Kadosh* blessing of the High Holiday prayers:

- ***L'dor vador hamlikhu*** - “Throughout every generation, accept G-d as King, for He alone is exalted and holy...”
- ***U'vkhen yitkadash shimkha Hashem*** - “May Your name be sanctified, Hashem our G-d -”
- ***Al yisrael amekha*** – “- upon Your nation Israel.”

We find the same structural design in the central blessing in the *Amidah* for Shabbat Mincha: “**You** are One, and **Your name** is one, and who is like **Your nation Israel**, one nation in the land.”

From where did the Prophet Yeshayahu draw this idea of three sanctities in this order? The source for this structure is none other than the verse we headlined above: “***I am the Lord your G-d.***” This official and binding declaration, repeated 26 times in the Torah, expresses the same three stages: I; the Lord; your G-d.

The three are parallel to: Before Creation; Creation itself; and after Creation, when the Nation of Israel was chosen. It is extraordinary to see how the Torah relays this message to us in a most brilliant format, citing various verses in Vayikra that connect the three sanctities with the heading “***I am the Lord your G-d.***” in a graduated manner. In one of them, Hashem is referred to only as “***I.***” then as “***I, the Lord your G-d.***” and a third time as “***I, G-d.***” These are the verses:

<i>For I am holy</i> (Vayikra 11,45)	כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי
<i>For I, G-d, am holy</i> (20,26)	כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה'
<i>For I, the Lord your G-d, am holy</i> (19,2)	כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

The first verse refers to Hashem – I – alone, before creation. The second one refers to how Hashem is known as the world comes into being. Finally, the third verse tells us of the dwelling of the Divine Presence amidst the Nation of Israel. Preceded by the word *Barukh*, Blessed, this last phrase forms the three-part backbone of all our blessings: ***Barukh Atah Hashem Elokeinu, Blessed are You, the Lord, our G-d.***

With all this, however, we still do not understand: What does it mean to say that G-d is holy?

■ Separation and Dedication

“Holiness” has two meanings: “isolation/separation,” and “singular dedication.” Let us consider the following examples of holiness in which these meanings are manifest.

When a groom says to his bride *harei at mekudeshet li*, “you are hereby sanctified unto me,” he is essentially saying, “You are separated from all other men, dedicating yourself only to me.”

When we dedicate an object to G-d or to the Beit HaMikdash, that is, when we “sanctify” it, we are actually separating it from all other objects and dedicating it exclusively to that particular stated purpose. Similarly, a “holy person” is one who has separated himself from profane matters and has dedicated himself solely to the service of G-d.

Quite clearly, these two meanings – separation and dedication – complement and supplement each other.

When G-d commands us “*You shall be holy*,” as He does in the beginning of Parashat Kedoshim, He means we must separate ourselves from the other nations and from their customs, in terms of the food we eat, our physical relationships, etc. Differentiating and separating ourselves in this way leads us to the next step: dedicating ourselves solely to the service of G-d.

What, then, is the meaning of the continuation of the above command: “*For I, the Lord your G-d, am holy*”? If holiness means “to separate,” from what does G-d separate Himself?

The answer is that with this declaration, Hashem takes leave of direct supervision and intervention in the affairs of the Gentiles, enabling the laws of nature to exclusively govern them. At the same time, He dedicates His Name and His direct Providence towards Israel – supervising us in accordance with Torah law, not natural law. He is our singular, dedicated G-d, and we are His special, dedicated nation.

This dual relationship is emphasized by Moshe Rabbeinu at the end of the Torah:

אֶת ה' הָאֵמַרְתָּ הַיּוֹם לְהִיּוֹת לְךָ יְיָ-לֵהִיִּם וְלִלְכֹת בְּדַרְכָּיו...
וְה' הָאֵמַרְךָ הַיּוֹם לְהִיּוֹת לוֹ לְעַם סְגֻלָּה...

*You have selected the Lord this day, to be your G-d,
and to walk in His ways, and to observe His statutes ...
And the Lord has selected you this day to be
His treasured people... (D'varim 26,17-18)*

This verse, too, tells us that Hashem withdraws from direct supervision over the other nations, and dedicates this instead only to the People of Israel. At the same time, He demands of us that we withdraw and separate ourselves from various practices of the nations, as enumerated above, so that we may be worthy of being His Nation, fulfilling His Divine mission.

From here, we proceed to the following words: וְהִתְקַדְּשִׁיתֶם וְהָיִיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים, “*Sanctify yourselves and you shall be holy*” (Vayikra 11,44). Why the duplication? Is not “*Sanctify yourselves*” the same as “*you shall be holy*”? The answer is no, on two levels. The straightforward understanding of this verse tells us that the level of sanctity must first be formed, and only then can it be manifested. That is to say: Become sanctified, and remain that way.

The two are different from another standpoint as well, based on the two meanings we have given for *kedushah*: “*Sanctify yourselves*” – by **separating** from the other nations’ customs; and “*you shall be holy*” – **dedicate yourselves** unto G-d.

Quite clearly, these two different steps are mutually dependent, as can be inferred from the following verse:

וְהָיִיתֶם לִי קְדוֹשִׁים כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' וְאֲבַדְלָ אֶתְכֶם מִן הָעַמִּים לְהִיּוֹת לִי.
*Be holy unto Me - for I, G-d, am holy, and I have separated you
from among the nations to be Mine. (20,26)*

That is, “your holiness is akin to Mine.” The Medrash on this verse enigmatically states:

"My holiness is higher than that of yours (Israel's)" (Vayikra Rabba 24,9).

These words are like an uninterpreted dream. Is it not obvious that G-d is more holy than we are?

In keeping with what we have learned, the Medrash is revealing from within this verse how Hashem's commitment towards us is greater and deeper than ours towards Him. In practical terms, this means that even if the worst happens and we violate our Covenant with Him, He will never violate His Covenant with us. Even if the People of Israel choose, Heaven forbid, to worship other gods, He still will never replace us with another nation. As is written:

בְּמִשְׁפָּטֵי מֶמְסוֹ וְאֶת חֻקֵּי גְעֻלָּה נִפְּשָׂם.
 וְאִם גַּם זֹאת בְּהִיּוֹתָם בְּאֶרֶץ אֲבוֹתֵיהֶם לֹא מֵאַסְתִּים וְלֹא גְעַלְתִּים לְכַלֵּתָם
 לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתָּם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם.
 ... [they] despised My ordinances and rejected My statutes.
 But still... I will not despise them nor will I reject them to
 annihilate them, thereby breaking My covenant with them, for
 I am the Lord their G-d. (Vayikra 26,43-44)

■ Law and Justice

Let us further our pursuit of an understanding of the nature of G-d's holiness. Consider the following important verse:

וַיִּגְבֶּה ה' צְבָאוֹת בְּמִשְׁפָּט וְהָיָל הַקָּדוֹשׁ נִקְדָּשׁ בַּצְּדָקָה.
 G-d, the Lord of Hosts, will be exalted in judgment,
 and the holy G-d shall be hallowed with justness. (Yeshayahu 5,16)

In what way is G-d called "holy," and how is His name sanctified? The verse tells us that it is via *tzedakah*. Though we often translate this word as "charity," throughout the Bible it actually means "justice." That is to say, the singular and unique trait of the Creator is manifest by the effecting of absolute justice, in the absolute deepest sense of the term.

The main proof that *tzedakah* means "justice" stems from these words of Isaiah: "With *tzedakah* shall you be established; distance yourself from monetary oppression, for you shall not fear" (Yeshayahu 54,14). The way to distance ourselves from deceptive monetary practices is by acting justly. The prophet guides Israel and says: By doing justice, your redemption will be readied.

When we combine this with what we have said above, the result will be the following: Hashem acted justly in having chosen Israel to fulfill His mission in the world, and He is therefore in the right in forbidding Israel those things that would preclude their fulfillment of the mission. Accordingly, there is also justice in the fact that He differentiated them from the nations, and it will be just for Israel to keep G-d's precepts and laws.

These concepts are precisely what Moshe told Israel in his parting speech:

וּצְדָקָה תִּהְיֶה לָנוּ כִּי נִשְׁמֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת
לִפְנֵי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ בְּאִשֶּׁר צִוָּנוּ.

*And it will be tzedakah for us that we make sure to
observe all these commandments before the Lord, our G-d,
as He has commanded us.* (D'varim 6,25)

That is, if we observe G-d's commandments as He charged us, it will be considered "just."

■ Sanctified and Hallowed

Looking again at the three mentions of "*holy*" in Isaiah's prophecy, we note a *pasek* (a type of comma) following the first of them, separating it from the other two mentions. What is the nature of this division?

According to our introduction above, the first "*holy*" parallels G-d's will prior to Creation – something of which we have no comprehension and cannot even speak. Permission is granted us to speak about G-d's will only from the time of Creation and onward – for we are a part of this Creation. Thus can we understand the *pasek* after the first "*holy*."

The Medrash provides a different angle:

R. Avin said: This can be likened to a king's subjects who fashioned three crowns for him. What did the king do? He put one on his head, and gave the other two to his sons.

Similarly, the angels crown the Holy One with three sanctities every day, and what does G-d do? He wears one of them on His head, and places the other two on the head of His nation Israel. (Vayikra Rabba 24,8)

This very picturesque description actually expresses a very sublime concept. But let us first ask: Why does G-d take only one sanctity, while giving two to Israel? The same Medrash provides the answer:

One holiness goes to the upper worlds, where the Evil Inclination has no power, as is written, "by the word of the holy ones is the edict..."

(Daniel 4,14)

But in the lower words, where the Evil Inclination has control, would it be that two sanctities would suffice! As Israel is told: "You shall sanctify yourselves and be holy." (Vayikra 11,44; 20,7)

More sanctity is required in the physical world, because the human drive to misbehave, known as the Evil Inclination, necessitates extra holiness to offset it. But if so, why just two sanctities? Perhaps more are required?

Two are sufficient because what is needed is not just more holiness, but rather two very specific types of sanctity. To illustrate, picture a spaceship or satellite cruising forever through outer space practically on its own, after an initial powerful push. Similarly, Earth and the planets revolve constantly around the sun and do not need any additional impetus, for there is no resistant air to obstruct their movement.

On the other hand, here on Earth, the air of our atmosphere causes friction with whatever moves through it, and energy activation is required at all times. An airplane whose engines stop in mid-flight will lose power and velocity, bringing it down with a resounding crash.

This example helps us understand why we need two sanctities – two actions – here in the physical world: one to reach a position of holiness, and the other to keep us there. As is written:

... והתקדשתם והייתם קדשים כי קדוש אני ...
... *You shall sanctify yourselves and be holy,*
for I am holy... (Vayikra 11,44)

The first action is proactive undertaking of becoming sanctified. The second step is to "*be holy*," i.e., to maintain this level of sanctity over a period of time, requiring a continuous effort. This is because in our reality, we encounter constant resistance in the form of our Evil Inclination, necessitating constant effort. The words "*be holy*" teach us that it is not enough to rise up once and "*sanctify yourselves*"; we must always work to remain on that high level of sanctity.

In the upper spiritual world, however, where there is no Evil Inclination and no spiritual "resistance," the original, initial act of sanctification suffices for its effect to remain eternal.

■ Sanctifying the Month

The above is manifest in the declaration of each new month as sanctified by the Beit Din. The Sages of the Sanhedrin were authorized to determine the date of each new month, based on the testimony of witnesses who saw the first glimmer of the new moon.

Determining the first day of the new month means also fixing the dates of the holidays, including Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. The actual obligations to fast on Yom Kippur and to refrain from work on festivals are, of course, Biblical – but the authority to determine the dates on which these commands apply was given over to the Sanhedrin of Israel.

The Mishna tells us how the new month was announced. After the testimony of the witnesses was heard and approved, the head of the court would declare the new month “Sanctified!” And all those present would answer after him, “Sanctified, sanctified.” (Rosh HaShanah 2,7)

We thus again see three sanctities divided into one and two: The representative of the Heavenly determination of the month first says **sanctified** one time, and then the nation here on earth responds and confirms two times: **Sanctified, sanctified**. This law is derived from the following verses in Parashat Emor, where the various festivals are detailed:

אֵלֶּה מוֹעֲדֵי ה' אֲשֶׁר תִּקְרְאוּ אֹתָם מִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ...

These are the festivals of G-d that you shall proclaim as proclamations of sanctity... (Vayikra 23,37)

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶת מוֹעֲדֵי ה' אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Moshe told G-d's festivals to the Children of Israel. (verse 44)

We again see the same structure: The first verse, describing Israel's role in the sanctification process, repeats the word “*proclaim*” twice, while in the second verse, Moshe told Israel of “*G-d's festivals*” only once.

When a person attains “holiness,” it is incumbent upon him to maintain this level over a period of time; this is a life-long struggle. However, he will thus merit a Divine crown upon his head, as the Prophet tells us (Yeshayahu 49,3):

וַיֹּאמֶר לִי, עַבְדִּי אַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר בָּךְ אֶתְפָּאֵר.

And He said to me, “You are My servant, Israel, in whom I will take pride.”

