



## **Parashat Kedoshim: Don't Apply Lipstick to the Mirror**

Dear Friends,

Parashat Kedoshim is the spiritual peak of the Torah! How could it be otherwise, with mitzvot such as **“Love your fellow as yourself”** (Vayikra 19:18) and **“You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.”** (19:14)

The entire list of mitzvot in this parasha is both sublime and inspiring, and also very challenging. It is so challenging that sometimes it seems that there is no possibility that we can fulfill them.

We are all familiar with the moments of inspiration in which we are moved to be better people, or simply to begin an exercise program or a diet. These moments tend to collapse in weakness and despair, something in that grand desire disappointing and dissolving.

How is it that on the one hand, something inspires and excites us very authentically, and on the other, it dissolves in inertia and despair?

I would like to suggest two reasons for this gap between inspiration and despair:

### **1. The illusion of all or nothing:**

Something within us hears the sublime mitzvot of Parashat Kedoshim as absolute. It is this totality that causes our excitement and inspiration. But it is the very same totality that weakens us when we discover that we have not succeeded in fulfilling the mitzvah in its entirety - we still harbor some negative feelings about one person or another, or we have not managed to reach out to everyone, try as we might. We have not succeeded in “saving” one of our good friends from his or her distress. And when the measure is all or nothing - and because there is no earthly way for us to fulfill these commandments in their entirety, ever - we fall from the “all” into the “nothing”, into despair. Even the most famous nun in the world, Mother Teresa, lived with a constant sense of despair because of her inability to fulfill her mission completely.

### **2. The trap of external measurements:**

Naturally, our consciousness takes us outside of ourselves. When we hear the mitzvah “**Love your fellow as yourself**”, for example, our thoughts extend immediately to the reality around us - how much we are capable of truly loving that stranger on the street, the friend who let us down, the irritating driver who cut us off on the road, or the party members whom we did not vote for in the last elections, and so on.

In this way, trapped in the notion of “all or nothing”, and with our gaze turned outwards towards reality, there will always be a painful gap between the excitement and inspiration the mitzvot arouse in us, and our ability to fulfill them in their entirety.

Clearly, it is time to release ourselves from the illusion of “all or nothing.” In reality, there is no such thing! It simply doesn’t exist! It is a fiction created by humans, therefore useless and upsetting. In reality what is, is what there is. It is only our thinking in absolute terms which advises us that there is anything other than what there is, and it makes us miserable.

Look for the small deeds. The sweet moments of grace. A brief glance of understanding. No more than that.

In terms of our external vision - this is perhaps the biggest cause of despair and anguish. The outside will always, but always, reflect what we don’t have. One person will always have more than another, therefore there will always be jealousy and hatred between people, always be battles for limited resources, and always problems and pain.

The only “place” in which it is possible to attain relative peace and quiet, security and satisfaction, is within ourselves. But turning inwards is contrary to our nature and our habits, and it requires practice and guidance. Our physical eyes will forever draw our attention outwards. Even if we close our eyes, our awareness will still be on what is or isn’t going on outside of ourselves.

Even though we have not defined holiness (which is the name of the parasha - kedoshim, meaning “those who are holy”), one thing is clear: there is no holiness outside. The external world is entirely neutral. It is not beautiful or ugly, not good or bad, not pleasant or repulsive. It has no meaning at all, it simply is.

Values, such as beauty, pleasantness, and meaning exist within us. We simply project them on the external reality and then mistakenly think that outside is beautiful or ugly, good or bad. A breathtaking view is not really breathtaking. It simply is. We project our internal view onto it.

And because good and bad, beautiful and ugly exist within us, the mitzvah “Love your fellow as **yourself**.” reminds us that our fellow human being, the one standing before us, is exactly like us. Exactly! At the end of the day, we are all made of the same materials, both on a molecular and on a psychological level. We all have the exact same weaknesses, even if they appear with some variations in the external world. We all have the same hopes and desires - they simply take on different external guises. None of us is better than the other - no one! - and no one is inferior.

The complete verse from which I quoted earlier is: **“You shall not hate your brethren in your heart. Reprove your kinsman and you will incur no guilt because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your People. Love your fellow as yourself, I am the LORD.”** (Vayikra 19:17-18) Because your brethren are no different than you in essence, hating him or her is essentially self-hate. And yes, this is true also of our most bitter enemies - they are made up of the same exact materials. It is possible - and even desirable, according to the parasha - to reprove him if necessary, but not out of superiority or judgment. On the contrary, it should be done with a deep sense that we are very familiar with their situation, because we are the same, and his sin is most probably ours as well.

So what remains? What does the parasha imply this year?

Most of the work is internal, dealing with our inner qualities. But the external world is often the only one available to us, and it is a mirror. It reflects how we truly look, and reflects what is going on inside, because our internal world is projected onto our external one.

Just as one does not put lipstick on the lips in the mirror, so, too, the most holy and sublime work is looking inwards. But please, take it easy, be gentle with yourselves! The last time I saw my wife put on lipstick, I noticed she put it only on her lips, not on her entire face. So - just on the lips, and sometimes even just on one. The color will rub off onto the other lip in any case.

May we find rejuvenating meaning in these days of remembrance and celebration, and a good month and Shabbat Shalom to all.

Elisha