



## Parshat Kedoshim: What 'Holy' Means Today

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander  
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone  
5784 / 2024

“Be Holy.” With these simple words, the Torah poses a great challenge for each of us. We, the descendants of those who stood at Sinai, are bound by 613 commandments, with a litany of details regarding their observance clarified by the rabbinic tradition. The Torah’s commandments guide us both morally and spiritually, providing instruction for how we are meant to treat our neighbors and the needy, to create sacred spaces, to engage in worship, and so much more. The Torah offers a comprehensive blueprint for a deep and rich religious life.

Yet with all this the Ramban, in his commentary to the opening verse of our Parsha, claims there is more to be done than what is listed in the five books of the Torah. He points out that someone acting cleverly could find ways to technically abide by all that the Torah asks of us, yet nonetheless engage in behaviors unbecoming of a servant of God - what Ramban terms a *naval birshut haTorah*, a degenerate within the guidelines of the Torah.

Hence, Ramban argues, the Torah had to command us to look beyond the letter of the law, and *Kedoshim Teheyu* - to be holy - namely, to act in ways that accord with the Divine will, even when doing so is not specified in the Torah.

As we read this parsha, we are fighting for our future as a nation in the land of Israel and against antisemitic threats across the diaspora. This struggle must inspire us to ask ourselves what type of Jewish community do we wish to safeguard? In these tumultuous times, what are the goals of this sacred people that we wish to secure? The responsibility of *Kedoshim Teheyu* is the essential spiritual genetic code that we wish to protect and actualize.

The sacred requirement to sanctify God’s name, to comport ourselves in ways that reflect the Divine, takes on even greater urgency in a time of war. Addressing the Torah’s instruction that the military encampment of the Jewish people must be ‘holy’ (Devarim 23:15), Abarbanel writes:

*It is the practice of the nations in their wars that they eat every abomination and are steeped in promiscuity; stealing and theft abound, yet none are ashamed. And they similarly gird themselves in viciousness, rage, and anger, since their strength is of human origin.*



*Yet the encampment of Israel is holy, accompanied by Divine Providence, for their warring is conducted not through human strength [alone], but through divine power, to save them from attack and to combat their enemies. Therefore it is fitting that their actions should be holy and pure.*

This certainly has been, and remains, the challenge we face in this moment - maintaining our holiness, and with it our sense of dignity towards all people, even in the midst of wartime. The fact that the IDF implements protocols to ensure the local population's safety and health that is above and beyond international law is consistent with the ideal of being holy.

There is no doubt that this is what Hashem asks of us right now: not only to follow the Torah's stated high bar for conducting war justly but to succeed in channeling greater divine light into the world through our actions. It may not be appreciated in the short term but history will bear witness, if we live up to this mandate, of a posture of holiness on the battlefield and in our civil society. We emulate God in this world, and preserve the Divine that lies within every one of our souls.