

Parashat Emor 5773, 2013:

*Understanding Mikra'ei Kodesh*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

One of the more ubiquitous terms that appears in *Chamisha Chumshei Torah* (the Five Books of the Torah) is *mikra kodesh* (literally, “something called holy,” i.e., the Festivals, pl. *mikra'ei kodesh*). There are a total of 19 cases of our expression in *Sifrei Shemot*, *Vayikra*, and *Bamidbar*, including 11 instances in our *parasha*. In addition, *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed Memory) utilized our phrase in every Friday evening and Yom Tov *Kiddush*, as well as throughout the Shabbat and Yom Tov *tefilot* (prayers). Given human nature, however, precisely because of the pervasive usage of “*mikra kodesh*,” and its plural variant, we have become desensitized to its meaning and significance. As such, we need to “step back” and encounter it anew, in order to understand at least a small part of what the Master of the Universe was communicating to us when He used this term in His holy Torah.

Rashi (1040-1105) shares his understanding of “*mikra kodesh*” with us in his comment on a verse that is found in our *parasha* (*Sefer Vayikra* 23:35):

**a holy occasion:** [This expression mentioned in connection with Yom Kippur, means that you are to] sanctify it [the day] through [wearing] clean garments and through prayer, while [this expression mentioned in connection] with the other holy days, [means] sanctify it with food and drink, through [wearing] clean clothes and through [their own special] prayers. — [See *Torath Kohanim* 23:186] (This and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi, based upon his Midrashic source, stresses the positive aspect of *mikra kodesh*. In his view, these holy days require explicit demonstrations of their unique identity (i.e. their *kedushat hayom*). Therefore, we don special clothes, recite inspiring prayers, and, with the exception of Yom Kippur, eat the finest meals we can afford – replete with the most delectable beverages.

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), in the first of his three explanations of our term as found in his commentary on our *parasha* (*Sefer Vayikra* 23:2), also emphasizes the positive characteristics of the Festivals:

***Mikra'ei kodesh***: And it will be on this day that everyone will be called (*keruim*) and gather together to sanctify His Name. This is the case since it is a commandment incumbent upon the Jewish people to join together in the House of the L-rd on an appointed day to sanctify the day in an explicit public manner through prayer (*tefilah*), praise (*hallel*) to the Almighty, and with clean garments. Moreover, [the Jewish people] are obligated to make this a day of feasting as is stated in the tradition (Heb. *kabbalah*, i.e., *Sefer Nechemiah* 8:10): “And he [Nechemiah] said to them [the Jewish people], ‘Go, eat fat foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our L-rd, and do not be sad, for the joy of the L-rd is your strength.’”

Nachmanides’ second elucidation of the term “*mikra kodesh*” is language-based in nature. He posits that it is a derivative of “*karui ha’edah*” (“called, invited, or summoned to the congregation”) and supports this interpretation based upon the phrases in *Sefer Shemuel* I: 9:13: “and afterwards the invited guests will eat,” and *Sefer Yeshayahu* 4:5: “and over all those summoned therein, ” wherein this statement refers “to those places that are called in this manner since this is where those summoned to the congregation will gather.”

Nachmanides' third exegesis of "*mikra'ei kodesh*," contains some similarities to his first explanation and to that of Rashi. Herein, he bases himself upon Onkelos, the quintessential First and Second Century Torah scholar:

And Onkelos determined that this phrase is similar in kind to "Jacob called for his sons and said, 'Gather and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days.'" (*Sefer Bereishit* 49:1) – this is an expression of "happenings" ("*me'ora*"). On each day that will ensue [that is called a "*mikra kodesh*,"] you must make them holy. And our Rabbis, may they be remembered for a blessing, said: "Celebrate them through food, drink, and clean clothes." This means that their nature in your eyes should not be similar in kind to the other days, instead, make them an occurrence of holiness – and differentiate them in their foods and dress from a regular weekday to one that is holy. This, too, is the opinion of Onkelos. (Translation, underlining, and brackets my own)

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993) known as "the Rav," by his followers and disciples, expanded upon Onkelos' analysis as presented by the Ramban and stated:

It appears from Onkelos' understanding that the Festivals are called "*mikra kodesh*" because great, lofty and exalted events took place on these days. For example: the Exodus, the Giving of the Torah, and matters similar in kind. **The essence of the holiness of the Festivals is rooted in the wonders and miracles that the Holy One blessed be He brought about on these days.** [In conjunction with this idea, we must note] that the Departure from Egypt is not simply the rationale for the Festivals; rather, it is the fundamental basis of their essential holiness and qualitative nature as chosen days. We may adduce a proof: We mention the phrase, "a remembrance of the Departure from Egypt," in each and every *Kiddush* – whether it is recited over a cup of wine or in the liturgy. This indicates that this commemoration represents the fundamental underpinning for the holiness of, and for, each *mikra kodesh*. (*Shiurim l'Zacher Abba Mari*, Volume I, pages 151-152, first edition), translation, bolding, and brackets my own)

In contrast to the interpretations we have examined thus far, Rashi's grandson, Rabbeinu Yaakov ben Meir (Rabbeinu Tam, 1100-1171), took an entirely different view in his understanding of *mikra kodesh*. Unlike his grandfather, who stressed the importance of positive actions that personify the uniquely holy character of the *chagim* (holy days), Rabbeinu Tam stressed the importance of refraining from *melacha* (creative physical

activity) based upon the *Beit Din* (Court of Law) having declared this day to be one that is endowed with holiness:

It appears in Rabbeinu Tam's view that we call such days "*mikra kodesh*" because we recognize that the *Beit Din* has sanctified the day – and we refrain from doing *melacha* because of the holiness of the day (*kedushat hayom*). Such a day, however, is not called "*mikra kodesh*" when the cessation of creative activity is done for a reason other than the holiness of the day – such as out of mere laziness to undertake *melacha*. (Tosafot, *Talmud Bavli, Shevuot 13a, s.v. lo karu mikra kodesh*)

Here, too, we can look to the Rav for insights as to how we can best understand the deeper meaning inherent in Rabbeinu Tam's position:

Rav Soloveitchik zt"l expanded on this interpretation of Rabbeinu Tam that a person's motive for refraining from *melacha* is essential. Chazal (*Berachos 20b*) teach us that women are obligated to recite *Kiddush* on *Shabbos* according to the Torah. Notwithstanding *Kiddush* being a time bound positive *mitzvah* from which women are usually exempt, there is a *halachic* connection between *Kiddush* and the prohibition of *melacha*, in that whoever is forbidden to do *melacha* on *Shabbos* is obligated to recite *Kiddush*. This *halacha* is derived from the tradition that the terms "*Shamor*" and "*Zachor*" used in the Torah concerning *Shabbos* were recited simultaneously by Hashem. "*Shamor*" refers to the prohibition of *melacha* where "*Zachor*" is the source for the positive obligation to recite *Kiddush*. The connection between *Kiddush* and *melacha* is not only a technical one concerning who is obligated to perform the mitzvah of *Kiddush*. *Kiddush* is linked to *melacha* because the purpose of *Kiddush* is to make a verbal declaration why we are refraining from *melacha*. Rather than merely taking a day off from work, we begin *Shabbos* with an affirmation, through our recitation of *Kiddush*, that *Shabbos* is a *mikra kodesh*. As such, refraining from *melacha* on both *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* is only complete if accompanied by *Kiddush*. (Rabbi Sobolofsky, "Mikra Kodesh," [http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2011/parsha/rsob\\_emor.html](http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2011/parsha/rsob_emor.html), underlining my own)

Given the different approaches to *mikra'ei kodesh* that we have presented and analyzed, it is manifestly evident that our *Mo'adim* (Festivals) are multifaceted in their essence and nature. Beyond a doubt, each *mikra kodesh* emerges as a holy and supernal gift bestowed upon our people by the Master of the Universe. Therefore, with G-d's beneficent love and help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to honor His *mikra'ei kodesh* with the respect and dignity they deserve. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have 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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