

Parashat Mishpatim, 5770, 2010:

Rabbi David Etengoff

*In Pursuit of the Holy*

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka, and in honor of the wedding of my niece, Chaya Etengoff, to Yaakov Heiligman.

And you shall be holy people to Me, and flesh torn in the field you shall not eat; you shall throw it to the dog[s]. (*Sefer Shemot* 22:30, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The above-quoted verse from our *parasha*, posits a direct link between our being a holy people and refraining from eating “flesh torn in the field” (“*basar treifah*”). Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (1194-1270), known by the Hebrew acronym as the “Ramban,” gives the following rationale for this *pasuk* (verse):

The reason for [the inclusion of] this verse is because until this juncture the Torah mentions the rationally apprehensible laws (*mishpatim*) and warns us against those matters that are disgusting in nature. And now, when the Torah is about to begin its discussion of food-based prohibitions, it begins by stating “And you shall be holy people to Me.” The reality is that a person ought to be able to eat anything that would enable him to live, and that nothing should be proscribed in regards to any food. [Why, then, does the Torah prohibit certain foods?] This is solely to enable purity to inhere in the soul. It is for this reason that one should eat only clean [i.e. permissible] foodstuffs – so that one will not have inflexibility and arrogance inhere in his soul. This is why it states: “And you shall be holy people to Me.” (*Commentary on the Torah*, translation my own)

In the Ramban’s view, on some spiritual level that is by no means transparent to us, intransigence, conceit, and haughtiness seem to be the by-products of eating *basar treifah*. These negative character attributes prevent us from achieving *kedushah* (holiness) and concomitantly pervert the purity of our souls. Indeed, perhaps the single greatest barrier to *kedushah* is arrogance (*gaavah*). It blinds us to the ramifications of our behavior, and makes us feel as if we are living on a different and higher plane of

existence than the rest of mankind. Little wonder, then, that Nachmanides warns us against this horrendous *middah* (character trait) in his celebrated *Iggeret*:

And now, my son, understand and observe that whoever feels that he is greater than others is rebelling against the Kingship of Hashem, because he is adorning himself with His garments, as it is written (Tehillim 93:1), "Hashem reigns, He wears clothes of pride." Why should one feel proud? Is it because of wealth? Hashem makes one poor or rich (I Shmuel 2:7). Is it because of honor? It belongs to Hashem, as we read (I Divrei Hayamim 29:12), "Wealth and honor come from You." So how could one adorn himself with Hashem's honor? And one who is proud of his wisdom surely knows that Hashem "takes away the speech of assured men and reasoning from the sages" (Iyov 12:20)!? So we see that everyone is the same before Hashem, since with His anger He lowers the proud and when He wishes He raises the low. So lower yourself and Hashem will lift you up! (Translation, <http://www.pirchei.co.il/specials/ramban/ramban.htm>)

Herein the Ramban is teaching us that G-d, and G-d alone, has the right to act with greatness. Human pride born of wealth, honor, and wisdom represents, like man, a mere passing shadow. In addition, an arrogant person can never become holy, given that holiness fundamentally depends upon accurately comprehending our place and role in the G-d–Man relationship. How, then, can we avoid the pitfalls of *gaavah*, so that we can achieve *kedushah* and thereby encounter our Creator? The Ramban provides us with very practical advice:

In all your actions, words and thoughts, always regard yourself as standing before Hashem, with His *Shechinah* [Divine presence] above you, for His glory fills the whole world. Speak with fear and awe, as a slave standing before his master. Act with restraint in front of everyone. When someone calls you, don't answer loudly, but gently and softly, as one who stands before his master. (Ibid.)

In short, when we truly feel ourselves to be in G-d's presence, we will act with humility before Him and with restraint and dignity toward others – thereby enabling us to apprehend the true meaning of a life built upon the pursuit of that which is holy.

Michah was an eighth century BCE prophet of our people whose words and concepts provide a strong foundation for the Ramban's ideas. Thus, in *Sefer Michah* 6:8, we find a simple, yet profound, formula for living our lives as ethical Torah Jews in pursuit of that which is holy: "*Higid lecha adam mah tov, umah Hashem dorash memcha ki im asot mishpat v'ahavat chesed v'hatzneyah lechet im Elokecha*" ("He has told you O' man what is good! What does G-d require from you except to perform acts of justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your G-d?") Michah is teaching us that "good" and, by extension a good life, are defined first and foremost by actions that embody justice in our dealings with our fellow man. Treating others as our equals and with equity is an essential part of Jewish living. We are all created *b'tzelem Elokim* (in G-d's image). Therefore, we are all ultimately the same in His eyes. By maintaining a constant sense and awareness of the intrinsic worth and value of our fellow human beings, we begin to emulate Hashem (*imitatio Dei*). Imitating Hashem is one of the fundamental goals of living as a Jew. Therefore, the Gemara in *Talmud Bavli, Sotah* (14a) states: "*Mah hu malbish arumim, af atah halbash arumim. Hakadosh Baruch Hu bikar cholim, af atah bikar cholim. HaKadosh Baruch Hu nicham aveilim, af atah nicham aveilim, Hakadosh Baruch Hu kavar matim, af atah kavor matim.*" ("Just as Hashem clothes the naked, so should you clothe the naked; just as Hashem visits the sick, so, too, should you visit the sick. *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* comforts the mourners, so, too, should you comfort the mourners. *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* buries the dead, so, too should you bury the dead.")

"Kindness" is the next quality that is stressed by Michah. Given much of modern life,

kindness appears to be an “extra” in many quarters. In point of fact, the prophet categorically states that it is not something extra. Kindness, instead, is part and parcel of what Jewish living should represent. Michah urges us to love acts of kindness and ardently practice these kinds of behaviors with our fellow human beings. As a result, Rabbi Akiva stated (*Talmud Yerushalmi, Nedarim, 9:4*): “*V’ahavata l’rayacha kamocha, zeh klal gadol b’Torah*” (“And you should love your neighbor as you love yourself, this is the overarching principle of the Torah”).

Michah concludes his homily with the famous words: “and to walk humbly with your G-d.” Humility (*hatznayah lechet, anivut*) may well be one of the most important aspects of Jewish life. Little wonder, then, that the Ramban tells us in his *Iggeret* that when we act humbly, Hashem’s divine spirit and glory rest upon us and we merit *Olam Haba* (the World to Come). As we have already seen, the opposite *middah*, arrogance, is also the polar opposite of what Hashem wants from us. Anyone who acts with haughtiness is, in reality, trying to substitute himself for Hashem. “*B’kochi v’otzem yadi*” (“By **my** strength and by **my** hand,” *Sefer Devarim 8:17*) is the antithesis of Jewish life and living. We must, instead, develop an in-depth recognition of our complete dependence upon Hashem. My rebbi, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), stated that it is forbidden to pray to Hashem unless we realize at that moment that our life constantly hangs in the balance and that we are totally dependent upon our Creator. Any other thoughts, he maintained, have nothing whatsoever to do with prayer. Instead, they are self-serving statements of arrogant self-righteousness. *Hatznayah lechet*, then, is an

important key to unlocking the mystery of our relationship with Hashem. It enables us to know before Whom we stand.

May humility become the litmus test by which we measure the goals and accomplishments of our lives. May we have the discernment to ask ourselves, “Am I serving Hashem by this thought or action, or am I merely being self-serving?” May Hashem grant us this spiritual strength and wisdom so that we may pursue the holy. Then, like Avraham of old, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to walk before Him in justice and righteousness. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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[http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat\\_hashavuah/index.html](http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html).

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