

# Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

K'doshim

*G-d said to Moshe... "Speak to the Israelites and tell them, You shall be holy. For I, the Lord your G-d, am holy" (19:1-2).*

The actual meaning of, "You shall be holy", is widely discussed in the commentators. The Midrash (Sh'mot Rabba 24:6) followed by Rashi, states that this commands the avoiding of the illicit physical relationships described in the previous chapter. Holiness is a product of refraining from sexual immorality. In sharp contrast, the Ramban does not limit the concept of holiness to any category of precepts. Rather, holiness is something that should be characteristic of all aspects of life. A person who only observes the letter of the law may become a NAVAL BIRSHUT HA-TORAH, a degenerate, debased person without actually breaking the Torah. Examples of characteristic behavior would include gross overeating of roast duck with the best, most 'glatt' hechsher, and a stamp collector offering a higher price for a very rare stamp when the other already agreed to sell it to someone else who had set his heart on it.

Yet according to the Ramban's explanation, it seems that He is not actually demanding a great deal. Not being a NAVAL BIRSHUT HA-TORAH seems to be a dimension of Derech

Eretz; civilized and decent behavior. Derech Eretz is not exclusive to Am Yisrael, but to humanity in general. Why should the Torah at this stage give such prominence to the importance of civilized and decent behavior?

In response, this gives an insight into human nature. In taking on the elevated and exacting demands of the Torah, it can be fatally easy to overlook the fundamentals of the need for socially acceptable behavior at all times. Or worse, that one's position in humanity is so high that acceptable-to-others behavior is not very important. This, implies the Ramban, is just not so! All the mitzvot are to be observed in the framework of Derech Eretz; as he puts it, not to be a NAVAL BIRSHUT HA-TORAH. As R. Elazar ben Azariya declared: "If there is no Derech Eretz, there is no Torah" (Avot 3:17). Lacking suitable behavior to others, Torah observance can become a chilul HaShem, something that brings the Torah into disrepute (c.f. Yoma 86a).

This was brought home to me as a young man at Etz Chaim Yeshiva, London. Learning with my chavruta in a heated discussion on some complex point in Mesechet Yevamot, I was swinging back and forth on the chair, putting excessive strain on two of its legs. The Rosh Yeshiva, R' Nochum Ordman zt"l, in walking by broke into his characteristic warm expansive smile and whispered to me: "There's also a din of Nezikin."

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