

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



ACHAREI-K'DOSHIM

Unlike Any People

Towards the end of this week's first Torah reading, we begin a section of the Torah called the Holiness Code, at least that's what Bible critics call it. Even though I totally reject their 'criticism' of our Torah, I really like that epithet for chapters 18-23 of Vayikra (BTW they use that name for chapters 17-26). For me, these six chapters really delineate what we mean when we refer to the Jewish People as the Holy Nation.

To be 'holy' - KADOSH - is described by some rabbinic authorities as to abstain from illicit sexual behavior (Rashi); to others it implies even curtailing permitted behavior to practice moderation in all ways (Ramban); while still others suggest that it demands that we imitate God (Rashbam). While all those answers have merit, I personally refrain from such a concise explanation. I think that one must read these chapters over and over again to achieve a sense of this great purpose and obligation.

However, right at the beginning of this Torah mandated project to be 'holy', we begin with a clear obligation to be different. At the outset, the

Torah demands: Do not follow the practices of the land of Egypt, where you used to live, or follow the practices of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. You must not follow their customs (Vayikra 18:3). Be different!

Although there are a plethora of explanations for this double exhortation, I believe that the most straightforward approach is to demand that we not follow the sexual laxity of Egypt nor the idolatrous behavior of the Canaanites. But since we have the perspective of millennia of Jewish wanderings, I believe that we could legitimately claim that our verse demands that we don't keep up customs we found in our last home nor adopt the conventions of the newest abode.

Okay, enough theory. In practical terms: What can we do and what can't we do? Must we somehow still look and behave like the Jews who left Egypt? Of course not! After all, I'm writing this on a computer and not chiselling it out in stone. Thank God!

The Code of Jewish Law (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Dei'ah 178:1) gives a relatively clear outline: One should not follow the customs of non-Jews (nor should one try to resemble them). One should not wear clothing that is particular to them [or their culture]; ...one should not build

buildings - like the non-Jews' temples - so that large groups of people will enter them, like non-Jews do.

The Rama (Reb Moshe Isserles, who describes Ashkenazic practice) adds: Rather, one should be distinct from them in one's manner of dress and in all of one's actions. But all of these restrictions apply only to things that non-Jews do for the sake of sexual innuendo. These restrictions also apply to things that they do because of a custom or rule that does not have a logical reason, out of concern that these are "ways of the Amorites", and may come from idol worship or superstitions inherited from their ancestors. But things that they are accustomed to doing for a logical purpose - such as their custom for expert doctors to wear particular clothing so that the doctors will be recognized as specialists - one is permitted to wear such clothing.

Okay! Religious or superstitious acts are a NO NO. However, well reasoned, logical behavior is fine.

Got it! We can put sirens on ambulances and police cars, but no crosses on shuls and it's fine if a black cat crosses your path (but don't walk under ladders, please, that's just stupid!).

But can I wear a necktie? We know that there are Chasidim who don't wear ties, but I think that since it has become a non-offensive way of

showing that we are getting dressed up, it should be fine, and Rav Moshe Feinstein wrote: There is no necessity to wear clothing different from the Gentiles unless their dress is immodest (1953).

Can Americans celebrate Thanksgiving? Now, Thanksgiving is an interesting issue. According to Rav Herschel Schechter, Rav Soloveitchik ate a Thanksgiving meal with turkey. But I had a Rebbe in YU back in 1971, who demanded that we come to SHIUR on Thanksgiving. I was one of four who showed up, which angered my family, which was wrong of me, but I was a BAAL TESHUVA who didn't know better.

The Pachad Yitzchak (Rav Yitzchak Hutner) wrote that it was wrong to celebrate Thanksgiving, but Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, who was head of Ezras Torah (before Rav Moshe) had Thanksgiving on their calendar of MINHAGIM. Plus, to this very day the annual Agudas Yisrael convention is held on Thanksgiving weekend, and turkey is served. I lived in Atlantic City for a couple years when the Aguda convention was there, and later I lived in Stamford CT when it was held there. I guess they just followed me.

This brings me to the issue of sirens for Yom HaShoah & Yom HaZikaron. I grew up, of course, with 'moments of silence' (in the US, 'moments of

silence' at sporting events are 20 seconds long). Here in Eretz Yisrael, for me the standing for the siren is a proper sign of memorial and respect for those who died AL KIDDUSH HASHEM, and whom we pledge to never forget.

However, every year we see videos of Chareidim ignoring the sirens and going about their business, because they see it as copying the greater Gentile world. Over the years, the established MINHAG is for the various religious communities to argue about it.

Forever we will ask if Herzl's dream of 'being a state like all states' contradicts Yeshayahu's vision of the Jewish people being 'a light unto the nations' (Yeshayahu 42:6)? For me, I sincerely believe that they can be compatible, but may the debate continue until Mashiach Ben David comes, BIM-HEIRA B'YAMEINU! 🙏