



GROWTH

At The

SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT ACHAREI MOT - KEDOSHIM

Whatever You Can Do

Parshat Kedoshim opens with G-d telling Moshe the following (Leviticus 19:2-3): "Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: you shall be holy, for I - Hashem, your G-d - am holy. You shall each revere your mother and father, and My sabbaths you should keep; I am Hashem, your G-d." These 4 themes appear to be quite distinct from one another, and the fact that they are lumped together in the same phrase is somewhat perplexing. What exactly threads the commandments of "being holy," revering one's parents, observing Shabbat, and the stamp of "I am Hashem, your G-d"?

Perhaps, the following story can illustrate.

A certain Hasidic rabbi who lives in Israel, R' Moshe Tannenbaum, once found himself being approached by an extremely secular-looking individual who invited him to his son's brit milah at Kibbutz Shomer HaTzair. Being that this particular kibbutz was renowned and proud for being the most anti-religious kibbutz, the rabbi was a bit skeptical and initially hesitant. "I wouldn't be asking a complete stranger unless I really needed you," the man persisted. "You're the 10th man." He couldn't say no to that, and so, the rabbi accepted the man's invitation.

After the brit, the father came over to the rabbi to ask for another favor. "Unfortunately, my father, being an elderly man, was unable to make it to his grandson's brit today due to health reasons, but I would really appreciate it if we could pay him a visit and you can give him some encouragement. He feels so bad that he couldn't attend..." He happily obliged. They traveled together to see the elderly, wheelchair-bound grandfather, who was touched by their thoughtful visit and the rabbi's kind and uplifting words. Amidst the conversation, the rabbi mentioned that he was a Karliner chassid. Upon hearing this, the elderly man was in shock and utter disbelief. R' Tannenbaum didn't anticipate that being from the chassidut of Karlin would have such an impact on this kibbutznik's patriarch, and so the old man explained:

"I come from Berlin, which was the pinnacle of secular and Reform Judaism back in my time. It was the height of the assimilation epidemic. At the time, R' Yisrael was the young progeny of the Karlin chassidut and he once visited our town in Berlin. He was hosting an event in one of the synagogues, and although no one in our town really took an interest in religion, many people were intrigued by 'Yiddish Theater' from a cultural perspective, and I was one of the people who attended. Even though this took place over 50 years ago, I still remember it as if it happened yesterday. He started off by announcing that although he always reserved divrei Torah for after the meal, he would veer from his general custom just for Berlin and share an idea on the parsha - which happened to be Parshat Kedoshim.

"He asked on the connection between themes of the opening verses: why did the Torah follow 'You shall be holy' with honoring parents, keeping Shabbat, and then 'I am Hashem, your G-d'? The rabbi then explained: 'When I speak to people who already pray and do every mitzvah and live their best lives as Jews, all I need to say is "be holy." But then, there are some crowds where the lofty request of "being holy" is too much for them. It's too much pressure, and they don't think they can do it. You know what you tell people like that? The Torah tells them: "No problem. But could you at least have awe and respect for the things that your parents taught you?" Even if you lack the motivation or knowledge to observe everything or climb the spiritual ladder, can you at least hold onto the traditions that were kept in your own home? Then, there are some where even asking to be on the level of their parents is too much. For those that can't merely maintain the values and lifestyle of their parents, the Torah implores: "can you at least keep Shabbat - one of the most fundamental mitzvot of our faith?"

"Then, the rabbi stood up at the meal and addressed us all directly, smashing his hand onto the table. 'And for the Jews of Berlin!' he cried. 'I can't ask them to be holy. I can't ask of them to be like their parents. I can't even ask for them to keep Shabbat. So at the very least, internalize the fourth and final request. Can you remember that there's a G-d in this world? Even if you can't keep the last nine commandments, can you at least hold on to the first one and never forget that there is a Creator?"

"I still remember how shaken I was by the strength and conviction of that rabbi - how he spoke in such a real and authentic manner to the souls of Jews who felt weak. At the time, I was engaged to marry my non-Jewish girlfriend, and that's when I thought to myself, 'I'm not holy - fine. I'm not following the ways of my parents - fine. I'm not shomer shabbat - fine. But to walk away from the belief in G-d at all? That's too much.' I mustered up the strength to break up with the girl, and we called off the wedding.

"Rabbi, Hashem clearly orchestrated for you to attend this brit milah because it is only in the merit of your mentor in Karlin, who sparked something within my soul all those years ago with his bang on the table, that I have this Jewish grandson..."

This idea is a powerful one that we all ought to internalize. Judaism is in fact not a zero-sum game, and we mustn't feel discouraged from growth merely because we're not perfect or good enough. Even when we have high expectations, we must make sure to encourage our children to do only as much as they can, never underestimating the inherent flame of a Jewish soul. [1]