

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Psalm 99

"Israel's Song": An Analysis of Kedusha

The psalm is short enough, let's quote it in full:

The Lord enthroned on Cherubim, is king,
peoples tremble, the earth quakes.
The Lord is great in Zion,
And exalted above all peoples.
They praise Your name as great and awesome,
He is holy!

Mighty king who loves justice,
It was You who established equity,
You who worked righteous judgment in Jacob.
Exalt the Lord our God
And bow down to His footstool;
He is holy!

Moses and Aaron among His priests,
Samuel, among those who call His name -
When they called to the Lord,
He answered them.
He spoke to them in a pillar of cloud;
They obeyed His decrees,
The law He gave them.
O Lord our God, You answered them;
You were a forgiving God for them,
But you exacted retribution for their misdeeds.
Exalt the Lord our God,
And bow toward His holy hill,
For the Lord our God is holy.

From the surge of Israel - centric lines, we see that the focus of the psalm clearly shifts from a discussion of nature's relationship with God, to that of man's, specifically the children of Israel.

This transition began in psalm 98 where "He was mindful of His steadfast love and faithfulness toward the HOUSE OF ISRAEL" (verse 3), and took shape in our psalm with the

singling out of major Jewish personalities and their relationship with God. The shift is guided by, and revolves around, the concept of holiness.

Jacob Bazak notes that there are three distinct sections in the psalm, all of which conclude with the same words: "Exalt our God for ... He (our God) is holy." What is the relationship which binds the three units together - that of praising God and His holiness? The catchphrase of "exalt God for He is holy" leaves us questioning the need for this praise. Why praise God for His holiness? And is it not this holiness which pervades all of Mankind? What is the nature of this nationalistic approach?

Through an analysis of this concept of holiness we can begin to appreciate the reason it acts as the crucial link in this psalm.

What is kedusha? Commonly translated as holiness, we find its origin uncertain. On the one hand, the term appears in the framework of death - "all who touch the altar will be 'consecrated'" - yikdash (Exodus 29:37), on the other hand, we see it in the context of purification - "And the Lord said to Moses 'go to the people and warn them to 'stay pure' - kidashtam - today and tomorrow."

We find this word used in a metaphysical state; "the Lord blessed the seventh day and hallowed it - va-yekadeshehu; yet we also locate the word in a very physical state, "You shall take the anointing oil and anoint the Tabernacle ... so that it shall be holy--'kadosh'" (Exodus 40:9).

Finally, a strange variation of the word is found in Leviticus. "No Israelite woman shall be a cult prostitute - 'kedesha,' nor shall any Israelite man become a cult prostitute - 'kadesh!'" (Deuteronomy 23:18). How does this definition fit in with our understanding of kedusha as holiness?

Let's begin with a noteworthy verse found in the Torah. "The Lord spoke to Moses saying "Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them You shall be holy — kedoshim teheyu - for I the Lord, Your God, am holy" (Leviticus, 19:1).

What is the nature of this what appears to be a Biblical commandment? Rashi offers his famous remarks quoting the Midrash (Vayikra Raba), that the word kadosh means be separated (perushim) from sexual temptations and from sin in general. A very channeled

manifestation of this commandment seems to emerge; in order to attain holiness, reject sin, most of all refrain from licentiousness.

Ramban brings down Rashi's position and argues that while it is clear that one should repel sin, this does not render holiness to which God had been referring; rather, the focus is entirely different. Separate yourself from that which is allowed to you and you will achieve holiness. What is the meaning of this?

Ramban explains that while it is forbidden to eat non-kosher meat, and permitted to eat kosher meat it is nevertheless repulsive to take this allowance and turn into a glutton, gorging the meat as an animal would. Similarly, says the Ramban, while there is no prohibition regarding drinking alcoholic beverages, nevertheless, one should not become a full time drunk.

The underlying concept used by the Ramban and Rashi is that within our physical, mundane, lifestyle we should acknowledge a higher realm, a system of separateness, not only on a physical plane but on a metaphysical one as well. How can we become holy? Through creating a boundary between the world we live in and we who inhabit it. Understand though, that this does not mean we should isolate ourselves from the rest of the world at least not in a physical state.

There is, in my eyes, another dimension to the concept of kedusha which offers a unique perspective regarding its place in the Psalms. Reverting back to the source verse for kedusha, we notice an interesting parallelism:

"The Lord spoke to Moses saying 'speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them You shall be holy // for I the Lord, Your God, am holy' (Leviticus, 19:1).

We usually focus on the reason for becoming holy - because God is holy, and then proceed to define the notion of holiness. Perhaps we should take a step back and realize that God is commanding us to become something that HE IS. In essence, He is saying, 'Be Like Me.'

This in itself is a remarkable idea to grasp. Not that we acknowledge God's holiness, but that God acknowledges us and grants us the opportunity to emulate His holiness. How can we do that? Most clearly through the observance of the mitzvot in the Torah, but also

through setting up a boundary of metaphysical separateness from certain forces in the world, whether they manifest themselves in sin per se, or in something which technically is allowed but nevertheless detrimental to our intimate relationship with God.

The final way to achieve this Godly holiness on a national level is through prayer -

"Moses and Aaron among His priests,
Samuel, among those who call His name -
When they called to the Lord,
He answered them.
He spoke to them in a pillar of cloud;
They obeyed His decrees,
The law He gave them."

The verb "ANH" to answer appears twice in these verses, emphasizing the idea that when we speak to God we should view it as part of a dialogue already in process. We do not begin the discussion, but respond; God continues in turn with His "response"(1).

This idea that prayer on a national level is involved in the pursuit of praising, and ultimately emulating, God's holiness can be expressed in a blessing we recite thrice daily during our "Shemoneh Esreh", or "amidah" (the nineteen blessing prayer we recite during services in the morning, afternoon, and evening).

"You are holy, and Your name is holy, and holy ones praise You every day, Selah,
Blessed are You, Lord who is holy."

The above third blessing of the "three of praise" is clear as to its thesis—God's holiness. However, one thing is vague in the sentence, who are the "holy ones" who praise Him every day? Some commentaries explain that this refers to the celestial angels who sing praise to God daily.

I prefer the approach of, among others, Rav Hirsch, Rav Kook, and Rabbi Yakov Tzvi Meklenberg in the interpretation that we are the holy ones. In line with the rest of the three blessings of the "amidah", the praise of God does not center on Him alone, but on God's relationship with His people.

1 Avot (patriarchs)—refers to the special bond God created with our forefathers, and more importantly, continues with us. This expresses the fundamental historical aspect of our religion. We come to God as His people, as the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

2 Gevurot (strength)—we acknowledge God's physical "chesed"—acts of loving kindness. The praise does not center on the creation of the world, or His powers in the celestial spheres, but instead focuses on, and perhaps redefines the concept of, gevura—strength. This idea is based on His simple acts of lifting up the sick, freeing the persecuted, and ultimately breathing new life into the dead.

3 Kedusha, similarly, need not be understood as praising God for His holiness, or the holiness of the angels who exalt Him daily. Rather, we acknowledge God's holiness - His metaphysical (and physical) separateness, but the true praise comes when we realize that He has empowered us, His chosen people, with the ability to achieve His Holiness.

How we achieve this holiness, "idach perusha zil gmor"—the rest is just interpretation, go and learn it. But THAT we can is itself perhaps one of the most important messages in King David's book of Psalms.

Note: (1) see Job chapter 3:2, and subsequently chapter 38:1.