

In this one sweeping statement the Torah assigns to us a mitzvah that seems well beyond our capacity – be holy. Even more perplexing this isn't relegated only to the elite, or to the most pious. Rather, every Jew is commanded to be sacred.

This presents a number of problems. The first is that the mitzvah is extremely vague. If the Torah tells us to put on tefilin, it is clearly defined action, to be done with a particular object, at a specific time. But what does it mean to be “holy?” How does one define it? And how does one attain this lofty state? If this isn't problematic enough, the basis of comparison makes it infinitely more difficult to understand. “You shall be holy, because I your G-d am holy.” In what manner, form or fashion can man's holiness be compared to HASHEM's?

In attempting to explain this mitzvah, the Ramban defines it as a general guideline against gluttony. He explains that the Torah permits pleasurable activities. One is allowed to eat many types of food. One may drink intoxicating beverages. A husband and wife are permitted to be together. As a result a person may become immersed in pleasures. This mitzvah is a general guideline to use indulgences properly, keep them in check—using them guardedly, judiciously.

While this Ramban is illustrative, he doesn't seem shed much light on the issue. Controlling one's desires is a fine concept, but how does that make a person sacred? It might stop him from becoming a hedonist, but, it won't make him holy.

### ➤ THE NATURE OF MAN

The answer to this question is based on a more focused understanding of human nature:

The *Chovos HaLevovos (Sha'ar Avodas Elokim)* explains that HASHEM put into man two distinct components. The *Nefesh Ha'Sichli*, intellectual soul or neshama, and the *Nefesh Ha'Bahami—the animal soul*. The *neshama* comes from the upper worlds, and similar to the angels, only craves that which is good, right and proper. It deeply

## Holiness is Natural

“You shall be holy,  
for holy am I your G-d.”

— Vayikrah 19:2 —

desires to be close to HASHEM. Its very essence strives for perfection.

The *animal soul* contains all of the drives that man needs to keep himself alive. Imprinted into it are the drives for food and drink, rest and shelter and all the other physical needs of man.

These two parts are diametrically opposed and are constantly battling for control of man. Each one cries out for its fulfillment, each one demands its needs. And, either one grows or shrinks based on usage. Much like a muscle that with use becomes strong and with disuse atrophies, each part becomes stronger or weaker, based on how often it is allowed control. If man harnesses his desires, they become weaker and his pure intellect comes to the fore, eventually ruling over his animal soul. If he regularly gives in to his base desires, they become stronger and eventually dominant, till they govern over his neshama.

### ➤ A PULL TO HOLINESS

This seems to be the answer to the question on the Ramban. Within man, HASHEM implanted a Neshama so pure, that it pulls him to greatness. Its only desire is to be as much like HASHEM as it can be. HASHEM is perfect. HASHEM is holy. And so, Man's neshama pulls to be perfect, to be as holy as much as a human can be.

The difficulty with man reaching this state, is that his animal soul tugs him towards everything temporal and passing. Its desires are immediate and mundane—the opposite of all that is holy and sublime.

The more that man gives into these desires, the stronger their pull on him. If left unchecked, they would turn him into an animal in the form of a man.

The Torah is teaching us that being holy isn't foreign to us—quite the opposite, it's part of our very nature. Half of our personality only wishes for that which is elevated and proper. If we listen to that side, we will be holy. It's instinctive. The difficulty is that there is another half of us that makes blocks us from reaching that state. To grow, we have to resist its call, and stand up against its pull.

Each of the mitzvahs guides us towards perfection. Do this and your nishama will shine. Don't do this, as it will sully you, making it more difficult for you to actualize your potential.

### ➤ THE PURPOSE OF CREATION

With this mitzvah of “being holy”, The Torah is providing a guiding principle by which to use this world. Pleasures and enjoyments have their place. The *Misilos Yesharim (perek 4)* describes pleasure as tools to be used. When leveraged properly they can help to elevate a person. When used as an aid to allow him a relaxed state of mind to better serve HASHEM – then they are tools for his growth. He becomes elevated through their use, and they become elevated by being used for their intended purpose. But he must be careful, because their pull is strong, and he can easily overuse them, and become less divine. Therefore the Torah warns us to practice moderation.

We learn from this mitzvah that holiness is inborn in us. All we need do is the system to bring it out. The mitzvahs are that system. They guide us to using this world as it was intended. When we do, we fulfill the reason for creation, and our purpose for being put into this world. We become more like HASHEM, we become holy.

*For more on this topic please listen to Shmuz #13 - Nefesh HaSchili / Nefesh HaBahami*