

Be Unique – For I Am!

דַּבֵּר אֶל-כָּל-עֵדוּת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוּשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יי אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them: You shall be holy; for I YHWH your God, am holy.

The word קדוש is traditionally translated as holy. The more meticulous commentators explain that קדוש means separate, designated, set aside. Consequently, all which is sacred is also קדוש because it must be set apart and not accessed by all. In that sense, the opening verse of Parashat Kedoshim is understood as saying that just as God is set apart from the world, so devout Israelites must separate themselves from the rest of the people, from the nations, and from the crowd. According to Nahmanides, the process of separation continues within the nation, as those who want to be spiritually elevated take upon themselves additional measures of abstinence and religious practices.

This interpretation raises several problems:

1. Immediately following the imperative “be holy!” the Torah lists forbidden actions along desired ones. Most of them are natural laws, preached, if not practically followed, by most civilized societies. Nowhere in this portion or in the Bible can we find support for the idea of קדוש עצמך במותר לך – abstain even from the things which are allowed.
2. In Exodus (19:6) God refers to the Israelites as מְמַלְכֶת כֹּהֲנִים – a kingdom of priests. Since the role of a priest is to teach and promulgate knowledge of the Torah, as stated by Malachi (2:7), this designation means that just as the Kohanim are the spiritual leaders of the nation, so the nation should become a spiritual guidelight for the whole world. This idea is also supported by the famous words of Isaiah (2:3) and Micah (4:2): “...many nations will say, let us ascend the mount of the God of Jacob, so He will teach us His ways and we will walk in His paths.” How can we succeed in that mission if we become aloof and search for ways to be better than others?

would like to think of as modern, is fragmented and stratified. We equate unity with uniformity, and therefore seek to conceal or erase differences. When we fail, we often shut ourselves in a bubble of people who are like us, either physically, religiously, or intellectually, and find there our refuge of unity.

This rejection of human individuality stems from fear and from the inability to appreciate and digest our multifaceted, and sometimes insane, human experience. I have recently found that fear expressed by Yuval Noah Harari a professor of history at Hebrew University and a best-selling author. In his book *Homo Deus*, Harari argues for a new understanding of mankind, one which makes us nothing more than a random collection of wires, neurons, and chemical reactions. Our experiences, he claims, are all subjective, and there is no objective entity or personality which could be described as human. Harari goes on to predict the end of humanity as we know it, and its replacement by improved robo-humans. Harari's scientific-philosophical treatise is nothing less than a new way to oppress human creativity and individuality by making them insignificant. The Torah guides us not to be swayed by ancient or modern ideologues. Each individual is, as the word indicates, indivisible and unique. This understanding leads to an appreciation of one's own talents and gifts, and to the nurturing of self-esteem and a sense of purpose and fulfillment. It is then extended towards the rest of humanity, as we realize that all others are unique as well.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Haim Ovadia