

MORASHAH
THE RABBINIC FELLOWSHIP OF THE UTJ
 811 Palisade Ave., Teaneck, NJ 07666
www.utj.org 201.801.0707

Rabbi Kenneth Greene

Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Emor

At first glance, it would appear that the primary focus of this week's portion is the ritual status of the *kohen*, the priest. The loss of family members, physical blemishes, even the behavior of his own progeny, all seem to have an impact on whether or not the priest can fulfill the ritual role assigned to him. Still elsewhere, the portion focuses on the details of sacrifices, i.e., what makes them acceptable for worship, and in particular, sacrifices pertaining to the holidays and how they reflect on the sanctity of the particular occasion observed. Yet amongst all these details rises an overarching principle, a key value that lies at the core not only of the Torah, but of Judaism in totality and our relationship with God in particular:

"And you shall not profane My holy name, so that I may be sanctified among the children of Israel; I am the Lord Who sanctifies you." (22:32)

Holiness... sanctity... the phrase "*Kiddush Hashem*" comes to mind. "Sanctifying God's Name" – the highest form of such sanctification was martyrdom. And indeed, throughout our long history, from the time of the Greeks and Romans until the present day, there have been Jews who, under the most trying circumstances, have preferred to surrender their lives rather than desecrate and dishonor God's Name and the Jewish people. Fortunately, most of us need not face such an extreme situation.

Yet in the broader context, the concept of *Kiddush Hashem* today need not be explained only in terms of martyrdom. After all, the idea of "sanctity", *Kedushah*, is not foreign to us. When a loved one passes away, we acknowledge the sanctity of his/her life and what it meant to us, by reciting the Mourner's Kaddish. When a young couple fall in love and truly seek a unique and sacred bond, one with the other, we call it *Kiddushin*, Marriage. When we celebrate the sacredness of the Sabbath, the joy of Simchat Torah, the freedom exemplified by Passover, we recite a prayer over wine sanctifying the occasion – *Kiddush*. Yet while all of these are

Rabbi Greene is rabbi of Freehold Jewish Center (NJ) and a member of the UTJ Board.

The Union for Traditional Judaism is a trans-denominational organization dedicated to bringing the message of open-minded Halakhic Judaism to the widest possible audience.

All *Divrei Torah* can be found at <http://www.utj.org/Torah/HaShavuah>

acts of *Kedushah*, of sanctity, none of them is performed on an individual basis day in and day out.

What, then, is the path to *Kiddush Hashem*? It is living a life of *Kedushah* – of sanctity – by striving to fulfill the moral as well as the ritual precepts immortalized in the Torah.

The Midrash recounts how, having been commissioned by their teacher, Rabbi Simon ben Shetach, to purchase a donkey, the students exalted at having found precious jewel under the animal's collar. "Did the seller know of the gem?" asked their teacher, when inquiring how much they had paid for the animal. In response to their negative reply, he refused to take ownership of the gem or the animal and ordered it returned to its non-Jewish owner, lest he be perceived as taking advantage of the letter of the law, but not acting in its spirit. Upon the return of the gem and the animal, the non-Jew proclaimed, "Blessed be the God of Simon ben Shetach. Blessed be the God of Israel."

This is what it means to strive to live a life of sanctity. Israel's recent response to the tragedy in Haiti is one good example; the behavior of a Bernie Madoff, the very opposite. One need not be a priest, a *kohen*, to be concerned about the details of living a life of sanctity; for that matter, one need not even be Jewish. What does matter is that we all try to apply the Torah's lesson to our lives.

Shabbat Shalom!

The Union for Traditional Judaism is a trans-denominational organization dedicated to bringing the message of open-minded Halakhic Judaism to the widest possible audience.

All *Divrei Torah* can be found at <http://www.utj.org/Torah/HaShavuah>