



THE PERSON

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IN THE PARSHA

A Life of Sanctification

The conditions under which we live are many and varied. Some of us live in very comfortable, even idyllic, surroundings. Others struggle with diverse hardships, including poverty, disease, and the conditions of war. Our people have known unspeakably extreme conditions, such as those experienced during the Holocaust.

Throughout history, we have learned to obey God's commands, no matter the situation in which we find ourselves. Not too long ago, we all celebrated Passover. Some of us were privileged to conduct the *seder* in the Old City of Jerusalem, in close proximity to the site of the Holy Temple. Others gathered around tables in resorts in much more unlikely venues, ranging from Florida and California to exotic Mediterranean or Caribbean isles.

Most of us enjoyed the holiday in the warmth of our own modest homes, in places as geographically distant from each other as Brooklyn and Bnei Brak. Our collective memories drew upon images of the first Passover celebrated in Egypt at the brink of freedom from centuries of slavery, as well as images of Passovers experienced in the throes of the slavery of the Warsaw ghetto, and even in the nightmarish death camp of Auschwitz.

Our observance of *mitzvot* is never negated by the conditions of our lives.

This week's Torah portion, *Parshat Emor* (Leviticus 21:1-24:23), confronts us with a *mitzvah* which must be observed in the full range of life's myriad conditions, however challenging they may be. I refer to the *mitzvah* of *kiddush Hashem*, usually translated as "the sanctification of God's name." Permit me to explicate this *mitzvah* by first providing an outline of the entire weekly *parsha*.

The *parsha* begins with a lengthy description of the standards of behavior required of the *kohanim*, the priests, the "sons of Aaron." This description occupies the entire first half of the *parsha*, chapters 21 and 22. The latter half of the *parsha*, chapter 23, enumerates the major festivals of the Jewish calendar. Between these lengthy sections, we find these brief verses:

"You shall faithfully observe My commandments... You shall not profane My holy name, so that I may be sanctified in the midst of the Israelite people—I the Lord who sanctify you... who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God..." (*Leviticus* 22:31-33).

The Rabbis understand these verses to refer, first of all, to the ultimate sacrilege: profaning God's holy name, or, in Hebrew, *chillul Hashem*. Conversely, these passages adumbrate the concept of the sanctification of God's name, *kiddush Hashem*, the noblest, and arguably the most difficult, of

all the *mitzvot*.

Why do I say “most difficult?” Because the classical rabbinic definition of *kiddush Hashem* is the willingness to suffer martyrdom rather than betray one’s faith in the Almighty. Thus, those Jews during the Spanish Inquisition who willingly chose martyrdom over baptism exemplified *kiddush Hashem*. Indeed, all of the six million victims of the Holocaust, who were killed merely because they were Jews, are said to have performed the *mitzvah* of *kiddush Hashem*.

But can this “sanctification” only occur in such dire circumstances? Is it only through one’s death that one can “sanctify the Lord?” No one has ever responded to this question as resoundingly, and as eloquently, as did Maimonides when he wrote:

“Anyone who willingly, without being compelled to do so, violates any of the *mitzvot*, spitefully and without pangs of conscience, has thereby profaned the name of the Lord. But, on the other hand, whoever refrains from sin, or performs a *mitzvah*, for no other reason, not out of fear, nor to seek glory, but rather to serve the Creator, Blessed is He, as did the righteous Joseph when tempted by his master’s wife, such a person has sanctified the name of the Lord...” (Maimonides, *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah*, 5:10).

From this perspective, we can better understand the words of Rabbi Isaac Nissenbaum, a leader of the religious Zionism movement in pre-war Poland, and a hero

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of the Warsaw ghetto who was ultimately murdered there. He insisted that in the hellish conditions of Nazi persecution, it had become necessary to somewhat modify the concept of *kiddush Hashem* so that it signified something more than martyrdom.

How fortunate are his parents who taught him Torah; how fortunate is the teacher who taught him Torah

He introduced the phrase *kiddush hachaim*, “the sanctification of life.” He wished to inspire the tortured residents of the ghetto not to “die for the purpose of sanctification of the name of the Lord,” but rather to “live their lives in a manner that sanctified the name of the Lord.” He urged his people to sanctify the name of the Lord, even in the horrendous conditions of the ghetto, by doing all that they possibly could to remain alive, to survive, and to live spiritual lives to the extent that those conditions allowed.

Rabbi Nissenbaum did not survive the Holocaust. But others with similar views did. One of them was named Rabbi Gad Eisner, whose heroic deeds in the aftermath of the Holocaust have been recorded by numerous eye-witnesses.

Many of the other survivors, upon discovering that their homes were gone and that their families had been killed, were ready to surrender to the “Angel of death” rather than struggle to remain alive. “What is there to live for?” they asked.

Rabbi Gad encouraged them to remain alive and arduously walked from bed to

bed in a post-Holocaust makeshift hospital to spoon feed these tragic individuals.

More than that, after they had begun to physically recover, he inspired them to engage in spiritual practices, in Torah study, and even in joyous celebrations. He would say, in Yiddish, “*az menn lebt, zohl zein gelebt*,” loosely translated as “as long as you are alive, live to the maximum!” Then he would add, “Remaining alive, fully alive, is the greatest sanctification of the name of the Lord, the highest form of *kiddush Hashem*.”

But one does not have to resort to Maimonides, nor even to victims or survivors of the Holocaust, to find descriptions of *kiddush Hashem*. The Talmud offers a definition which is appropriate to those of us who thankfully live in far less extreme conditions, who live “ordinary lives”.

This is the definition of *kiddush Hashem* offered by the Talmudic Sage Abaye:

“Thou shall love the Lord your God.” (*Deuteronomy* 6:5) This refers to someone whose actions cause the Lord’s name to become beloved by others. He is a person who reads Scripture, studies *Mishnah*, and associates with the wise; one who conducts himself courteously with all others, causing them to say, ‘How fortunate are his parents who taught him Torah; how fortunate is the teacher who taught him Torah. So-and-so who learned Torah, observe how beautiful are his ways, how exemplary is his conduct.’” (Talmud, Tractate *Yoma* 86a)

This is the *kiddush Hashem* of which we are all capable. We need not be martyrs, we need not be heroes. We must merely guide ourselves by the Almighty’s Torah and live our lives according to His ideals. That is how we can “sanctify His name.” ■