

Parashat Kedoshim

There is a disagreement between Rashi and the Ramban in terms of the definition of the mitzvah at the beginning of Parshas Kedoshim: “Kedoshim Teeheyu” [You shall be holy] [Vayikra 19:2]. Rashi interprets the mitzvah as “separate yourself from illicit sexual relationships and sin”.

The Ramban gives the mitzvah a much broader implication. The Ramban says that in Parshas Shmini, the Torah forbade consumption of a number of species of animals, fish, and birds. In Parshas Achrei Mos, the Torah prohibited a number of specific sexual relations. However, even after all these prohibitions, a man may eat many types of meat and may engage in marital relations with women to whom he is married. The Ramban says that theoretically, until this point, the Torah did not restrict an individual from being a gluttonous and lustful person, so long as he limited his consumption to kosher wine and meat and he limited his marital relations to his wives, when they were not in a state of impurity. However, says the Ramban, to ensure that a person not become a “naval birshus haTorah” [a glutton within the areas permitted by Torah law], the Torah here gives an additional mitzvah to be holy and conduct oneself in moderation, even in those areas that are legally permitted.

The Ramban explains that this is a style that is common in the Torah. First, the Torah gives a specific list of what is permitted and what is prohibited. Then the Torah gives an “umbrella mitzvah” so that one will understand the spirit of the law and not conclude, “If the Torah has not prohibited it, it must be permitted.” “Kedoshim Teeheyu” is such an umbrella mitzvah.

The Ramban cites as another example of such an umbrella mitzvah the mitzvah to ” v’asisa hayashar v’ha’tov” [do what is correct and good] [Devorim 6:18]. The Torah has already singled out prohibitions for stealing, for cheating, for taking revenge, for bearing a grudge, etc. But where in the Torah does it say one must be polite or courteous? The Ramban says that the Torah cannot legislate for every single situation that might arise in society. Obviously, we would not expect the Torah to tell us that one should not talk loudly on his cell phone in an area where he is disturbing other people. One cannot do so and pretend that he is fully in compliant with a “Torah way of life” merely by protesting “where does it say that this is forbidden?” The Torah says, “Do what is correct and good”. This means, “be a mensch” which means, among other things, do not talk on a cell phone at the top of your lungs in a small room.

In Parshas Reeh, concerning the prohibition of eating blood (which appears many times in the Torah), the Torah teaches “Thou shall not eat it so that it may be good for you and your children after you for you shall do that which is correct (yashar) in the Eyes of Hashem.” [Devorim 12:25] Thus, not eating blood is also within the domain of “you shall do that which is yashar and good”. We might ask, what does not eating blood have to do with “v’asisa hayashar v’ha’tov”?

Rav Simcha Zissel proves from the Ramban that the reason for the prohibition of eating blood is that “the blood is the soul” [Devorim 12:23]. Animals have a form of a “nefesh”. This level of “soul” within animals is what breeds loyalty amongst animals to their owners. (e.g. – “man’s best friend!”) Plants do not do that. This is because animals have “nefesh” and plants do not. The Ramban says that it is necessary to respect this fact and it is not right for

one soul – nefesh (i.e. — man) to eat another soul – nefesh (i.e. — the blood of animals). The Ramban uses this idea to explain the mitzvah of covering the blood of a slaughtered animal (kisui hadam). The Ramban calls this a form of burial for the soul of the animal.

Rav Simcha Zissel says that this is why the Torah mentions the concept of “doing that which is correct and good” in connection with the prohibition against eating blood. This is the same idea. Hashem wants us to look at the Torah’s laws and to understand the deeper message of the Torah’s concern. When the Torah says, “Do not eat the blood,” it is telling us to respect life – even animal life!

When we try to understand the deeper meaning of the Torah’s laws, this itself is doing that which is proper and good. This probing for the deeper meaning of the Torah’s commands is part of a Jew’s responsibility. A Jew cannot merely ask “Where does it say it?” A Jew must read between the lines of Torah, so to speak, and conduct himself based on the spirit of the law, in addition to the letter of the law