“G-d spoke to Moshe saying, ‘When you take a census of the Children of Israel... this shall they give – everyone who passes through the census – a half shekel of the sacred shekel (shekel hakodesh)”’ (Shemos 30:11-13). The method with which Moshe conducted the census was having each person contribute half a shekel and then counting the resulting donations. The currency used is specifically called shekel hakodesh, which is a common enough term in Chumash, but is quite curious in itself. What about this shekel causes it to be called hakodesh – the sacred.

Ramban explains that these shekalim were considered sacred because they were used for holy purposes. The funds gathered by this census were donated towards the construction of the Mishkan, where G-d’s presence manifested itself and where sacrifices were brought. What could be a holier purpose than that? Similarly, shekalim that were used for purchasing animals and utensils for the sacrificial order, as well as for physically maintaining the Mishkan were also referred to as “hakodesh” because they were also used for a sacred purpose. Any currency that is utilized in the performance of a mitzvah is money that is serving a holy usage and, therefore, can be justly called shekel hakodesh. Thus, money used for pidyon bechorim – redemption of the firstborns – is also sacred currency because it is used for a mitzvah. Similarly, money used to pay for arachin – the monetary equivalent of the donation of a person to the Mishkan – is also called shekel hakodesh. As Rabbeinu Bachya elaborates, “Since all mitzvos are the core of holiness and some mitzvos require this currency,” the currency takes on a holiness corresponding to its use.

Similarly, Ramban continues, Hebrew is called lashion hakodesh – the holy language – because it was and continues to be used for holy purposes. It was in Hebrew that G-d said “Let there be light etc.” (Bereishis 1:3) and created the world. The Torah itself was given to us in Hebrew, as well as all of the prophecies and other biblical books. At Mount Sinai, G-d spoke directly to the entire people of Israel in Hebrew and it was in this language that our forefathers were named. Because Hebrew has been used for holy purposes it is considered to be a sacred language.

According to Ramban, Kedushah is defined by supplementary attainments and not by inherent status. Something must become holy by going beyond its natural state and being taken to a holy level.

1 The Even Shoshan Concordance (Jerusalem: 1988), p. 1204 lists 25 places in Shemos, Vayikra, and Bamidbar in which the term is used.

2 Ad loc.

3 Ad loc.

4 Part 3, ch. 8
something is used for a holy purpose. When currency is used for a mitzvah it becomes sacred and when a language is used to create the world and convey the Torah it becomes sanctified. Kedushah is defined by supplementary attainments and not by inherent status. Something must become holy by going beyond its natural state and being taken to a holy level.

According to Rambam, however, holiness is not due to a positive usage but to a lack of diminution of its purity. A language is inherently sacred and only loses that status when it contains less than holy words. Hebrew, Rambam claims, is the only language that has not lost its holiness but, theoretically, any language that retains its purity could have been sacred. Similarly, presumably, the Ramab would explain that the shekel hakodesh is called holy because, as the Ramban himself suggests at the beginning of his comments, the shekel coins used in the Torah were entirely pure, lacking all dilution. This purity of content, rather than its sanctity of use, is what earned for these coins the title of holy because they have not been defiled of their inherent sanctity.

R’ Romm continued that this same disagreement can be found in the famous dispute at the beginning of Parashas Kedoshim. The Torah commands us to be holy (“kedoshim tihyu”) but remains unclear regarding exactly what that obligation entails. Rashi explains the command to mean, “Separate yourselves from forbidden relationships and from transgression” while Ramban explains the mandate to be an obligation to distance ourselves even from that which is permissible but excessive. According to Rashi we fulfill this obligation by adhering to the strict prohibitions of the Torah while according to the Ramban we must go beyond the laws and create our own stringencies. In other words, Rashi understands that we are inherently holy and we can fulfill the mandate of kedoshim tihyu by refraining from defiling our sanctity through sin. As long as we do not violate a prohibition we are, according to Rashi, holy. This, R’ Romm explained, is similar to Rambam’s position we saw above that Hebrew is inherently holy because it has not been defiled by impure words. Indeed, we see in Rambam’s halachic magnum opus Mishneh Torah that Sefer Kedushah contains the laws regarding prohibited relations and foods while Sefer Mada – specifically Hilchos De’os – contains the concepts of going beyond the requirements of the law. Kedushah is attained by conforming to the prohibitions of the Torah and not by striving above that to abstinence.

Ramban, however, is consistent with his earlier position and contends that holiness must be attained through additional behavior. Merely conforming to the Torah’s prohibitions does not raise someone to the status of holiness. Rather, he must go beyond that natural state and “sanctify himself in what is permissible to him.”

According to Rambam, however, holiness is not due to a positive usage but to a lack of diminution of its purity.

“Rabbi Yochanan said, ‘Were it not written in the verse, it could not be said. It teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped Himself like a she’il’ach tzibbur, and showed Moshe the order of prayer. He said to him, ‘Whenever Israel sins, let them perform this order before Me and I shall forgive them.’... Rav Yehuda said, ‘A covenant is made over the thirteen attributes, that they are never ineffectual. As it says, “Behold I am making a covenant’ (Shemos 34:10)”’ (Rosh Hashanah 17b).

Based on this gemara, the Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy were made into the centerpiece of selichos. After all, they come with a guarantee of forgiveness.

And yet... we all know people who say these words with deep conviction and with every fiber of their being in Elul and the Aseres Mesukim Midevash

This last point about Sefer Kedushah is not something I heard from R’ Romm but is my own thought. Cf. R’ Ya’akov Kamenetsky, Emes LeYahu’akov, Vayikra 19:2 for a very different take on the Rashi and Rambam.

RABBI MICHA BERGER

Bakeish Shalom

Yemei Teshuvah but do not have perfect years. In fact, the entire concept does not seem to fit; are we really saying an unrepentant murderer simply recite a couple of verses and be forgiven?

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook describes two ways of doing te-shuvah.1 The first is sudden, “coming

1 Oros haTeshuvah, ch. 2
from some kind of spiritual thunder that centers the soul. In one moment he recognizes the evil and repulsiveness of sin, and turns into a new person. This sort of teshuvah comes from some influence of inner gift, by some great spiritual influence, that it is worthy to seek its roots in the deepest of mysteries. The higher teshuvah comes from the thunder of universal good, the Divine Good which underlies all the worlds.

The second sort of teshuvah is gradual. “He feels that he must progress and improve his ways and his lifestyle, his desires, his thought patterns. In his travels on this path he conquers, bit by bit, the ways of righteousness, repairs his middos, improves his actions, teaches himself how to become more and more proper until he reaches the pinnacle of brightness and repair.”

The first luchos, “G-d’s manufacture they were, and the writing was G-d’s writing” (Shemos 32:16). They were a “thunder from heaven”, spirituality as a gift from the Almighty. As something unearned, there was no guarantee that they could be kept. Bnei Yisrael sought to maintain this lofty experience; they could not await Moshe’s return. They had a need for further inspiration that might write on the luchos the ideas that were on the first luchos” (v. 2). But man must invest the effort.

To approach Hashem with the Attributes does not merely mean to use them to petition Hashem for mercy. Rather, it is the development of the self so as to better embody those attributes. To approach Hashem with the Attributes does not merely mean to use them to petition Hashem for mercy. Rather, it is the development of the self so as to better embody those attributes. Gifts are unreliable; what was given can always be lost. It is someone who is working toward earning that change who is guaranteed not to be left empty handed.

These are not quick and easy changes. Each middah can take years of effort. But through effort we earn and acquire our teshuvah, we guarantee its permanence.

This is a hard message to accept, particularly living in the culture that we do. The Alter of Kelm, Rav Simcha Zisel Ziv, reassures us. “The work is long, it will take a lifetime. But that is exactly why you were given a lifetime in which to do it.”

Rabbi Micha Berger wrote last week about the first paragraph of the Shemonet Esrei. He spoke about the primary importance of the phrase “haKel haGadol haGibor vihaNorah”, as it describes how Hashem directs His power to the world and to us as individuals, and gives structure to the entire berachah. It expresses our confidence in G-d’s omnipotence. But it was not always thus.

The Gemara in Yoma 69b brings a very interesting account of this phrase’s use. It originated with Moshe in Devarim 10:17. While he exhorts the people to do “the right thing,” he
tells them it is because Hashem is the Great, Mighty and Awesome G-d. Berachos 33b takes this as the ne plus ultra of praise of G-d, the full reason for our adherence to Him and His Will.

But the verse is quoted by two later prophets, under vastly different conditions than obtained in the Plains of Moab, on the verge of entering the Land.

The first is Yirmiyahu (32:18), during the final siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Yirmiyahu is in prison, for prophesying the downfall of the Judean kingdom. He has just been given a symbol of the return from exile, buying tribal land from his cousin Chanamel and burying the deed in a jar. He prays to G-d, praising Him as “the great and mighty G-d”, but not awesome. Why? Rashi cites our Gemara, that “non-Jews are dancing in the courtyard of Your Temple, the place of your Awe on Earth; how can I describe You as Awesome?” He emends Moshe’s praise to fit the current situation.

Daniel then quotes our verse, in the depths of the Babylonian exile. Thinking that the seventy years of Jerusalem’s desolation were nearing their end, he prays to G-d that He send the deliverance soon. As we now know is normal in prayer, he opens with praises of Hashem, “the great and awesome G-d”, but not Mighty. How can he praise G-d as Mighty, when G-d is hidden, we are exiled among, and enslaved to, non-Jews? And we paraphrase the conclusion of his prayer in our Selichos (Dan. 9:17-19).

Then the Anshei Knesses HaGedolah came, including in their number several prophets as well as the non-prophetic rabbis who would succeed the prophets as authorized Carriers of the Tradition, and in constructing the text of the daily prayers, restored Moshe’s praise to its full glory. How, when the Second Temple was not fully functional, when the Jews were subjugated to foreign powers?

They reinterpreted the pshat in the verse. According to the Chavos Yair: “If the simple translation makes no sense and we have to explain it in a way that makes sense – that explanation is called Pshat and not the simple translation.”

They reinterpreted Mighty to describe Hashem’s restraint in not fully expressing His anger and destroying the sinful Jews, only demolishing their Temple. Awesome was taken to mean inspiration of the fear of G-d, without which it would have been impossible for the Jews to continue to exist while exiled among other nations. Thus they wholeheartedly restored the full praise of Moshe into the thrice-daily fundamental prayer.

The Gemara concludes with the troubling question: “How could our Rabbis (Rashi: the prophets Jeremiah and Daniel) do this, uprooting the takkanah of Moshe? R’ Eliezer said, ‘because they knew that G-d was the G-d of Truth, therefore they could not lie about Him.’”

The decree of Moshe, the perfect qualification of G-d’s praise, was uprooted by later and lesser prophets, because the simple meaning of the verse bothered them, and seemed untrue. Only later did the even lesser Rabbis “restore the Crown to its former glory”.

The Maharsha puts it most poignantly. The prophets could not lie to their generations. However, the Anshei Knesses HaGedolah, with the perspective of the end of exile, including among their number Mordechai, instrumental in the Jews’ survival through hidden miracles, could see that G-d’s greatness consisted of withholding His anger, that His Awesomeness consisted of inspiring fear to maintain the connection between the Jews and Himself. The Anshei Knesses HaGedolah were thus called “HaGedolah” because they, through reinterpretation of pshat, magnified the perception of G-d’s strengths and attributes, restoring meaning to all of the attributes given by Moshe.

What latitude does that give our Biblical commentators? Quite a lot, it seems, given the wide variety of interpretations all passing for “pshat” in the past 2500 years of Biblical interpretation. That possibility apparently continues today. Never let it be said that the Tradition is static, frozen in some pre-modern mold. The time-honored model of innovative interpretation, from its source in the aggados of Chazal and its continued practice throughout the ages, includes reinterpretation of non-legal material to fit the tenor of the times (see Meiri’s commentary to Avot 3:15 for guidelines).

I am indebted to R’ Reuvan Cohn of Newton, MA, who pointed out this gemara to me.

[See also the essay at http://www.aishdas.org/toratemet/en_devarim.html – ed.]