Everyday Kiddush Hashem: Thoughts for Parashat Mishpatim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Mishpatim

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Some years ago, we were returning from a wonderful trip to Israel. As we sat in the waiting area of the Ben Gurion airport before the flight, we noticed a young family nearby--a husband and wife and their little children. As could be expected, the children were restless and wanted to run around and play.

The mother, in a soft voice, spoke to the children: It's fine to play, but please remember: everything you do should be a "Kiddush Hashem" (a sanctification of God's name). The children understood their mother's message and they played nicely and quietly.

When we boarded the plane, we found ourselves sitting a few rows in front of this family. Throughout the long flight (11 hours or so), the children were remarkably well-behaved. They read books, spoke quietly, rested. One of the daughters, perhaps aged 9 or 10, brought a glass of water to an elderly woman who said she was thirsty. I was so impressed by the children's behavior that I complimented the parents and the children. We struck up a conversation--and a friendship.

These parents were doing a marvelous job raising such fine children. The secret of their success was teaching the children to remember that all their actions should sanctify God's name. They should know that they are ambassadors of God and Torah, and that their words and deeds should inspire respect from those who see them. They should avoid unbecoming behavior, vulgar speech, immodest clothing.

Living one's life in the spirit of "kiddush Hashem" not only leads to proper behavior and speech, but also to inner courage to stand by one's principles. Instead of succumbing to the negative qualities of general society, one develops the strength to resist group pressures.

This week's Torah reading includes the words: “and you shall be holy people unto Me” (Shemot 22:30). This verse is included in a Torah portion that deals with many aspects of everyday life—borrowing and lending, relating honestly with others, repaying damages, eating kasher food. Holiness is linked to the way we live our daily lives; it isn’t an ethereal concept restricted to prayer, meditation and study.

The Talmud (Yoma 86a) cites the teaching of Abbaye that “the Name of Heaven should be beloved because of you.” People should look at us as models of honesty, decency, and religious integrity. They should see us as representatives of God and Torah, worthy of emulation.

Maimonides (Yesodei haTorah 5:11) writes that a scholar should be “scrupulous in conduct, gentle in conversation, sociable, receiving others cheerfully, not insulting even those who show disrespect, conducting business with integrity.” This applies not only to scholars but to all who are identified as Jews.

The mother in the airport taught her children: remember, everything you do should be a “Kiddush Hashem.” Good advice not only for her children but for all of us!

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