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[Home](#) > Tefillah - 046 Disconnecting from the World

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A Relationship of Both Awe and Love

The third blessing of Shemoneh Esrei begins with **אתה קדוש**, “You are holy.”

Hashem is totally separate from this world. We have a mitzvah of “*You shall be holy, for I am Hashem.*” Chazal say that this possuk would imply that maybe we can become as holy as Hashem. For that reason, Hashem said “*For I am Hashem*”, which implies to us that Hashem’s holiness is way above any of the holiness we can reach. Hashem is completely removed from this world.

There are two aspects in our relationship with Hashem: to have *yirah* (awe) of Him, which means that we realize He is separate from us and totally removed from us, and that nothing comes close to His holiness. At the same time, however, we are also able to having a loving relationship with Hashem and talk to Him as if He is a friend, as the *Mesillas Yesharim* states [based upon the words of *Rashi* to *Shabbos 31a*].

So on one hand, Hashem is “holy” and thus completely separate from this world, yet at the same time, we are able to have a relationship of love with Him.

Although we need both aspects in our relationship with Hashem (fear and love), we will mainly discuss here the second aspect of our relationship with Hashem, which is that we can relate to Hashem as a loving ‘Friend’ that the *Mesillas Yesharim* describes.

Disconnect So You Can Connect

In order to enjoy a close relationship with Hashem, we need to sanctify ourselves on this world. Later in the blessing we say, **וקדושים בכל יום יהללוך סלה**, “And the holy ones praise You, every day.” We are called the “holy ones”, for we are designated for Hashem; we are meant to sanctify ourselves to Him.

But if a person is too attached to the materialism of this world, he won’t be able to talk properly with Hashem and relate to Him as a Friend. Just as Hashem is separate from this world, so must we separate ourselves from our connection to the materialism of this world, in order to talk with Him.

Besides for the fact that we need to disassociate ourselves from this materialistic world, we also need to separate ourselves **internally** from this world – we need to enter the depths of our soul, the “Jew” within us, and be apart from the very outlook that society has.

We all have things on this world we worry about, such as our families and our livelihood, and we need

to take care of what we need to be taken care of, but, in our inside, we must feel like we are a stranger towards this world.

Two Kinds of Separation We Need

In the later generations, and especially in our generation, people are too connected to the world. People these days are connected to the world on a constant basis - much more than in the previous generations - and it has attached people way too much to this world.

That is one aspect of the problems today: the attachment to materialism of this world. Because people are attached to materialism, they find it very hard to fulfill the mitzvah of "*And you shall be holy.*"

But in addition to this problem, the constant connection to this world makes a person feel an inner contradiction. The soul inside us feels the truth, and it feels contradicted by the lifestyle of the generation. Our soul, deep down, feels that the way that the world lives now totally goes against who we really are. So besides for the problem of being attached to materialism, the light of our soul is being prevented from access.

Feeling Like A 'Stranger' Towards This World

We must clearly be aware that the way of life in the world now contradicts who we really are deep down. If someone in this generation doesn't feel how this world is not his real place, there is no way for him to get in touch with the light of his soul.

We are not talking about having high aspirations to grow in spirituality. We are talking about something else entirely: we must feel like strangers towards this earth (as is it written, "*I am a stranger in this land*"), that this place is not our real place!

You don't have to be on such a high level these days to realize how the current lifestyle contradicts how our soul deep down wants to live like. The whole situation today is like an exile to our soul. Our soul was already in our exile by having to be in our body, but now it is in a whole new profound kind of exile. We need to feel like we are a **stranger** to this earth!

To illustrate, if a Jew who keeps Shabbos goes to a place where people openly profane the Shabbos, he feels like he is in a strange place. In the same way, we must feel like we are a *stranger* towards this earth.

Of course, we all have ups and downs in our spirituality, but whatever the situation, we must realize that we do not have any connection whatsoever to this world.

Becoming Holy: Two Requirements

This is the meaning of how we fulfill the mitzvah of "*And you shall be holy*". There are two aspects to how we separate ourselves from this world and become holy.

Each person, in his unique way, can sanctify his life, by not indulging; as we know that this mitzvah entails for a person not to fulfill all his permitted desires and live an indulgent kind of life.^[1] But besides for this, we need to sanctify ourselves by separating ourselves from society and not feel like we are a part of it.

Once you feel like you're a "stranger" towards this world, you have begun to redeem your soul. It will feel painful, of course, because you will feel like you're apart from everyone. But the words of the

Rambam are famous: that we need to separate from society, when society is evil (except for rare individuals, who can be connected with society yet still remain deeply attached with Hashem), and we need to be prepared to go into the desert if we must.

'Ahavas Yisrael' Required

We will emphasize, however, that this should not compromise on our love for other people. We must love everyone in the Jewish people (except for members of the *Erev Rav*). But we must still be able to separate from society, at the same time.

A Time For Serious 'Hisbodedus'

This is the main kind of *hisbodedus* (solitude) that we need these days.

This is not about doing *hisbodedus* in a forest; there are people who do *hisbodedus* in the forests, yet they are still very connected to this world...

(The Alter of Kelm once made a sharp statement: The whole world consists of fools, and the wise people of the world are like 'strangers' here.)

The Two Aspects of Reaching Holiness

So in order to reach holiness in our times, there are two layers to this - an external layer and an internal layer. The external layer of sanctity is to avoid indulgence in materialism. But the inner layer of how we sanctify ourselves is to feel separate and apart from this world.

To Be 'Alone' With Hashem

Most people in our times (except for some rare individuals, as we mentioned) need to separate from society (along with having a love for all Jews) in order to have a true relationship with Hashem. We must feel that Hashem is like a friend that we can talk to. We need to sense Hashem's existence in our lives.

The more inner solitude we have, the closer we are to attaining sanctity. Reb Yisrael Salanter wrote that our greatness is reached in our inner world of solitude (*hisbodedus*).

Of course, we need to help others, and we were created to help people, as Rav Chaim Volozhiner writes. However, helping people is only the outer layer of our existence. Our true greatness is reached when we are in solitude, when we are separated from the world.

The *mitzvah* to sanctify ourselves - "*And you shall be holy*" - is essentially for us to build within ourselves a place in which we can live apart from society. Of course, we need to go out into the world sometimes to take care of our needs. But in essence, we can live in an inner place in our soul.

Otherwise, a person is enslaved to the world in a personal kind of exile. When a person is able to live in his soul, he has a personal redemption - he goes free from the 'jail' of the body.

There is a kind of life a person can live in which he lives "alone", separate from society. May we merit to sanctify ourselves - along with loving others - so that we can bond with Hashem.

[1] See Ramban in the beginning of Parshas Kedoshim (Bamidbar 19:1)

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