

Sefer Kedusha

Hilkhot Issurei Bi'a / Laws of Forbidden Intercourse

Chapter 14:1-5, 19:17, 22:18-21

1 In what manner are righteous proselytes to be received? When a heathen comes forth for the purpose of becoming a proselyte, and upon investigation no ulterior motive is found, the court should say to him, "Why do you come forth to become a proselyte? Do you not know that Israel is at present sorely afflicted, oppressed, despised, confounded, and beset by suffering?" If he answers, "I know, and I am indeed unworthy," he should be accepted immediately.

2 He should then be made acquainted with the principles of the faith, which are the oneness of God and the prohibition of idolatry. These matters should be discussed in great detail; he should then be told, though not at great length, about some of the less weighty and some of the more weighty commandments. Thereupon he should be informed of the transgressions involved in the laws of gleanings, forgotten sheaves, the corner of the field, and the poor man's tithe. Then he should be told of the punishment for violation of the commandments. How so? The court should say to him, "Be it known to you that before entering into this faith, if you ate forbidden fat, you did not incur the penalty of extinction; if you desecrated the Sabbath, you did not incur the penalty of death by stoning. But now, having become a proselyte, should you eat forbidden fat you will incur the penalty of extinction, and if you should profane the Sabbath, you will incur the penalty of death by stoning." This, however, should not be carried to excess nor to too great detail, lest it should make him weary and cause him to stray from the good way to the evil way. A person should be attracted at first only with pleasing and gentle words, as it is said first, "I will draw them with cords of a man," and only then "with bonds of love" (Hos. 11:4).

3 Just as the court should inform him of the punishment for transgression, so should they tell him of the reward for the observance of the commandments. He should be assured that by performing these commandments he will be vouchsafed the life of the world to come, and that there is no perfectly righteous man but the learned man who performs these commandments properly and understand them.

4 They should say to him further, "Be it known to you that the world to come is treasured up solely for the righteous, who are Israel. As for what you see that Israel is in distress in this world, it is in reality a boon which is laid up for them, because it is not granted them to receive the abundance of good things in this world like other peoples, lest their hearts should wax haughty and they should go astray and squander the reward of the world to come, as it is said, "But Jeshurun waxed fat and kicked" (Deut. 32:15)."

5 "Nevertheless, the Holy One, blessed be He, does not bring upon them too many calamities, lest they should altogether perish. Rather, all the heathen shall cease to exist, while they shall endure." The court should expatiate on this point, by token of their

affection for him. If he then changes his mind and does not wish to accept, there should be no further delay, and he should be at once circumcised. If he is already circumcised, a drop of blood of the covenant should be drawn from him, and the court should wait until he is completely healed, after which he should be immersed.

Chapter 19

17 All families are presumed to be of valid descent, and it is permitted to intermarry with them in the first instance. Nevertheless, should you see two families continually striving with one another, or a family which is constantly engaged in quarrels and altercations, or an individual who is exceedingly contentious with everyone, or is excessively impudent, apprehension should be felt concerning them, and it is advisable to keep one's distance from them, for these traits are indicative of invalid descent. Similarly, if a man always casts aspersions upon other people's descent—for instance, if he alleges that certain families and individuals are of blemished descent and refers to them as being bastards—suspicion is justified that he himself may be a bastard. And if he says that they are slaves, one may suspect that he himself is a slave, since whosoever blemishes others projects upon them his own blemish. Similarly, if a person exhibits impudence, cruelty, or misanthropy, and never performs an act of kindness, one should strongly suspect that he is of Gibeonite descent, since the distinctive traits of Israel, the holy nation, are modesty, mercy, and lovingkindness, while of the Gibeonites it is said, "Now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel" (II Sam. 21:2), because they hardened their faces and refuse to relent, showing no mercy to the sons of Saul, nor would they do a kindness to the children of Israel by forgiving the sons of their king, notwithstanding that Israel showed them grace at the beginning and spared their lives.*

Chapter 22

18 There is no prohibition in the whole of Scripture which the generality of the people experience greater difficulty in observing than the interdict of forbidden union and illicit intercourse. The sages have declared that when Israel was given the commandments concerning forbidden union, they wept and accepted this injunction with grumbling and wailing, as it is said, "weeping in their families" (Num. 11:10), i.e., weeping on account of the matter of family relations.+

19 The sages have declared further that the soul of man lusts after larceny and forbidden unions and covets them. At no time can one find a community which does not contain libertines indulging in forbidden union and illicit intercourse. And the sages have declared also, "The majority of men are guilty of larceny, the minority of forbidden union, and all of them together of the tendency to evil tongue."

20 Consequently, it behooves a man to subdue his inclination toward these vices and to inure himself to unbounded sanctity, pure thought, and disciplined moral disposition, so as to be saved from such transgressions. Above all, he should be on guard against improper seclusion, since this is the chief contributory factor to unchastity. The greatest of our sages used to say to their disciples, “Warn me to beware of my daughter, warn me to beware of my daughter-in-law,” in order to teach their disciples not to feel embarrassed in such matters and to keep away from improper seclusion.

21 In like manner, man should keep away from levity, drunkenness, and lewd discourse, since these are great contributory factors and degrees leading to forbidden unions. Nor should a man live without a wife, since married estate is conducive to great purity. But above all this, as the sages have declared, a man should direct his mind and thoughts to the words of Torah and enlarge his understanding with wisdom, for unchaste thoughts prevail only in the heart devoid of wisdom, and of wisdom it is said, “A hind of love and a doe of grace let her breasts satisfy you at all times, with her love be you ravished always” (Prov. 5:19).