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I want to share a remarkable story about the Baal Shem Tov, brought in Rav Irving Bunim's sefer on פרקי אבות, Ethics from Sinai - a classic. The Baal Shem Tov was once raising funds in a town to build a much-needed mikvah. But the response was very poor. In desperation, the Baal Shem Tov approached one of the wealthy men in the town and offered him his own share in עולם הבא if the man would contribute the needed amount. The wealthy man agreed, but on one condition: that he receive the promise in writing. After the matter was settled, the חסידים who had witnessed the event turned to their master in astonishment. How could he give away his עולם הבא - his reward for a lifetime of עבודה? The Baal Shem Tov gave a threefold answer. "First," he said, "the מסורה teaches that whatever we give away in צדקה, Hashem repays tenfold. So, rather than forfeiting my עולם הבא, I've really invested in it with full expectation of receiving it back, and more. "Second, life in עולם הבא benefits me personally. But a mikvah brings קדושה and טהרה to an entire city. Surely the welfare of the many is greater than the personal benefit of one, even if that one is me. "Third, I have not worked all my life for עולם הבא. I have always tried to do מצות for their own sake - for the sake of the מצוה alone, and nothing more."

In this week's parsha, פרשת אמור, we find all of the הלכות of the כהנים, both for a כהן הדיוט and the כהן גדול. What is the sum total? What does the פסוק tell us that is the result of all of these הלכות? (21:6) קדשים יהיו. It's an interesting מצוה, both an עשה and a לא תעשה. The פסוקים give us a dual message: A) to elevate the כהנים to a higher level of קדושה, and B) to inspire them not to create a חילול השם. These two don't always go together, as we've discussed before. A person can, unfortunately, cause a חילול השם even when striving for קדושה.

Rav Aharon Kotler זצ"ל said that just as the כלל ישראל represent עבודה, so too every Jew, especially תלמידי חכמים, represents כלל ישראל. And as the Chafetz Chaim and many others have pointed out, today, every frum Yid carries that responsibility. Therefore, we must hold ourselves to a higher moral and spiritual standard than those around us.

There's a story about the son of the Alter of Slabodka. When he received his נדן, his wedding dowry, he gave away all of it to buy food for people who were starving at the outbreak of World War I. Not only that, he was told he could make a great profit by reselling the food. But he refused and gave it away for free to Rabbanim and תלמידי חכמים. He gave every penny to אֶלְמָנוֹת and יְתוּמִים. He even gave away his own יום טוב בגדים.

We may not be capable of that level of גוטסקייט and מסירות נפש. But we can learn from it that we're capable of more than we think. It's worth asking ourselves: "Am I serving Hashem, or am I serving myself?" When we do מצות, it's important to step back from rote, to move past the mindset of personal growth and שכר עולם הבא, and to ask honestly: "What am I doing? Who am I doing it for?" Ideally, let us all serve Hashem and be successful in it.

