

The Omer

I. Omer, When Every Jew Counts

On the second night of Pesach each year, Jews all over the world begin counting the Omer—the days between Pesach and Shavuot—in accordance with the commandment: "You shall count from the day after the festival-Sabbath, from the day that you brought the Omer offering, seven full weeks. Until the day after the seventh week, you shall number fifty days, and you shall then bring a new meal offering to G-d" (*Vayikra* 23:15, 16).

Although the *korban omer* was a communal offering, the days between Pesach and Shavuot had to be counted not only by the communal representatives, but by each and every individual Jew.¹

To fully understand the reason for this, we must first explore another point. Shavuot is known as the anniversary of the giving of the Torah—for it was on Shavuot, 2448, that all Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and heard the declaration of the Ten Commandments, as one can calculate from the Torah's account of the event.

Yet, nowhere among the many references to Shavuot in the Torah is any mention made of the day as the anniversary of the giving of the Torah. Why is this most significant aspect of Shavuot omitted?

There are a number of explanations offered to this. The *Alshech* explains that the Israelites reached the highest possible spiritual level with the giving of the Torah, a level that was subsequently lost with the sin of the Golden Calf. To specifically commemorate the initial revelation at Sinai would also mean recalling this great spiritual loss. Thus the Torah does not explicitly describe Shavuot as marking the giving of the Torah.

The *Abarbanel* offers a somewhat different approach. Remembering the giving of the Torah is a constant obligation upon every Jew. It is therefore not appropriate to

designate a single day for specific commemoration.

Nonetheless, it would be very surprising if the Torah provided no hint whatsoever to the great significance of this day. Both the above commentators state that there is an allusion to it in the counting of the Omer: The Omer days are counted, because of the outstanding significance of the period between Pesach and Shavuot in Jewish history. On Pesach, the Israelites began as newly freed slaves; and during the ensuing seven weeks, they were elevated to a level where they would be worthy of hearing G-d's voice proclaiming the Commandments. The very fact that Shavuot comes at the end of this counting alludes to its importance as the day upon which the Torah was given.

This also explains why every single individual must count the Omer. The acceptance of the Torah is described with the words, "All the people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the words that G-d has spoken, we will do'" (*Shemos* 24:3). The *Sefer Chasidim* explains that the Jews were required to possess perfect unity—to speak "with one voice"—to receive the Torah. If even one Israelite had refused the Torah, it could not have been given.²

Moreover, each individual had to rise from the level of slavery to that of revelation. Thus, every individual "counted" those days between the first Pesach and the first Shavuot.

Besides preparation for receiving the Torah, the counting of the Omer also bespeaks the Israelites' eagerness for the Torah, for they had realized that they would receive the Torah seven weeks after the Exodus, and they literally counted the days in anticipation.³ Here, too, each individual shared in this excitement.

II. Shavuot: Culminating the Advance Toward Freedom

Pesach is known as *z'man cheiruseinu*—the festival of our freedom, marking the Exodus, when we were freed from Egyptian slavery. This was only physical liberation—only the first step toward true freedom, which was realized on Shavuot with the acceptance of the Torah. As our Sages teach, "The only truly free man is he who is devoted to the Torah" (*Avos* 6:2).

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Many people question this, wondering how total subjugation to the Torah can be equated to complete freedom. But the concept is actually not that difficult. Nothing in the world is truly free. Natural phenomena are bound by laws of nature. And there are laws and rules—natural and man-made—that govern both the individual and society. Further, a man ruled by his passions is also in no sense free. . . . A careful analysis would reveal that true freedom simply does not exist in the material world, for nowhere is any creature free to do whatever it desires.

In the final analysis, only G-d is truly free, for of all that exists, only G-d can do exactly what He wants, at any time that He chooses, with no restraints whatsoever. Stated in another way, true freedom only exists with G-d. Man in search of freedom must seek association with G-d, and his only link to G-d is through Torah—G-d's word. Therefore, ultimate freedom can only be realized through total devotion to Torah.

With the first Pesach, the Israelites had their first taste of freedom. They then eagerly counted the days until they would gain total, absolute freedom, through receiving the Torah.

Freedom: Beyond the Beast

In a sense, freedom is an essential ingredient of humanity, for the ability to consider and select his options is a feature peculiar to man. Thus, one can say that with the acceptance of the Torah, the Israelites first realized their potential to be truly human in the fullest sense of the word. They now had the freedom to totally transcend their animal nature.

This is also alluded to in the Omer, for the word "omer" means sheaf, and according to the Oral Tradition, the Omer on the second day of Pesach consisted of a sheaf of barley. The *Abarbanel* explains that barley is normally animal food⁵, signifying that immediately after the Exodus the Israelites had not yet transcended their animal nature.

On Shavuos, however, the offering was two loaves of bread made from pure wheat flour. Wheat is a human food, indicating that with the acceptance of the Torah, the Israelites gained full human status.

Moreover, the Omer offering consisted of meal, while the offering on Shavuos consisted of fully baked breads. Flour is but the first step in converting grain into human food; bread is the final product. On Pesach, the Israelites had taken their first step toward realizing their true humanity; on Shavuos, they took the final step.

"Chametz" as an Offering

Also significant is that the Two Breads of Shavuos were leavened bread (*chametz*). This is in sharp distinction to Pesach, when *chametz* is absolutely forbidden.

As the Talmud states, *chametz* represents the Evil

Inclination (*Yeitzer Hora*)⁶, and on Pesach, the *Yeitzer Hora* was totally negated. As long as the Israelites were bound to the *Yeitzer Hora* they could not even begin their advance toward freedom. The banishment of the *Yeitzer Hora* was represented by the banishment of all leaven from each Israelite's possession.

On Shavuos, however, the Israelites reached a level of true freedom and total self-discipline. On this level, one can make use of the *Yeitzer Hora* to serve G-d. Our Sages interpret: "You shall love the Lord your G-d with all (parts of) your heart"—even with the *Yeitzer Hora*⁷, directing us to harness drives usually associated with evil, and direct them toward good. On that first Shavuos, this was achieved without conscious effort. Since even the *Yeitzer Hora* could now be used as a means of coming close to G-d, the Shavuos offering also included *chametz*.

This can be understood on a deeper level in light of a teaching of the Baal Shem Tov. The Talmud states that in the end of days, G-d will slaughter ("le'shochto"—from *schecht*) the *Yeitzer Hora*⁸. The Baal Shem notes that the Talmud employs the term normally used for ritual slaughter of kosher animals. He concludes that just as *shechita* (ritual slaughter) renders an animal kosher, so too will "slaughter" of the *Yeitzer Hora* render it "kosher"—that is, transform it into an angel of good.

Since receiving the Torah raised the Israelites to a level approximating that of the world of the future, they could deal with the *Yeitzer Hora* virtually as a good angel. In recognition of this, the Shavuos offering specifically designated use of leaven. This lofty spiritual level was lost with the Sin of the Golden Calf.⁹

III. Two Loaves, Two Tablets

Also of significance is that *two* loaves were offered, corresponding to the Two Tablets containing the Ten Commandments: and the reason for the number in both cases is very similar.

All through the Book of *Shemos*, the Tablets are referred to as *Luchos Ha'bris*—Tablets of the Covenant. The generation that had entered the Covenant at Sinai was still alive, and to them the Tablets served as a *tangible sign* of this covenant. In *Devarim* they are referred to as *Luchos Ha'eidos*—Tablets of Testimony. Since the majority of the people alive then were born after the revelation at Sinai, the Tablets then *bore witness* to this great event.

The Midrash explains that this is one of the reasons that there were *two* tablets. Just as testimony is only valid when taken from two witnesses, so too did the testimony of the Tablets require the presence of *two*.

The paradigm of a covenant (*bris*) was the "covenant between the halves" (*Bris bein HaBesarim*) in which animals were cut in half, and Abraham walked between the sections. Rashi explains that this is the thrust of every covenant: the makers of the covenant accompany

each other between the sections of a divided entity. This also is alluded to in the two-ness of the tablets and the loaves.

IV. The Bridge of Sevens

There is also significance in the duration of the purification process of the Omer—49 days. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes (based on the *Zohar*), many types of impurity are purged in a seven-day purification period. Cleansing can be understood as an act of re-creation and rebirth, with the period of cleansing paralleling the seven days of creation.

Before the Torah was given, however, the Israelites were required to undergo a most thorough cleansing—not only of their own impurities, but of all those that tainted the entire world from the time of creation. Thus, the requisite period of cleansing was seven times seven days.

V. Omer: A Period of Mourning

All of the themes associated with the Omer—freedom, preparation and anticipation for receiving the Torah—would lead one to think that these particular weeks would be a time of rejoicing and celebration. But instead, it is a period of national mourning when weddings and similar happy events are forbidden, as are cutting of hair and shaving. This is because the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died during this period.¹⁰ It might seem strange that these great men died during these weeks, and even more surprising that this should be enough to endow this entire period with a spirit of mourning.

But the Talmud records that they died because they were somehow faulted for lacking proper respect for one another. The Midrash also states that in some minute way—surely undetectable to us—they were jealous of each other.¹¹

Rabbi Akiva's students were the greatest Torah scholars of their time, and as the Talmud states, their death left the world "desolate." During this period of preparation for receiving the Torah, they should have put aside any differences—no matter how minute—that may have existed between them; they should have lived in perfect harmony and unity. Since they maintained their so-called rivalries, even during this period, they were punished precisely during these crucial weeks.*

As mentioned earlier, the very act of receiving the Torah required total unity on the part of the Jews.

*Actually the plague that killed Rabbi Akiva's students only lasted until Lag Be'Omer (18 Iyar),¹² as the Ashkenazim refer to it—or Lag LeOmer, in the Sephardic tradition.

Lag BeOmer is best known as the *Yahrtzeit* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, but it also had a significance much earlier. In the Talmud, it is known as *P'ros HaEtzeres*.¹³ The *Yerushalmi* explains that the laws of a festival are taught for 30 days preceding the festival, and the mid-point of this 30 day period is known as the "pros" of the festival. (It is at this time that the charity bins were emptied.) The *P'ros* of Shavuot falls of Lag BeOmer.¹⁴

Without such unity, our acceptance of the Torah cannot be complete. And without Torah, we are nothing. It is therefore taught that the Temple was destroyed because of the sin of unwarranted hatred (*sinas chinam*), for in a state of cleavage and rivalry we were without Torah and totally lacking in the merit required for having the Temple in our midst.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchov teaches that since the Temple was destroyed because of hatred, we cannot expect it to be rebuilt unless we purge this hatred from our midst.¹⁵

We therefore continue to mourn the death of Rabbi Akiva's students, as we continue to mourn the destruction of the Temple. For we know that as long as the Temple is not rebuilt, we have not yet rectified the stain resulting from a lack of unity of these students. Until we do, the Temple cannot be rebuilt, and the *galus* cannot end. Only when we learn to have the fullest measure of respect for one another and live in unity can we be worthy of the true Redemption. 17

Notes

1. *Menachos* 65b. According to many authorities, this means that one person cannot exempt another; see *Sefer HaAgudah* ad loc.; *Teshuvos Rashba* 126; *Levush* 489:1. Also see *P'ri Chadash*; *Chok Yaakov*. Although there is a general rule that "listening is like answering" (*shome'a keoneh*; *Sukkah* 38b), this case is seen as an exception. This is because the commandment here is to *count* rather than to speak, and hence even if one *writes* the correct date he fulfills his obligation; *Magen Shaul* 20. Cf. *Ramban* on *Vayikra* 23:15. Just as one cannot exempt another by writing the Omer date for him, so is he unable to exempt him by saying it. This is also the reason that, unlike conventional prayers, one must understand what he is saying when counting the Omer. See *Magen Avraham*.

2. *Sefer Chassidim* 233.

3. *Sefer HaChinuch* 306; *Ran* (on *Rif*), end of *Pesachim*.

4. Hence, "You are called 'man,' and not non-Jews," *Yevamos* 61a.

5. Cf. *Sotah* 9a. The *Zohar* also likens this to the offering of a *Sotah*; cf. *Numbers* 5:15, *Rashi ad loc.*

6. *Berachos* 17a.

7. *Berachos* 54a. Freedom from the Angel of Death is equivalent to freedom from the *Yeitzer Hora*; see *Bava Basra* 16a.

8. *Sukkah* 52a. See *Toldos Yaakov Yoseif*, *Kedoshim* (Koretz, 1780), p. 98d.

9. One may then wonder why the Israelites sinned if they no longer had a *Yeitzer Hora*? The *Gemora* explains that this was part of a divine plan to teach the ways of repentance to the world; *Avodah Zara* 4b.

10. *Yevamos* 62b.

11. *Bereishis Rabbah* 61:3.

12. Me'iri *ad loc.* states that this is a tradition from the Gaonim. See *infra*.

13. *Shekalim* 3:1, *Yerushalmi ad loc.*; *Bechoros* 57b, 58a.

14. *Abudarham*, quoted in *Bais Yosef*, *Orach Chaim* 493. However, see *Rambam Yad*, *Bechoros* 7:8.

15. *Kedushas Levi*, *Peirush HaAgados* (Jerusalem, 1958) p. 409.

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