

# THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

*by Rabbi Yehudah Prero*

"If one dies [under] fifty years [old] that is death by Kares; at fifty-two years that is the death of Shmuel of Ramah . . . At seventy, it is the death of the aged ; at eighty it is the death of a vigorous [old man], for it is written The days of our years are seventy, and with strength eighty years.' Said Rabbah, From fifty to sixty years [of age], that is death by Kares, and the reason why this has not been mentioned was out of deference to [the prophet] Shmuel of Ramah." (Moed Katan 28a)

The Talmud, in the section quoted above, explains the concept of the punishment "Kares," being "cut off" at a young age. Kares, the Talmud explains, occurs under the age of fifty. The Talmud inserts an unusual milestone, one which the Talmud itself addresses. The age of 52 is termed the "death of Shmuel," the great prophet. Later, we find that the sage Rabbah said that the age at which Shmuel died is actually within the time frame for Kares. However, we see that because Shmuel's case was different, his age of death was singled out. What was unique about Shmuel, and what was significant about the age of his death?

The Maharsha, in his commentary on this piece of the Talmud, explains the concept of Kares in greater detail. He writes that for the first twenty years of a person's life, he or she can not be subject to the punishment of Kares. These twenty years the Maharsha calls "the days of one's youth." After these twenty years, one has fifty years during which a person counts off each year. During each year, a person has to take stock of his deeds and actions, to see if he has acted properly. When a person reaches the fiftieth of these years, when one turns seventy, he has reached his purpose, and he has reached a level of accomplishment. This is similar, the Maharsha writes, to the concept of Yovel, the jubilee year. After seven sets of seven years in which there was a cycle of letting the land remain fallow, there is a fiftieth year, the Yovel year. In this year, land returns to its original owners. Similarly, when one reaches the fiftieth of these years of cultivation and growth after the 20 years of youth, he then can return to his original owner.

Shmuel HaNavi lived to the age of 52. Shmuel's mother Chana was barren for a number of years, and after being blessed with this son, she sang praises of G-d. From this song, the Talmud (Yoma 38b) tells us that the following lesson was learned: R. Chiya bar Abba said further in the name of R. Yochanan: When the majority of a man's years have passed without sin, he will no more sin, as it is said: (Shmuel I 2:9) He will keep the feet of His holy ones'. The Maharsha writes that when Chana uttered these words, she was prophesying about the life of her son: Shmuel would first live a majority of life without sin, and then sin no longer.

As we said, during the first twenty years of one's life, one cannot be punished with Kares. The critical point is the next fifty years. The Maharsha writes that if one calculates  $\frac{2}{3}$  of 49, the number arrived at is 32. Shmuel lived the first 20 years of his life without sin. He then lived the next 32 years of his life without sin. At this point, at the age of 52, Shmuel lived "the majority of a man's years" without sin. Certainly, had Shmuel lived longer, he would have committed no sin. However, Shmuel's life, his reaching of his potential and accomplishment, concluded at the age of 52. This was not a death in the nature of Kares, G-d forbid. It was because of his piety and righteousness, his ability to live for 32 years without sin, that he returned to his original owner at the age of 52, a time when he had lived "a majority of a man's life without sin."

The Maharsha writes that this calculation used to explain Shmuel's life-span is seen in this period of the year. The Sefira period is 49 days long. When we arrive at the 50th day of the count, we arrive at the holiday of Shavuot. The day of the Shavuot is the day on which the people who left the land of Egypt became a nation dedicated to the service of G-d. It is a day when, after 49 days of preparation, the people reached their ultimate goal: the receipt of the Torah, and the accompanying commitment to observe, uphold, and inculcate that which is contained within it. Yet, as we see by Shmuel, there is great significance in emerging from the majority of the period without having sinned. Once we have counted 32 days, in which we hopefully have been preparing ourselves for the upcoming holiday of Shavuot, we can celebrate the fact that we have remained free of sin for the majority of this time period. Therefore, on the 33rd day, or Lag B'Omer, we celebrate the fact that we have remained free of sin, and that we will continue to be in a state free of sin until Shavu'ot comes.

Shavuot begins at sundown on Thursday, May 20, 1999. The holiday is rapidly approaching. If we have not been using our time properly in preparation for receiving the Torah, we must start immediately. It is true that if we spent the majority of the 49 day Sefira period free of sin, we will continue to do so for the remainder of the period. However, even if that was not the case, we constantly have opportunities, every day during the count, to get ourselves back on track. We have the ability to make this forty-nine day period one in which we adequately prepare ourselves for our acceptance of the Torah. Come the fiftieth day, Shavuot, we can then be united with our destiny, our heritage, and our legacy: the Torah.