

# TWO-PART SINS

*by Shlomo Katz*

## **Hamaayan / The Torah Spring Edited by Shlomo Katz**

### **Emor**

**Volume XV, No. 28**

**19 Iyar 5761**

**May 12, 2001**

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Today's Learning:

Nazir 6:2-3

Orach Chaim 442:2-4

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Kiddushin 5

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Avodah Zarah 28

Parashat Emor not only falls during Sefirat Ha'omer / the Counting of the Omer every year, it also contains the verses which command us to perform this count: "You shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the rest day, from the day when you bring the omer of the waving [a Temple sacrifice of barley] - seven weeks they shall be complete. . ."

Many people have the custom to follow the counting of the Omer with a prayer that states in part: "May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that in the merit of the Omer count that I have counted today, may there be corrected whatever blemish I have caused . . ." This prayer requires explanation, writes R' Moshe Yair Weinstock z"l (20th century chassidic rebbe and kabbalist in the Bronx and Yerushalayim), for how can counting the Omer correct a blemish or sin?

He explains: Every sin has two parts - the sin itself and the lost opportunity to do a mitzvah using the time and energy that was expended for sinning. The sin itself is atoned for by bringing a sacrifice (in

the time of the Bet Hamikdash) or through studying the laws of the sacrifices. But how does one atone for wasting an opportunity to perform a mitzvah? By doing the reverse, i.e., enhancing one's performance of mitzvot and renewing one's commitment to the commandments.

Counting the Omer is our way of expressing how eagerly we await the holiday of Shavuot, the Day of the Giving of the Torah. Through Sefirat Ha'omer, we reaffirm that the ultimate goal of the Exodus, which we relived on the recently-ended holiday of Pesach, was to receive the Torah. In short, counting the Omer is how we renew our commitment to the observance of the Torah and its laws, and this helps to correct our past blemishes. (Divrei Yair)

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*"Hashem's appointed festivals that you are to designate as holy convocations - these are My appointed festivals." (23:2)*

R' Mendele Hager z"l (rabbi of Oybervisheve, Hungary; died 1942) explained this verse as follows: If you designate the festivals as holy convocations, then they are My [i.e., G-d's] appointed festivals. If not, the prophet tells us (Yishayah 1:14), "Your New Moons and your appointed festivals, My soul hates." (She'airit Menachem)

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*"You shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the rest day, from the day when you bring the omer of the waving - seven weeks they shall be complete." (23:15)*

The anonymous 14th century work, Sefer Ha'chinuch, states: "The root of this mitzvah is that the essence of the Jewish people is the Torah, and for the Torah the world was created. Thus it is written (Yirmiyah 33:25), 'If not for My covenant day and night [i.e., Torah study which takes place day and night], I would not have set up the laws of heaven and earth.' The Torah is the reason that Bnei Yisrael were redeemed and taken out from Egypt, i.e., so that they could receive the Torah at Sinai and observe it. . . Therefore we were commanded to count from the day after the first day of Pesach until the day of the Giving of the Torah, to show the longing in our hearts for this day and our pining, as a slave pines for shade . . ." (Sefer Ha'chinuch, mitzvah 306)

In light of the above excerpt from Sefer Ha'chinuch, one would expect that the Omer would be a joyful time, writes R' Meir Chadash z"l (mashgiach of the Chevron Yeshiva; died 1989). Why then did the Sages ordain that it be a time of public mourning?

The well-known answer is that 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died during this period of the year, and we mourn for them. But certainly, says R' Chadash, there has been no shortage of other tragedies in Jewish history. Why do we mourn for these students?

The midrash teaches that when Bnei Yisrael first left Egypt, they were not ready to receive the Torah because they were nursing their wounds (which were received during their slavery). Another

midrash teaches that when Bnei Yisrael arrived at Har Sinai, they were united "as one person, with one heart." It appears, explains R' Chadash, that the period from the Exodus to the Giving of the Torah was a time when Bnei Yisrael learned not to be self-centered, not to focus on their personal wounds, but rather, to focus on the needs of others. This was a prerequisite to receiving the Torah.

The gemara (Yevamot 62b) teaches that the students of R' Akiva died between Pesach and Shavuot because they did not treat each other with the proper respect. Clearly, says R' Chadash, their deaths during these weeks were not incidental; the Divine service of these weeks is to learn to care for others, and these students failed to learn that lesson.

This is why the Sages singled out this tragic event. It highlights the special significance of this period of the year, a time when we should be drawing closer to our brethren in preparation for receiving the Torah "as one person, with one heart." (Meir Netivot p. 290)

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### **Pirkei Avot**

Rabbi Meir said: Reduce your aisek and engage in Torah study. Be of humble spirit before every person. If you neglect the [study of Torah], there are betailim harbeh before you. But, if you labor in the Torah, G-d has ample reward to give you." (Chapter 4, mishnah 12)

The word "aisek" means "activity," and most commentaries understand the mishnah to refer to business activity. According to this understanding, Rabbi Meir is teaching us to lessen our involvement in business and increase our Torah study.

A different interpretation is offered in the name of R' Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov z"l (the founder of the chassidic movement; died 1760): If Rabbi Meir had meant to refer to business activities, he would have used the more common expression, "derech erez." Rather, says the Ba'al Shem Tov, "aisek" refers to Torah study. "Reduce your Torah study and engage in Torah study," Rabbi Meir says, i.e., reduce the quantity of your Torah study so that you can increase the quality of your Torah study, and study with awe and love of G-d. (Keter Shem Tov, paragraph 399)

The phrase "betailim harbeh" usually is translated "many excuses." If you are inclined to neglect Torah study, the mishnah says, you will always find many excuses to do so.

R' Yitzchak Yaakov Rabinowitz z"l (the "Biala Rebbe"; died 1905) offers a different interpretation. He says: It is proper for a person to approach Torah study with a certain amount of trepidation, wondering whether he is truly worthy of studying G-d's words. However, this fear can be carried too far, so far that it paralyzes the person and prevents him from studying Torah at all.

The first-mentioned trepidation is a sign of a person's holiness, while the latter-mentioned fear is a trick of the yetzer hara. How can a person distinguish between them? R' Rabinowitz answers:

If your introspection is driven by a feeling of holiness, you will be introspective as well when physical

pleasures come your way. You will ask, "Is this activity befitting a person on my spiritual level?" On the other hand, if your introspection is a trick of the yetzer hara, it will not affect your other activities.

This is what the mishnah means, says R' Rabinowitz: "If you neglect the [study of Torah]," and you want to examine your motives, ask yourself: "Are there betailim harbeh -- many excuses -- before [me]?" Do I avoid other activities by making the "excuse" that they are not befitting a person on my level? (Divrei Binah)

R' Yaakov Yechizkiyah Gruenwald z"l (Hungarian rabbi; died 1941) interprets "betailim harbeh" as "many inactive ones." He explains: When we study Torah and perform mitzvot, the angels that are created from our good deeds sing praises before Hashem. If you neglect the study of Torah, there will be many inactive ones - many angels who cannot sing. (Zechut Avot)

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### **Introductions . . .**

This week, we present an excerpt from the introduction to *Mateh Moshe*, a halachic work by R' Moshe of Przemysl z"l (Poland; died 1606). *Mateh Moshe* is noteworthy for explaining the sources of many customs which we take for granted, for example, the custom to make noise when Haman's name is mentioned.

In the part of the introduction before this excerpt, the author discusses the importance of Torah study.

I used to live in the city of Belz, where I was surrounded by many students who heeded my voice to hear the words of Hashem; there were many, so many, who relied on me. They were like my sons, sitting at my table before G-d, until the troubles of the time carried me and brought me here, to a metropolis among the Jews ("ir v'aim be'yisrael" - based on Shmuel II 20:19), to the house of my father-in-law, the philanthropist and adviser, wise and kindly, a prince and head among Israel, Shmuel, may the One Who Redeems save him. Here, too, I did not rest or find tranquility, for I could not fulfill my desire to spread the Torah.

However, I have found what my soul has sought in the words of R' Moshe Almosnino z"l [Turkey; 1510-1581] who explained the verses (Kohelet 7:11-12), "Wisdom is good with an inheritance, and better for those who see the sun, for to sit in the shelter of wisdom is to sit in the shelter of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of those who possess it." This means: Wisdom, like inheritance can be transmitted in two ways - in the teacher's lifetime, from his mouth to his students, and after death, through books. "Better for those who see the sun" means that it is better to transmit wisdom while one is living. The verse explains the reason . . . : There is a great difference between wisdom and money. When a teacher transmits wisdom to his students, he does not lose anything, for "wisdom preserves the life of those who possess it." [Thus the teacher gains. On the other hand, if one gives away his money, he has nothing.] Therefore, if I cannot transmit the

Torah from my lips to students, which is the best way to pass-on the inheritance, at least I will transmit it through books, and may my words be as desirable as if I had uttered them from my mouth to worthy students.

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