

THE OMER: ONLY THE BEGINNING

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BS"D

Volume 30, No. 30

6 Iyar 5776

May 14, 2016

Today's Learning:

Nach: Tehilim 27-28

Mishnah: Pe'ah 5:1-2

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Kiddushin 64

The Counting of the Omer, the mitzvah in which we engage every night at this time of year, is widely understood as being a countdown from the Exodus to the Giving of the Torah. Literally, however, we are counting the days since the Omer offering, when the first barley of the season was harvested and offered on the Temple altar. What does counting down to receiving the Torah have to do with the barley harvest and Omer offering?

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch z"l (1808-1888; rabbi of Frankfurt am Main, Germany) explains in an essay published in 1855: For agricultural societies, the harvest is the high point of the year, the culmination of all of the year's activities, the ultimate goal of nationalistic endeavor. A successful harvest gives a nation economic independence, which helps assure political independence. Thus, the harvest is the end of secular man's endeavors.

In contrast, we begin on the day of the barley harvest to count toward the Giving of the Torah, the day on which we realized the purpose for which we were taken out of Egypt and (eventually) given political and economic independence in Eretz Yisrael. Indeed, R' Hirsch writes, only as long as we recognized the primacy of Torah did we merit to remain in the Land. And, the ultimate redemption can come about only when understand that the purpose of having independence is to serve G-d, not simply to be a nation like other nations. (Collected Writings Vol. I, p.113)

"Speak to the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for holy am I, Hashem, your Elokim'." (19:2)

R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194-1270) writes: The Torah prohibits non-kosher food and

adulterous relationships, and it permits kosher meat and wine and marital relations. If the Torah had left it at that, one could lead a hedonistic life completely within the confines of Torah law. One could eat to excess. One also could speak in a vulgar way, since that is not expressly prohibited by the Torah. In short, one could be a "Naval b'reshut ha'Torah" / "'Low-life' with the Torah's permission." Therefore the Torah commanded us also to be holy, which is a general instruction to enjoy this world in moderation while refraining from many types of behaviors that are not expressly prohibited by the Torah, but which are inconsistent with being a holy people. One who observes this commandment is practicing the trait known as "perishut" / "separation." (Commentary on the Torah)

R' Moshe Chaim Luzzato z"l (1707-1746) writes similarly: The Gemara (Yevamot 20a) says, "Kadesh atzmecha ba'mutar lecha" / "Sanctify yourself regarding that which is permitted to you," i.e., prohibit things to yourself that are otherwise permitted. This is perishut. The reason for perishut is to distance oneself from transgressing actual prohibitions. (Mesilat Yesharim ch.13)

R' Shmuel Kimchi z"l (Spain; 14th century) writes: The Torah's intention is to lessen man's physical desires, not to eradicate them. Without the yetzer ha'ra, man would not eat, drink or procreate, all necessary activities. Thus our Sages comment on the verse (Bereishit 1:31), "Elokim saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good"-- "'Very good' refers to the yetzer ha'ra." Why then is it called the "yetzer ha'ra" / "bad inclination"? Because the majority of people do not use it properly and are drawn by their yetzer ha'ra to immorality or bad character traits. That is why our Sages refer to the yetzer ha'ra as the "yeast in the dough." Yeast is necessary, but too much yeast is damaging. (Commentary on Perek Shirah: Introduction)

R' Ovadiah Sforno z"l (Italy; 1475-1550) writes: The reason this verse concludes, "For holy am I, Hashem, your Elokim," is that after the Torah has taught us (in previous parashot) the laws of kashrut, ritual purity and family purity, it now tells us the purpose of these commandments: We were created in the image of G-d, and we should emulate Him to the extent possible. (Commentary on the Torah)

"You (plural) shall not steal . . ." (19:11)

The Gemara (Bava Metzia 61b) teaches: "Even to cause pain [rather than to keep the object], and even to pay double."

Rashi z"l explains that the latter case refers to a person who wants to give charity, but the intended recipient won't accept it. Therefore, the giver decides to steal from the pauper with the intention of being caught and being required to pay double.

How do our Sages know that these cases are what the verse intends to teach? R' Avraham Chaim Shor z"l (1560-1632) explains: Usually, a thief operates in secret. However, if a person plans to steal for what he thinks (wrongly) is a legitimate reason and he does not want to be branded a thief, he will share his secret with someone else before he acts. Here, the Torah used a plural conjugation of

"You shall not steal," to indicate that more than one person knows about it; hence, it must not be referring to ordinary theft. (Torat Chaim)

R' Yisrael Yitzchak Ha'levi z"l (Warsaw; 19th century) cites the above interpretation and writes: Alternatively, the plural form means to prohibit buying stolen goods [i.e., an activity that involves two people]. In the words of our Sages (in Bereishit Rabbah): "The mouse is not the thief, the mouse hole is the thief," [i.e., if the mouse had no escape route, it would not steal. The same would be true of thieves if they had no customers.] (Revid Ha'zahav)

R' Menachem Ha'Bavli z"l (Greece and Eretz Yisrael; died 1571) writes: The Torah uses the plural form for "You shall not steal" and likewise for "You shall not deny falsely, and you shall not lie" (in the same verse) to warn us that if one Jew steals, is dishonest or lies, gentiles will label all Jews as thieves and liars. (Ta'amei Ha'mitzvot No. 123)

Elsewhere in the Torah . . .

"Achat / One thing I asked of Hashem . . ." (Tehilim 27:2-3)

R' Chaim Yosef David Azulai z"l (Chida; 1724-1806) writes: R' Yitzchak Luria z"l (Arizal; 1534-1572) teaches that Hashem gave us three related gifts. They are: Eretz Yisrael, the World-to-Come ("chayei Olam Ha'ba"), and the Torah. The initial letters of these three spell "Achat," which is what King David was praying for in this verse.

Chida adds: The Gemara (Ta'anit 8b) teaches that a person should not pray for two things at once. (This applies to a personal prayer, as opposed to Shemoneh Esrei, where we do ask for many things, Chida explains.) However, if the two (or more) requests are related, one may ask for both, just as King David asks for three things here because they are related gifts from Hashem. [Chida does not explain why Eretz Yisrael, the World-to-Come, and the Torah are related. Perhaps it is because they are all vehicles for the revelation of Hashem's Name.] (Yosef Tehilot)

Letters from Our Sages

This letter was written by R' Zvi Pesach Frank z"l (1872-1960), who later would become Chief Rabbi of Yerushalayim, to his cousin R' Isser Zalman Meltzer z"l (1870-1953; rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Slutsk, Russia). The letter is dated "Tammuz 5680 [1920]." The context for the first paragraph is the relatively recent end of World War I, during which many Jewish communities fled from the battlefield. The letter is published in Shevivei Ohr, p.186.

To my great joy, I received greetings from your honor via a traveler from there to here. I was

extremely happy to hear that your honor has returned home in peace, and that the merit of your Torah--particularly, the public teaching of Torah--protected you and saved you from the decree of exile which has come upon the world. Thanks to G-d, Who is Good and does good, that He has kept us alive and brought us to this day when we can exchange letters with each other. May we hope to soon see our complete salvation, and may we give thanks before Him for the redemption of our souls.

Among the many things that must be said at this time, I would like to suggest to his honor that he reflect deeply--perhaps he will see fit to come up to the holy mountain [i.e., to move to Eretz Yisrael], together with his holy yeshiva. Why should we not be awakened by the good people in the secular camp who are distant from the Torah--many of them have never seen its light--but who give their lives and souls to renovate our treasured land to the best of their understanding? Why should those who wave the banner of our holy Torah stand at a distance at this time when we see clearly an awakening from above to show mercy to His nation and His land? Behold, "It is time to favor her, for the appointed time has come; for Your servants have cherished her stones and favored her dust" (Tehilim 102:14-15).

[Postscript: R' Isser Zalman Meltzer made aliyah in 1923 together with some of his students and served as rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Etz Chaim in Yerushalayim.]