

THE DIMINUTIVE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The Diminutive *omer*¹

Through the mitzvah of the *omer* offering, we merited the Land. Actually, it was Avraham who used it to seal the deal. And the effectiveness of his *omer* offering had something to do with the mitzvah of *milah*.

This may seem confusing, but it is a paraphrase of a medrash,[2] which is even more confusing in its full form. It warns us not to view the *omer* "lightly," because it was through it that Avraham inherited the Land. To prove the point, the medrash cites two verses that appear serially. The first[3] promises the Land to Avraham and his descendants; the next exhorts him to "keep My covenant." The medrash sees the first verse as predicated upon the second - you will merit the land only because you continue to keep the covenant. The entire section, and the covenant referenced therein, however, clearly refers to the mitzvah of *milah*. Circumcision is the *bris*, upon which the promise of the Land is contingent. How this medrash sees an allusion to the *omer* is mystifying.

We will put our main question aside for the moment, and return to it later. First, let us consider the truism that very few people maintain an "even keel" in relating to Torah and mitzvos. We are blessed at times with periods of great clarity and enlightenment. They are usually not permanent, but give way to times of limited grasp. Worse yet, we sometimes find that our minds are so beclouded, that our visibility is reduced to near zero.

We are commanded to perform the mitzvah of *milah* on an eight-day old child. The infant has no higher order comprehension, and yet it is this mitzvah in particular that safeguards our right to the Land - which in turn is the gateway to the highest levels of comprehension!

What *milah* is the individual, *omer* is to the nation. It recalls the collective level of our people upon emerging from Egypt, stepping into physical freedom from the forty-ninth rung of degradation. It is for this reason that the *omer* is brought from barley, which served as animal fodder in ancient times. At the time we offer it, we are still animal-like, and not quite human. *omer* represents the most reduced form of national attainment, and yet it serves as the necessary precursor to the encounter with Hashem seven weeks later at Sinai. Each journey of forty-nine days begins with a single korban that bespeaks inadequacy, but brings the nation to the level of prophecy.

So perhaps the connection between *milah* and *omer* is not so mystifying. *milah* and *omer* share an apparent minimalism; they both seem to be mitzvos performed with a deficit of spiritual input. The

medrash's lesson is uplifting and powerful. From these two examples we learn not to cynically dismiss the mitzvos we perform during the times of our lives that lack clarity and focus. These mitzvos make minimal demands, and place limited expectation upon those who observe them. Yet each of them leads to extraordinarily great things: to earning the Land of Israel, and to receiving the Torah. How foolish it would be to doubt the power of any mitzvah, even one performed in a state of spiritual weakness!

The *omer* shows its small footprint in the arena of *berachos* as well. Unlike so many other mitzvos, no shehechyanu attaches to the counting of counting the *omer*. One explanation utilizes the famous observation of the Ari regarding the relationship between the first night of Pesach and the *omer* period. All the spiritual lights and revelations that we try to grab hold of in the run-up to Shavuot are actually present on the Seder night, only to be withdrawn after the first day of Pesach. While they return, one at a time, in the following weeks, none of the are really new. The shehechyanu berachah is restricted to new items; the *sefirah* period deals exclusively, as it were, in old merchandise.

This approach yields a new interpretation of the question of the Wise Son. The avodah that he questions is that of the *sefirah* period! "Look here," he remarks. "Why are you commanded to participate in an elaborate avodah during *sefirah*? It doesn't get you anything new! Everything that you work towards, you already had in hand on the first night of Pesach!"

We explain to him that we must always be ready to put something away for afikoman. A vast richness of spiritual light bursts out on the night of the *sefirah*, a display of the *isra'usa d'le'eila* of the holiday. Through the mitzvos of the evening, we carry over those lights to the following day, the first day of Pesach. Beyond that, however, lies a period of time of relative concealment. The wealth of light is lost; it is made available to us sequentially, one light at a time.

We spend much of our lives following the same pattern. We are privileged to experience some times of great enlightenment, but we experience the opposite as well. We survive the darkness by planning for it in advance - by salting away some of the light for the spiritual nighttime. This is the intent of the calendric link of Pesach and Tisha B'Av, in which the latter always falls on the same day of the week as the *sefirah* night. The Torah wants us to realize that we can capture enough of the spiritual gift on the first night of Pesach to remain bound to HKBH at the times of the densest fog and gloom, like Tisha B'Av.

This, then, is the special promise of the *sefirah* interval. We discover the richness of leftovers, of how much remains accessible to us from those momentary bursts of brilliance. We see how to take them, build with them sequentially, until we become different, elevated people, ready to stand once again at the base of the mountain of revelation.

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1. Based on Nesivos Shalom, vol. 2 pgs. 322-324
 2. Vayikra Rabbah 28:6

3. Bereishis 17

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