

# (RE)COUNTING THE OMER

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

On the second night of Pesach, we begin the mitzvah of Sefiras HaOmer, the counting of the 49 days from when the Omer offering was brought until Shavuos - the fiftieth day. The mitzvah to count the days after the Omer is found in parshas Emor (Vayikra 23:15):

*"And you shall count for yourselves, from the day after Shabbos [i.e. the first day of Pesach], from the day when you bring the Omer - seven complete weeks..."*

Interestingly, we (in the Diaspora) have the unique opportunity to perform two different mitzvos on the same night, both of which have the same root in Hebrew: SPR. Sefiras HaOmer (root SPR) means **to count**. "Sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim" means to **recount** the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Is this root-connection merely coincidental, or is there some hidden relationship lurking beneath the surface?

In the Hagadah, we discuss the Four Sons: the wise, the wicked, the simple, and the son who knows not even to question:

"What does the wise son say? [He asks], 'What are these testimonies, decrees, and ordinances that Hashem our G-d, has commanded you?' And you should tell him the laws of Pesach: We do not taste anything after the Afikoman."

Mefarshim (commentators) ask: How, by teaching the wise son one law - that one may not partake in any other food after the Pesach offering (represented by the Afikoman) - have we somehow answered his detailed question? Many explain that this law is found in the last Mishnah of tractate Pesachim (the Talmudic tractate dealing with the laws of Passover). What the author of the Hagadah means to say is that you should take care to teach the wise son all the laws of Passover, up to and including the very last Mishnah.

The Belzer Rebbe, R' Yissocher Dov zt"l, takes a different approach. The Hagadah, he says, is not telling us what to teach - it is telling us how to teach. The night of Pesach, after all, is not meant for detailed study of the intricate laws of Passover, but rather for the mitzvah of sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim, recounting the Exodus from Egypt.

We know that the reason one may not eat anything after the Pesach/Afikoman is so that "the taste of Pesach may remain in one's mouth" long after the meal has ended. The Hagadah is instructing the father to tell over the story of the Exodus with such feeling and emotion, that, like the Afikoman, its

taste will remain with the son long after his Hagadah has been closed and the table cleared. When we recount Yetzias Mitzrayim, of course, our goal is not only to "tell over to our children." Our Sages teach that even one person alone must still perform the mitzvah.

Perhaps the mitzvah of Sefiras HaOmer - "counting" the days, could also be, "days in which we recount (continually) the story of the Exodus." "You shall tell over (SPR) [the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim with such great fervour and joy that], even the day after Pesach its impression is still felt! Not only that, but, Seven complete weeks the story of the Exodus shall constantly be on your minds!" Possibly, then, the two mitzvos with the same root are indeed connected: We observe and "count" the days after the Omer, all the while continually "recounting" the Exodus. But why? Why is it so important that the mitzvah of Sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim leave such an indelible impression? And why specifically during the period of Sefiras HaOmer?

Our Sages teach that the 49 days between Pesach and Shavuot were days of great spiritual growth for the Jewish nation. While on the fifteenth of Nisan they physically left Egypt, they were spiritually weakened and scarred as a result of their generations-long servitude in a land of immorality and promiscuity. Receiving the Torah immediately after leaving was inconceivable. Rather, they were given 49 days, during which they were to cleanse themselves of all Egyptian influence. Kabbalistically, there are "49 gates of impurity" through which one may choose to defile oneself (the "fiftieth gate" would thus be the proverbial "point-of-no-return"). Correspondingly, there are also 49 gates of purity through which one may elevate oneself. On each of the 49 days, Bnei Yisrael removed themselves from one abyss of spiritual contamination, while at the same time establishing one new plateau of spirituality.

Each year, we, as the Bnei Yisrael then, have the obligation and the opportunity during these 49 crucial days to release ourselves from the "bondage" of our own faults, sins, and shortcomings, and to acquire new levels of "freedom": insight, clarity, and spiritual purity.

Contemporary medical research is replete with studies proving that the more positive one's attitude to any given path of treatment, the greater the chance that the treatment will prove successful. If this amazing fact is true with regard to bodily healing, how much more so does it stand to reason that one who desires to heal spiritually must first believe in his ability to heal! One who is convinced that he is beyond healing (teshuvah!) stands almost no chance. Conversely, one who firmly believes that Hashem's hand, so to speak, is "open to the penitent," and that these days are especially conducive to spiritual healing and growth, will be sure not to waste even a single day of his/her Sefiras HaOmer without teshuvah and Torah study.

It's easier to take a Jew out of Mitzrayim, the saying goes, than it is to take Mitzrayim out of the Jew. Ultimately, Hashem did both. On the fifteenth of Nisan, He took the Jews out of Mitzrayim. And during the ensuing 49 days, He helped the Jews get Mitzrayim out of themselves. We all have our own Mitzrayims - aspects of our personalities and natures that we'd rather conquer and get beyond.

At times, we're frustrated; it seems no matter how hard we try, we just don't get anywhere. Perhaps that's why it's so important to keep reminding ourselves about Yetzias Mitzrayim. Hashem did it then, and He continues to do it to this day. Each day of Sefiras HaOmer, we receive the potential for great growth and liberation, so that, by day 50 we will truly feel ready to receive the Torah. Have a good Shabbos.

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