

# TRUE ACCOUNTABILITY

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

The parsha begins with laws relating to kohanim, describing which blemishes make a kohen unfit for Temple service. Included in this discussion are the laws governing the Kohen Gadol (the High Priest), whose central role demanded an even higher level of purity, and less involvement in the mundane aspects of daily life. Logically, the Torah concludes with details of the blemishes that make animals unfit for sacrificing.

Following in the "footsteps" of the above discussion of sacrifices, this week's parsha instructs regarding sacrifices related to the different chagim (holidays). These parshios will probably seem familiar, because they were read on the second day of Yom Tov on Pesach, and they are the reading for both days of Yom Tov during Sukkos.

Nestled within these paragraphs is the mitzvah of the Omer-Offering, and the counting of the omer, something we have been doing each evening since the second night of Pesach, and which we will continue to do until the night before Shavuot-forty-nine days in total. Normally, this period between Pesach and Shavuot, during which the omer is counted, is often viewed mainly in terms of its halachic status as a period of aveilus-mourning. For thirty-three days of this period, we are told, twenty-four thousand students of Rebi Akiva died, because they didn't sufficiently honor one another. After all, it was their rebi who emphasized that a "main principle of Torah is, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "

However, Sefiros HaOmer is significant more because these forty-nine days bind Pesach to Shavuot, and are a build-up to Kabbalos HaTorah-the receiving of Torah. In a sense, Pesach and Shavuot are like the first and last days of a chag, and the period of the omer is like the chol hamoed in-between the two.

If so, then why did Hashem choose this period to punish the students of Rebi Akiva? Isn't chol hamoed a time meant for joy, and not for mourning? Was this the only period during which Rebi Akiva's talmidim failed to show the proper respect for one another?

The answer is, no. However, the period of the omer, according to our tradition, is a unique time of the year for achieving a special level of clarity, for revealing that which is hidden within the Torah-and the person (which is why each day of the omer is associated with a particular middah, or character trait). In the case of the talmidim who perished, their inner derision of their colleagues was revealed through their deaths.

This is why it is also the period during Rebi Shimon bar Yochai revealed the hidden teachings of the Zohar and Kabballah. For many, this historic day of Torah revelation, commonly referred to as Lag B'Omer (i.e., the thirty-third day of the omer), also marks the day on which Rebi Akiva's talmidim ceased dying.

Thus Sefiros HaOmer represents a crucial period of the year to reach into the depths of Torah, which in turn, helps us to better understand ourselves. For, Torah is like a mirror that reflects our inner essence, and the better we understand it, the clearer the vision of us it can reflect. Ultimately, the Kabbalists teach us that the "soul" of the Torah and the "soul" of the Jew are the same.

Therefore, though the importance of Sefiros HaOmer may be somewhat overlooked today, it cannot be downplayed in terms of the opportunity it presents for deepening and solidifying one's connection to Torah. This is the main preparation for Kabbollos HaTorah, and really, one of the most important rectifications of the Jewish people in advance of Moshiach's coming. For, it was at Har Sinai, during the period of the Omer that the Jewish nation reached the historical level of total unity, of k'ish echad b'leiv echad-a single person with a single heart-something that can only be achieved through the level of clarity provided by constant Torah learning.

On a deeper level, the Omer-Offering represents more. The actual offering, as prescribed in this week's parsha (23:9), was an omer (about 2 quarts) of barley from the first reaping of that year's yield on the second day of Pesach. This was brought to the priest officiating in the Temple, who then waved it in the appropriate way. This procedure made the crops of that year permissible to consume, transforming them from chodosh (new) to yashan (old). If you go to your local kosher bakery, you may find a sign stating that their products are baked with yashan; certainly that which is produced from flour made in Eretz Yisroel must be made from yashan.

The effect of the Omer-Offering was to unify all of creation. The omer was a mitzvah to trigger a purification process in order to elevate all aspects of creation from impurity to holiness. The perfection of creation was in its imperfection, since it was G-d's will that man, through the use of his free-will, put the "finishing touches" on creation himself. Thus, the words "Holy to G-d" written on the headplate worn by the Kohen Gadol (Shemos 28:36) was not meant only as a reminder to the Kohen Gadol of his mission in the Temple and on behalf of the Jewish people, but as a reminder to **all** of us of our mission on earth to purify creation.

This process is more a function of din than chesed, of judgment than of kindness. Like any process of selection and refinement, scrutinization and judgment is necessary. Chesed overlooks weaknesses, but din seeks them out, reveals them, and then tries to change them. This is why it was specifically during this period, until Lag B'Omer, that Rebi Akiva's students were killed by the plague. As we approach Shavuot, the time the Torah was given, we move towards a period of chesed, symbolized by the transition from barley first brought for the omer to the wheat-loaves brought on Shavuot; wheat symbolizes mercy.

Thus the Omer-period is one during which refinement occurs. It is a time to separate out externalities, to reduce one's dependency on aspects of life that don't necessarily promote spiritual growth. Sefiros HaOmer is a sieve of sorts through which we all pass in order to become more spiritually-refined beings. This is why the rabbis teach that the end of the redemption process, which begins at Pesach time, in the future, will end with Shavuos.

Knowing this, we can understand why the last portion of this week's parsha deals with the Blasphemer, who, Rashi tells us, was the son of a Jewish woman and the Egyptian whom Moshe killed in Egypt (Shemos 2:12). What is unusual is the fact that the mother's name is mentioned in the Torah (Shelomis bas Divri), which usually constitutes loshon hora-evil talk.

However, Rashi is quick to explain why. Singling out Shelomis bas Divri is an indirect way of telling us that, in spite of the Egyptians' best efforts, the Jewish women stayed loyal to their husbands throughout their long servitude, that is, with the exception of Shelomis bas Divri. Furthermore, Rashi explains, the Torah mentions her name to emphasize what led to her unfaithfulness: she was always talking and saying "Shalom" to everyone. In other words, Shelomis' lack of modesty, something we learned from last week's parsha, is the basis of a loss of holiness.

They say that the problem with talking too fast is that you might say something that you haven't thought of yet; you can add to this that the problem of talking too much is that you can say things that can lead to the unthinkable! Perhaps this is why coupled with the mitzvah of the Omer-Offering is the mitzvah to verbally count the omer as well. This reminds us that "there is nothing better for the body than silence," and nothing better for the soul than holy speech. This is true **accountability**.

Have a great Shabbos, and one that you can **count** on to bring you clarity.

Have a great and wholly Shabbos,

Pinchas Winston

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