

FROM EMOR TO OMER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d told Moshe, "Speak to the Children of Israel and tell them that when you come into the land which I give to you and you harvest it, then you must bring an omer of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. He must wave the omer before G-d, to be accepted for you; on the day after the day of rest (the second day of Passover) the kohen must wave it." (Vayikra 23:9-11)

How convenient that the parshah of the omer comes up every year during the actual period of time to which it refers. As counting the omer is one of those short and unusual mitzvos that we do religiously without too much understanding of what its effect is meant to be, it is always worthwhile to go into some detail about it.

Let's start with this:

"The depth of this idea is that the Omer-Offering that we perform each year is for the sake of building Malchus and its completion, a process which begins the day after the first day of Pesach and which is completed on the holiday of Shavuos, as is known from the words of the Arizal. This rectifies Israel in this world, making them holy to G-d without any trace of the Sitra Achra..." (Drushei Olam HaTohu, 2:4:9:3)

Admittedly, there are some terms to explain here before moving on. First of all, Pesach is one of the four "judgment days" mentioned in the mishnah and discussed in the Talmud, specifically with respect to the wheat harvest. Says Rebi Akiva there:

"Why did the Torah say to bring the omer on Pesach? Since Pesach is the time of the wheat harvest, The Holy One, Blessed is He, said, 'Bring an omer before Me on Pesach so that I should bless the wheat in your fields.'" (Rosh Hashanah 16a)

Thus, for forty-nine days beginning from the second day of Pesach, an omer of barley was brought to the Temple as the Omer-Offering commanded in this week's parshah.

The "Malchus" being referred to is that of G-d's, specifically down here on earth. Stock markets and technological achievements aside, the point of world history is to build the Kingdom of G-d here on earth. In simple English, it means bringing mankind to the realization that G-d runs the world so that they will, lovingly, turn their attention to His will and their energy to implementing it on all levels of

society. In even simpler English, it means Yemos HaMoshiach - Messianic Time.

This is a process that is relevant all year round, but apparently most appropriate between the holidays of Pesach and Shavuos.

The "Sitra Achra," in this context, of course refers to the yetzer hara. One heart can't have two loyalties. Thus, the process of building G-d's kingdom on earth has the effect of simultaneously reducing the role and influence of the yetzer hara in people's lives, until it is gone completely from the world. The Talmud says that in the Days of Moshiach, G-d will slaughter the yetzer hara. (Succah 52a)

What better time of the year to work on this than between Pesach and Shavuos? On Pesach we eat unleavened bread that symbolizes the deflated ego - man without his yetzer hara. The omer period that follows continues the process of spiritual refinement with the goal of presenting us before G-d as purified beings by Shavuos, when we relive the giving of Torah.

Thus, the Leshem (Rabbi Shlomo Elyashiv, zt"l) continues:

"For, the rectification of the Malchus and Israel are one and the same process, because they are its structure and limbs. It emanates throughout every Jew, and it is the totality of the Jewish people. All rectifications of Israel are within it because they represent the emanation of its spirit."

Again, simply put, the perfection of the Jewish people represent the perfection of the Kingdom of G-d on earth. Every Jew who returns to Torah and sanctifies the Name of G-d by trying to lessen and then remove the yetzer hara from his life represents a rectified portion of the Kingdom of G-d. We are the "bricks" in the Kingdom of G-d. Its soul is our soul.

Think about it. It's an awesome thought.

Shabbos Day:

On that day you must offer an unblemished male yearling sheep for a Burnt-Offering to G-d. The meal-offering must be two-tenths of an ephah of flour mixed with oil, a Fire-Offering to G-d for a pleasing fragrance. The Libation-Offering of wine should measure the fourth part of a hin. (Vayikra 23:12-13)

Wait, it gets better, as the Leshem continues:

"The Omer-Offering was to rectify the Divine Presence and Israel in this world every year. However, the main rectification will be in the future at the 'End-of-Days.' The redemption will begin on Pesach and be completed on Shavuos."

The main point of this specific offering was to reunite G-d with His people. Gradually, year after year

- even if we can't sense it - the Omer-Offering that was brought for forty-nine days between Pesach and Shavuos was repairing the relationship between G-d and the Jewish nation.

However, the main 'tikun' has yet to come because it will occur in the final set of forty-nine days necessary for this task, the one at the End-of-Days. The result will be that:

"The Divine Presence will be fully revealed through the Jewish people, as it says in Yeshayahu (30:20), 'Your Teacher will no longer be hidden behind His garment, and your eyes will behold your Teacher'. Behold, the Holy Divine Presence is called 'Faith of Israel' (Emunas Yisroel) because only Israel believes that G-d reigns forever, and that only He has created, creates, and will create all that will ever exist."

That's what WE are ALL about, have been about, are right now, and always will be about. This is what it means to be a "light unto nations," to make it eminently clear to the world that the Torah is not just a story - it is the most accurate description of reality that mankind can grasp. At some point in time, with or without our help, this is going to become true as reality flip-flops and what was once 'myth' in the minds of the masses - Torah - will become reality and what was reality will become distant illusion.

The only question is, does this process continue on in our day when we do not have a Temple and therefore cannot bring the Omer-Offering?

The answer, of course, is yes. What we lost primarily when the Temple was destroyed was the 'right' and possibility to work in partnership with G-d towards a common goal: redemption and the end of history. While we had a Temple we had a 'medium' through which to make a significant and specific contribution to the cause of creation, one that channeled the spiritual energies of the Jewish people in a very profound way.

However, Temple-less, we clearly lack such a focal point for the spiritual and physical output of the Jewish people. Nevertheless, that does not mean that we lack ALL means to 'contribute' to the ultimate goals of the Omer-Offering. This was particularly evident from the fact that Rebi Akiva lost his 24,000 students during this period of time, accounting for the mourning aspect of what should be a thoroughly happy, though, very contemplative time of the year.

However, the main point here is that "the redemption will begin on Pesach and be completed on Shavuos," and as the Talmud states elsewhere, "war is also the beginning of redemption" (Megillah 17b). Ironically, it was the savage suicide bombing of a Pesach Seder this year in Netanyah that instigated the high level of war that Israel is presently fighting, and which is drawing international wrath and threatening to draw in U.N. troops.

If so, then this places a whole new emphasis on another aspect of the Omer mitzvah, one that is still practical even in our times and at this late and thorny period of history.

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

You must count seven complete weeks from the day after the day of rest, from the day that you brought the Omer for the Wave-Offering, until the day after the seventh week, a total of fifty days. (Vayikra 23:15-16)

In anticipation of the holiday on which the Torah was given, we count the days between Pesach and Shavuos. Like someone counting money which is dear to him, we don't count down but up to the event of events, 'Matan Torah.'

However, Sefiras HaOmer, which is implemented by verbally stating the count itself after three medium stars have come out in the evening sky, has the dual effect of connecting two of the three Jewish festivals in an intimate bond. In a very real and practical sense, the first day of Pesach is the first day of Yom Tov, Shavuos itself is the last day of Yom Tov, and the days of the omer in-between are like the period of 'Chol HaMoed.'

The message is clear: the process that began on Pesach only ends on Shavuos; the one that centered around matzah ends only on the one whose offering is two loaves of bread. The Omer-Offering and the Omer-Count were and are the vehicles by which to travel from Point A to Point B. It may be a simple and quick mitzvah to perform, but a VERY effective one as well.

This is why in advance of the Omer-Count there is a paragraph that explains, in detail, just what we are about to do, to make sure that our thoughts are properly aligned. Many skip this paragraph for one reason or another.

In some siddurim there is also another anomaly. In the blessing in advance of the count, the Name of G-d is expanded in brackets. In other words, each of the four letters of G-d's Ineffable Name (the Tetragrammaton) are written as they sound (i.e., Yud-Vav-Dalet, Heh-Aleph, Vav-Aleph-Vav, Heh-Aleph). There are four such versions of G-d's Name, and the gematria of this version is equal to 45 when you add up the value of all ten-letters. It is the Name that corresponds to the level of Chesed through Yesod in the Sefiros, and the light with which G-d brings redemption.

Furthermore, the prayer "Ana b'koach" is also found in the Sefiras HaOmer service, which automatically indicates that something very spiritual is taking place. This is THE prayer whose seven stanzas produce the 42-Letter Name of G-d that prophets used to meditate on before ascending to higher spiritual plateaus. Just as in the case when we welcome in Shabbos, we recite this prayer to use it as and to signal the ascension to a higher spiritual domain.

Again, not all recite anything more than the brochah and the Omer-Count, but all siddurim seem to print very much the same thing.

However, perhaps the climax of all of this is the final paragraph that contains within it all the goals

and aspirations of every Jew, and the key to the importance of the Omer-Count:

"Master of the Universe, You commanded us through Moshe, Your servant to count the Omer-Count in order to cleanse us from our encrustations of evil and from our contaminations, as You have written in Your Torah, "You are to count from the day after the rest day, from the day you brought the Omer-Offering that is waved; they are to be seven complete weeks. Until the day after the seventh week you are to count fifty days" (Vayikra 23:15), so that the souls of Your people Israel be cleansed of their contamination. Therefore, may it be Your will, G-d, our G-d and the G-d of our Forefathers, that in the merit of the Omer-Count that I have counted today, that there be corrected whatever blemish I have caused in the sefirah (and here we insert the sefirah that corresponds to the day itself). May I be cleansed and sanctified with the holiness of Above, and through this may abundant bounty flow in all the worlds. And may it correct our lives, spirits, and souls from all sediment and blemish; may it cleanse us and sanctify us with Your exalted holiness. Amen, Selah!"

It's a long paragraph, and again, many skip it. However, it does tell the whole story and seems to say that the actual counting of the Omer acts in very much the same way as the Omer-Offering itself did. Therefore, it is a simple and quick mitzvah that is to be taken seriously and performed with great intention, especially as the Jewish people stand at such important historical crossroads, which threaten to affect the life of every Jew, no matter where he or she lives.

MELAVE MALKAH: Trust and Faith in G-d, Part Three

"When we further contemplate this matter, we will see that it is as if certain very holy people whose spiritual strength was great and who were always directed towards G-d also erred in this matter, though not as the result of a test or complaining, G-d forbid, but as a result of their own humility and great holiness. Nevertheless, on their level it is still considered a mistake and blemish. The rabbis write in 'Pesikta d'Rav Kahana' and it is also found in Vayikra Rabbah (29:2): And you, Ya'akov my servant, do not fear: On the ladder that The Holy One, Blessed is He, showed Ya'akov Avinu, the angel of Baval ascended and then descended, after which the angel of Medai ascended and descended, and then the angel of Yavan ascended and descended, and finally the angel of Edom ascended and descended. The Holy One, Blessed is He, told Ya'akov, 'You ascend too.' At that moment Ya'akov became afraid and said, 'G-d forbid I should ascend like the rest and descend as well!' The Holy One, Blessed is He, told him, 'Do not fear, for you will ascend but never descend.' However, he did not believe Him and therefore did not ascend. Reb Becharia in the name of Rebi Meir elucidated: Ya'akov Avinu erred in this and did not believe in His wonders and therefore he did not ascend. The Holy One, Blessed is He, told him, "Had you trusted in Me and ascended, you would never have come down again. Now that you did not trust in me, your children will be oppressed by

the four kingdoms'..." (Drushei Olam HaTohu 2:5:4:5)

What had been bothering Ya'akov Avinu - the GREAT Ya'akov Avinu? If he himself, OUR Forefather, could not find it within himself to adequately trust in G-d at his moment in truth, then how can we be expected to act otherwise?

According to the Leshem, Ya'akov was bothered by his own imperfection. In his humility, he assumed that he could still sin, and if not him, then his descendants, and that this would 'force' G-d to send his children into exile. After all, how could G-d simply look the other way in the face of sin, which may even undermine the entire Torah like idol worship or illicit relationships?

Therefore, it wasn't that Ya'akov doubted G-d's good will and desire to treat him and his descendants the best way possible. He certainly didn't doubt His ability to do so! Rather, what he doubted was HIS own ability to uphold HIS end of the bargain, which would cause G-d to make his future people 'descend' just as the other nations did as well.

"However," continues the Leshem, "it seems to me that the main thing is that any promise of good cannot be changed even in light of sin, as it says in Midrash Tanchuma, Parashas Vayaira (13) ... In fact, the only time such an occurrence does happen is when the trust itself is the reason for the sin, that is, he trusts in G-d not to punish him and therefore he acts wantonly and leniently and sins ... Regarding, Ya'akov Avinu, he feared that if he trusted in himself that he would become lenient and sin, and thus his trust would be the reason for his sin and cause for G-d to change His promise ..."

Thus, concludes the Leshem, only when a person uses his trust in G-d as a reason to be lenient in terms of mitzvah performance and committing transgressions, things can backfire. However, if one sincerely trusts in G-d, is doing his best to live by Torah appropriately, and finds himself in need of Divine help through no negligence of his own, then trust in G-d will save the day - to the extent that one actually is prepared to rely upon G-d.

A peaceful and meaningful Shabbos for ALL of the Jewish people,
Pinchas Winston