

WHEN IT REALLY COUNTS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Dedicated to Tuvia ben Yishai HaLevi (Theodore Kaye), z"l, who died on Shabbos, 17 of Iyar 5723 (May 11, 1963) at the age of 55. A generous man with a very good heart, he always felt for the other person and enjoyed helping people in distress. He was always willing to give of his time to teach others, and would often bring home people who he felt were hungry and too broke to buy food, and feed them. May the merit of the reading of this parshah sheet bring him even closer to Hashem Yisborach than he must already be. His daughter, Miriam Tova Weinberg.

FRIDAY NIGHT:

You shall then count seven complete weeks after the day following the [Pesach] holiday when you brought the Omer as a wave offering, until the day after the seventh week, when there will be [a total of] 50 days. [On that fiftieth day] you may present new grain as a meal offering to G-d. From the land upon which you live, you shall bring two [wheat] loaves of bread as a wave offering . . . This is an eternal law for all generations. (Vayikra 23:15-21)

The fiftieth day being Shavuos. A simple question: Why isn't the fiftieth day part of the Omer-Count? Why do we only count forty-nine days, and not fifty days? Likewise, why doesn't the Omer-Count begin on the first day of Pesach?

There are several answers to these questions, but the ultimate implication is that both the first day of Pesach and the fiftieth day of the Omer, Shavuos, is beyond our ability to count them. Both days are completely beyond the physical realm and beyond our ability to reach them on our own.

A couple of times the Talmud mentions that a Bas Kol, a Heavenly Voice announced that a particular rabbi merited prophecy, but that generation did not warrant him receiving it. This means that the rabbi in question had fulfilled all the personal criteria for G-d to directly communicate with him, but since prophecy is primarily to communicate to the people what G-d wants them to know, and since the generation would not listen to the message with sincerity, the talmid chacham was denied prophecy.

In other words, prophecy is not a given. For it to be a given, so-to-speak, it must be a natural result of one's efforts to achieve it. As the Talmud says, if someone says that he worked hard and failed, or that he didn't work hard and succeeded, do not believe him. the Talmud concludes (Megillah 6b), only if the person says he worked hard and succeeded are you to believe him. Why? Because that is the NATURAL way of things in this world.

However, it is not natural to become a prophet. It is natural to become a talmid chacham after a lot of effort and plenty of learning, but it is NOT natural to talk directly with G-d. That is a miracle in the greatest sense in our present condition battling the yetzer hara on a daily basis; a gift one receives from G-d for some higher purpose. When Moshiach arrives, we will no longer have the yetzer hara to battle, and prophecy, direct communication from the higher realms will be a normal event.

The truth is, everything is a gift from G-d, and there isn't anything that we do that is not facilitated by Divine Providence. However, for the sake of free-will, almost all of the Divine Providence that we enjoy daily is hidden away in consistency and commonalities. In other words, the fact that we can pull ourselves out of bed each morning and function each day is not considered such a great miracle when billions of people have been doing it each day around the world for almost 6000 years. Unless, of course, there is something uncommon about it. For example, if a person is disabled in some way that greatly hampers his physical or intellectual ability, yet he still functions "normally," then the miracle of ability becomes more obvious through his achievements. The trick to life is appreciating even the most basic and common aspects of everyday life, as if they are unusual and beyond what is considered to be normal.

However, if a person pushes himself hard enough and long enough, he will eventually reach a wall, be it a physical limitation or a spiritual one. And, it will not necessarily help him to find someone else who has broken through that wall and now lives on the other side of it. It is clear that another element, beyond another intense effort, is necessary to make the leap. It is clear that unless a Heavenly hand reaches down to pick up the person and shuttle him to the higher level, he just isn't going to get there on his own.

The technical yeshivishe term for that is *siyita d'Shemayah*, or help from Heaven. And, as we said already, though everything is a function of Heavenly assistance, some things are only possible because Heaven provided an obvious helping hand. It is to this realm that the holiday of Shavuot belongs, because it is from the realm of FIFTY that it emanates:

Regarding the matter of the fiftieth gate of the Fifty Gates of Impurity, they are mentioned by the Ramak in *Sefer Pardes* (Sha'ar HaSha'arim, Ch. 1). However, the GR"A in *Mishlei* on the verse, "All G-d does is for His sake" (*Mishlei* 16:4), says that the *Sitra Achra* only has forty-nine gates, and not a fiftieth . . . which are the Forty-Nine Faces of Purity and the Forty-Nine Faces of Impurity, as it says in *Midrash Tehillim* (*Mizmor* 12:4), and in many other places. The fiftieth gate [on the side of holiness] is the level of *Ain Sof*, as it says in *Tikunim* (*Tikun* 22), and to this level there is no one in the realm of the *Sitra Achra*, G-d forbid. (*Sha'arei Leshem*, p. 408)

That is, it is completely *l'malah min hateva* - supernatural.

SHABBOS DAY:

Moshe went up to G-d, and G-d called to him from out of the mountain, "Say to the house of Ya'akov, and tell the Children of Israel . . ." (Shemos 19:3)

SAY TO THE HOUSE OF YA'AKOV: This denotes the women: Speak to them in a gentle language;
TELL THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL: Explain to the men the punishments and details of the commandments in words that are as harsh as wormwood. (Rashi)

One might have thought that when G-d actually gave Torah to the Jewish people, He simply said it as it is, on the same level for everyone. After all, He healed the unwell to prepare them for the receiving of Torah, why not make the giving of Torah easy by making everyone understand everything the same way and on the same level?

No, explains Rashi. Even then, at the most monumental moment of history since the creation of man, G-d acknowledged and accounted for the differences between the genders, and between individuals for that matter. Indeed, part of the miracle of the giving of the Torah was how G-d spoke to everyone at the same time, but each person heard the same information on a level that was suitable to him or her.

For, there were and are two aspects to Mattan Torah, the general one experienced by the entire nation collectively, and the individual one that is based upon one's spiritual and physical nature. The former was a function of the needs of history and that of the nation, and the latter is always a function of the extent to which the individual has prepared himself to personally receive Torah.

Thus, on one hand, Shavuos is Shavuos - the same holiday for every Jew, beginning, transpiring, and ending the same way for all Jews equally. On the other hand, Shavuos is different for every single Jew, a function of the extent to which he is prepared to receive the gift of the light of G-d on the sixth night of Sivan each year.

The Leshem writes:

The depth of the matter is that the offering of the Omer that is performed each year, which is for the sake of building the Malchus to completion, begins each year on the first day after [the first day of] Pesach, and is completed by the holiday of Shavuos, as it is known from the Arizal. Through this, Israel is rectified in this world and becomes holy to G-d, free of any trace of the Sitra Achra. For, the tikun of the Malchus and Israel are one and the same thing, since they are her structure and limbs; she emanates throughout each Jew, and she is Klal Yisroel. Every tikun to Israel and their deeds are all within her, for they are her spirit . . . The Omer-Offering rectifies the Shechinah and Israel in this world each year, but the main tikun will be at the end of days, and the redemption will begin on Pesach and end on Shavuos . . . (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 87)

The Malchus being referred to is the eventual kingdom of G-d meant to be established on earth through the Jewish people, who, as the Leshem explains, is the basis of that kingdom. Its completion coincides with Yemos HaMoshiach, after evil has been eliminated and free-will is no more. In the meantime we are building it, spiritual brick after spiritual brick, year after year primarily during the period of the Omer.

At the same time, we are building Shavuot and Mattan Torah. Each day of the Omer that we count is like another piece of a stage that we build to be completed on the forty-ninth day of the Omer upon which G-d can and will give us Torah on the fiftieth day. According to the "size" of that stage and its spiritual strength, that is the extent to which it can be used for the giving and receiving of Torah on a personal level.

Thus, all that we can do, accomplish and build, is within the physical realm represented by the number seven and multiples of it up to forty- nine. Though we are spiritual beings and affect the world spiritually, we operate primarily in what is referred to as Olam HaZeh - this World. In terms of the sefiros, we can directly affect Chesed through Yesod, which govern the six millennia of Olam HaZeh, but not beyond this.

After having successfully reached the forty-ninth day of the Omer, we stop. We have gone as far as we can go, built as much as we can build, and we wait in exhilarated anticipation - FOR A MIRACLE, and the giving of the Nun Sha'arei Binah - the Fifty Gates of Understanding that are the holiday of Shavuot.

Like the first day of Pesach itself, this is something that is far beyond any counting or building man can do. It can only be a gift from G-d.

MELAVE MALKAH:

This very day shall be consecrated as a sacred holiday when no work can be done. (Vayikra 23:21)

This, perhaps, helps to explain another anomaly of the holiday of Shavuot: There are so few mitzvos for THE holiday that celebrates the giving and acceptance of mitzvos!

There are so many detailed mitzvos to Pesach that we have to start learning them at least thirty days before the holiday even starts. Succos is also packed with mitzvos and their details from the construction of a kosher succah to the waving of a kosher lulav and esrog. But Shavuot? There is a TRADITION to stay up all evening and learn Torah, and another one to have cheesecake prior to the Yom Tov meal.

This only goes to show how supernatural and beyond human effort the giving of Torah actually is. There is no mitzvah, per say, that we can do to guarantee that it will happen for us; we can only work hard to "inspire" Heaven to give it to us (as a gift) on whatever level we're able to experience it. Thus it says:

The level of the Fifty Gates of Understanding is the level of knowledge given to the Ba'al Teshuvah. (Pri Tzaddik, Tu B'Av 6)

Those who do teshuvah - that is, turn their hearts completely back to G-d, because:

Teshuvah is a function of Imma (i.e., the sefirah of Binah) . . . Therefore, anyone who sins and does teshuvah, the "Imma Ila'a" (Upper Imma) which is called "Teshuvah" rectifies the blemish of a person,

which is sufficient. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 21)

And thus the Talmud states that:

The place that Ba'alei Teshuvah stand, the completely righteous can't stand. (Brochos 34b)

Because righteousness can take one as far as Chesed, but it is the help from Heaven that takes one to the level of Binah, and thus it also says:

The prophets only prophesied for the Ba'alei Teshuvah. (Ibid.)

For nevuah (Nun-Bais-Vav-Aleph-Heh), the Hebrew word for prophecy is in fact "NUN comes," an allusion to the fact that prophecy is a function of the Fifty Gates of Understanding, which are given to the Ba'alei Teshuvah, the truly repentant.

That makes sense, given the fact that the Talmud states that this world was made for teshuvah:

Why was this World created with the [letter] Heh? Because it is like a promenade, so that all who want to exit may. Why does its leg hang [in mid-air]? If he wants to return in teshuvah, he can go up and enter through there (the gap between the roof of the Heh and the vertical leg). (Menachos 29b)

And:

Fifty Gates of Understanding were created in the world . . . (Rosh Hashanah 21b)

And thus, the world was created for Mattan Torah and the holiday of Shavuot, alluded to, once again, by the letter Heh:

And it was evening and it was morning, Yom HAsishi - THE sixth day. (Bereishis 1:31)

The letter Heh [preceding the word Shishi] is extra . . . to say that [G-d] made a condition with them [creation]: "If the Jewish people accept the Five (i.e., Heh) Books of the Torah [on the SIXTH day of Sivan, 2,448 years later], [then it is] good; if not, then you will resort back to null and void." (Shabbos 88a)

MELAVE MALKAH:

One more question before we leave: Why wasn't Torah given in Eretz Yisroel, the holiest land in the world? Of which it says:

All of this is by way of the holy light of the Holy One, Blessed is He, Who emanates His light and makes it dwell on the Western Wall, and from there it dwells on the Jewish people [and then it spreads out to the rest of the world] (Drushei Olam HaTohu 1:161a)

Why wasn't it given on top of Har HaBayis, where Ya'akov found the gate to Heaven after waking up from his incredible dream about the future of the Jewish people, the future home of the first two temples, and the final one, b'ezras Hashem, may it be in our time?

There are midrashim that deal with this issue. The most famous midrash teaches about the importance of humility when it comes to learning Torah (Har Sinai was a small mountain; Sotah 5a). Indeed, the Talmud mentions that Torah is compared to water, and like water it flows from high to low, and from Heaven to the humble person (Eiruvin 55a). Thus, right before Shavuot we read Parashas Bamidbar, to remind us that:

If a person makes himself like a desert upon which everyone treads, his learning will endure. (Eiruvin 54a)

Since he makes himself like a desert, ownerless to all, the Torah will be given to him as a gift. (Nedarim 55a)

Or, perhaps because we were destined to spend thousands of years in exile, the Torah was given to the Jewish people while they were still in exile. On the other hand, many great rabbis and the Talmud both indicate that the mitzvos don't even count in the Diaspora, although sins do. And, even though we don't hold likethis, the fact that such great rabbis could even suggest such a possibility means that there is definitely something to this idea.

The truth is, as the Leshem explains, at the time Hashem gave the Torah on Har Sinai, its status temporarily changed to that of the Temple with the Divine Presence hovering over it barely ten tefachim from the ground. Thus, the desert bloomed into a temporary Garden of Eden, as one would expect when the Shechinah is in the spiritual vicinity.

Nevertheless, it was still the desert, and for a specific reason. The Talmud states:

Three wonderful gifts were given by The Holy One, Blessed is He, to the Jewish people, and all of them were given through hardship. They are Torah, Eretz Yisroel, and The World-to-Come. (Brochos 5a)

We already know that Torah is a gift we could not have received had G-d not given it to us first. And if that is true of Torah, how much more so is it with The World-to-Come? And why is Eretz Yisroel sandwiched between the two in the Talmud? Does it not belong in the same realm as Torah and The World-to-Come? Therefore to receive Torah was the most "natural" thing in the world.

Thus the Talmud says:

Three inherit The World-to-Come, one of which is someone who lives in Eretz Yisroel . . . (Pesachim 113a)

And:

One who lives in Eretz Yisroel lives without transgression. (Kesuvos 111a)

And:

Of the ten kavim of wisdom that fell to the world, nine fell on Eretz Yisroel, and one on the rest of the

world. (Kiddushin 49b)

Which is why:

The air of Eretz Yisroel makes a person wise. (Bava Basra 158b)

Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

To receive Torah in the desert, a place so completely devoid of spirituality and G-dliness, how could one overlook the tremendous miracles and gift that Mattan Torah brought about?

But, now that the Torah has been given in such a way:

There is no wisdom like the wisdom of Eretz Yisroel . . . (Bereishis Rabbah 16)

Which, like Torah and Shavuos, is something you have to create the stage for, but can only actually receive as a tremendous gift from Hashem.

Have a great Shabbos,
PW

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