

THE OMER-COUNT: POWER OF SPEECH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

"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)

We are now well into the Omer-Count once again, this Shabbos being the 18th day of the Omer. The fact that it begins each year the next day after the Seder shows that it is really the continuation of all that was supposed to have been accomplished during the Seder, and that all that was supposed to be accomplished at the Seder reaches its culmination 50 days later with the holiday of Shavuot.

It is no coincidence that the Omer-Count begins with animal food—an omer of barley—and ends with human food—two loaves of wheat bread—for this is what it is all about: going from animal food to human food. That is true growth, and that is true freedom, as the following midrash alludes:

Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi said: When The Holy One, Blessed is He, told Adam, "It will bring forth thorns and thistles," a tear formed in his eye. He said before Him, "Master of the Universe! Will I and my donkey eat from the same trough?!" When He answered him, "By the sweat of your brow you will eat bread," he calmed down. (Pesachim 118a)

However, as the Meiri points out, physical ingestion is really a symbol of a intellectual and spiritual ingestion:

Flour comes from the grinding of wheat, which, the Ultimate Wisdom made for this purpose. Through this, man is distinguished from the rest of the animals, as already stated in the Talmud: When The Holy One, Blessed is He, told Adam, "It will bring forth thorns and thistles," a tear formed in his eye. He said before Him, "Master of the Universe! Will I and my donkey eat from the same trough?!" (Pesachim 118a). This means that, had it not been that his food was ground finely, he would not have been able to achieve the completion of Torah (i.e., receive Torah at Mt. Sinai 26 generations later). (Meiri, Pirkei Avos 3:21)

Thus, though the Torah refers to Pesach as Chag HaMatzos to commemorate our eating of matzah during the holiday of Pesach, we call the holiday Chag Pesach—the holiday of skipping—to remind

ourselves of how God skipped over the houses of the Jewish people to kill only the Egyptian firstborn during the tenth and final plague in Egypt.

But why was it necessary to skip over the Jewish houses in the first place? Because, tradition tells us, the Jewish people had been living amongst the Egyptians, and on the 49th level of spiritual impurity—if you can call that living—which means, for all intents and purposes, that we had been 'eating' from the same trough as the donkey of that generation. That is, our outlook towards life had been similar to that of our Egyptian hosts.

For, as the Talmud explains, the body of the Jewish people is called 'Adam' (Yevamos 63a), whereas Mitzrayim is always represented by the donkey. I say Mitzrayim, and not Egypt, because though they were once one and the same place, they are not necessarily one and the same place. In fact, today Egypt is hardly the conceptual Mitzrayim it once was, for it is not the prime representative of the yetzer hara in our generation.

Rather, over the millennia, the Mitzrayim mantle has been passed from one culture to another. Throughout history, there is always one nation, or one culture made up of many nations, that represents the main yetzer hara of the day:

Therefore, they could not remain in Egypt a moment longer lest the Sitra Achra (i.e., the Satan) become completely eradicated and free-will become eliminated, the purpose of Creation. For, Egypt was the chief of all the Klipos (i.e., spiritual impurity) and if she been destroyed then so would the Sitra Achra and yetzer hara have been destroyed completely as well. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 408)

This is alluded to by the word mitzrayim itself, which Kabbalah explains to be a composite of two words: meitzer, meaning 'border,' and yam, which means 'sea.' However, Yud-Mem is also the gematria of 50, alluding to the Fifty Gates of Understanding, the complete opposite of the 49 Gates of Spiritual Impurity. Hence, Mitzrayim is any place, in any period of history, whose culture stifles religious growth and adherence to Torah values by creating an intellectual border to keep it out.

The result of such an approach to life will always end up being spiritually lacking. As the Talmud states: *ain apitrophus l'arayos*, which means, loosely, that when people lack a higher authority to respect and fear, they will fall prey to baser instincts, such as promiscuity. Heresy always leads to morally bankruptcy, something that is always represented by the donkey.

This is because the Hebrew word for donkey is chamor, which has the same letters as the word chomer—physical ingredient. Being 'beasts of burden,' they represent non-spiritual beings distant from the reality of God and the path of Torah. Any society that rejects God and Torah, no matter how intellectually active and physically robust it may be, spiritually-speaking, is compared to a donkey.

In modern political terms, that tends to be the Left. The political Left, in our society is usually viewed

as being an 'anything goes' type group of people, very 'open' and accepting of all kinds of lifestyles—except that is, lifestyles that oppose it. Indeed, the Left can vehemently oppose such counter-lifestyles, which is why it tends to be quite anti-God and religion.

That is why it must be more than ironic that the one animal that has come to represent the American Democratic Part is the donkey:

The most common mascot symbol for the party is the donkey, although the party never officially adopted this symbol. Andrew Jackson's opponents had labeled him a jackass during the intense mudslinging in 1828. A political cartoon titled "A Modern Bilaam and his Ass" depicting Jackson riding and directing a donkey (representing the Democratic Party) was published in 1837. A political cartoon by Thomas Nast in an 1870 edition of Harper's Weekly revived the donkey as a symbol for the Democratic Party. Cartoonists followed Nast and used the donkey to represent the Democrats, and the elephant to represent the Republicans. (Wikipedia)

Even more fascinating is the source for the symbol: Bilaam. Remember Bilaam? He was the one whose donkey saw the angel that he could not see, and ended up speaking like a human to chastise and embarrass him. It was Heaven's way of saying: If you're going to act like a donkey, then We'll make your donkey act like a human. Talk about role reversal!

Who was Bilaam, and what did he have to do with the Jewish people? Actually, nothing. Bilaam was a Midianite whose country was not destined to be conquered by the approaching Jewish nation. However, his jealousy and hatred of the Jewish people dragged him into a conflict that was not his to enter, and he caused a lot of damage to the Jewish nation before he was finally taken down by Pinchas. (Sound familiar today at all?)

His main weapon of choice was speech. As Balak says to Bilaam:

"Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the country. For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed." (Bamidbar 22:6)

To curse something evil can be a good thing. However, to curse something good is an evil thing, and totally contrary to the purpose of Creation. As the Talmud states:

Rebi Elazar said: Every man was created to toil, as it says, "Because man was made to toil" (Iyov 5:7). Now, I do not know if that means to toil through speech, or in actual labor; however, once it says, "A toiling soul toils for him, for his mouth compels him" (Mishlei 16:26), I know that a person was created to toil with his mouth. I do not know, though, if this means to toil in Torah or

just in regular conversation. However, once it says, "This Torah should not leave your mouth" (Yehoshua 1:8), I know that man was created to toil in Torah [through speech]. (Sanhedrin 99b)

No wonder the Talmud admonishes:

Rava said: Anyone who speaks of non-holy matters (Rashi: childishly and light-headedly) has transgressed a positive commandment, as it says, "Speak of them" (Devarim 6:7); "them" (Rashi: words of Torah), and not other words. (Yoma 19b)

Anyone who speaks distastefully will cause a negative decree from Heaven, even if they have 70 years of merits in their favor. (Kesuvos 8b)

For, as we learn from the Torah, what comes out of a person's mouth can distinguish him from the donkey more than what goes into it:

God formed man from dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils a living soul, and the man became a living spirit. (Bereishis 2:7)

A living spirit: A speaking spirit. (Onkeles)

The impact of the soul that God gave to man, which made him different from all other living beings within Creation, was speech. This, then, would imply that, unlike many of our other physical abilities, speech is 'rooted' high up in the spiritual realm. Hence the Zohar explains:

From a man's mouth you can tell what he is. (Zohar, Bamidbar 193)

More accurately, you can tell how much his soul holds sway over his body. Actions can be deceiving, but what comes out of a person's mouth and how it does can be an instant indicator of his level of spirituality. Hence, a person is obligated to verbalize the Haggadah even when alone and he is totally familiar with it, and we count the Omer by verbally pronouncing it. Some even add the following after:

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, God, our God and the God 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 ... 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!

We use speech, like a spiritual thermometer, to calculate how close or distant we are from being like a donkey. And then we use the Omer-Count to bring us to the level of Adam in order to receive Torah, and make the break from the donkey once and for all.

Text

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