

THE OMER AND HOLINESS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God told Moshe, "Speak to the entire congregation of the Children of Israel and tell them, 'Be holy, for I, your God, am holy.'" (Vayikra 19:1-2)

We have begun the Omer Count. We began, as we do each year, on the second night of Pesach and we will continue, God willing, for 49 days altogether after which we will celebrate the holiday of Shavuos and the giving of Torah.

The mitzvah is to verbally count each of the 49 days between the holidays of Pesach and Shavuos, beginning on the second day of Pesach when, in Temple times, the Omer sacrifice containing an omer of barley was offered in the Temple. This permitted the harvesting of the new crop of wheat that had grown in the previous year until then.

Without a Temple we can no longer bring the Omer-Offering but we count the 49 days nevertheless, for a couple of reasons. For one it is a "count-up" to Shavuos and the giving of Torah (as opposed to counting down which indicates a desire to end something), showing our enthusiasm to receive Torah, and to help us maintain that enthusiasm throughout the 49 days.

Another reason is because by counting the omer we spiritually prepare ourselves to receive Torah, something that requires a lot of preparation. As to exactly what that preparation is we need look no further than the second verse of this week's parshah:

Speak to the entire congregation of the Children of Israel and tell them, "Be holy, for I, your God, am holy." (Vayikra 19:2)

The reaction to this will vary. Some people will say, "Obviously." Others will cringe and say, "Not for me." Others may simply be intrigued and say, "What does it mean to be holy?" After all, bloody crusades were called "holy," as is Jihad. Obviously this obvious concept is not so obvious.

On a metaphysical level, as the Maharal explains, the Hebrew word for holy—kodesh—tells you that to be holy is to be separate. For example, a large part of the holiness of Shabbos is that it was "separated" from the six profane working weekdays. When someone separates himself from something, he becomes holy. But from what? What is the "something" from which a person in search of holiness must separate himself?

The answer comes from a well-known Ramban, but not one that many people quote when it comes

to understand the concept of holiness. The Ramban's answer is in response to a question he has on this week's parshah, which is basically: Until this point in Sefer Vayikra we have been learning about that which makes a person holy: avoiding impure foods, abstaining from forbidden relationships, etc. Why introduce the mitzvah to be holy here, and not at the beginning of the book, or at the end of it?

His answer is a little surprising. The Ramban explains that everything the Torah taught until now was just to reach the point that we could start talking about being holy. Avoiding that which is forbidden has been the preparation for discussing what it means to be holy, and this is why it is only now that the topic is being addressed.

But what is left after having discussed all the forbidden foods and relationships? From what else can one separate himself to become holy? The Ramban explains: from that which is permissible. Being holy, says the Ramban, is a matter of not being a menuval b'reshus HaTorah, a "disgusting person with the permission of the Torah."

Well, actually, it is not with the permission of the Torah since the Torah never permits disgusting behavior. What the Ramban means is that one might think that he can eat like a glutton as long as the food is "Glatt Kosher," and that he can drink as if there is no tomorrow as long as he imbibes kosher spirits. Says Parashas Kedoshim: not if you are a pursuer of holiness.

In other words, explains the Ramban, kedushah—holiness—is not merely about how you deal with that which is forbidden to you. Any decent human being with a sense of self-dignity should be able to practice some self-control and avoid "bad stuff" no matter how much he feels like partaking of it.

Rather, says the Ramban, kedushah is about how you behave with that which is permissible to you. It is about how you interact with the world that God has given you to enjoy, and what you do with it, and why. Even after commanding so many mitzvos regarding what is forbidden, the Torah still leaves plenty of room for a person to be a menuval with what is permissible, even if he is careful to avoid that which is not.

What the Ramban may not have known in his time is how it would become possible in our generation for a person to blend both worlds together. The technology of his time may not have revealed what it does in our time, how easy it is for one to step over the line that separates that which is permissible from that which is forbidden. This is another great reason why it is important to curb one's use of even that which is permissible.

Part of the problem is that technology today allows people to fill emotional gaps they may have always had but were unable to fulfill in a way that would not call upon them suspicion and humiliation. Many people do not even know what those gaps are and therefore do not realize that they are being exploited by themselves and others, thanks to things like mobile internet, instant messaging, etc. By the time they do come to the realization what has been going on they may have already stepped over the line of right-and-wrong. It may have started off innocently, and with something that may have been "permissible" even by Torah standards. But technologies today have

the ability to "furrow" a path between the permissible and the forbidden quite stealthily. It is not always so clear to the people who walk that path when they pass from one side to the other.

Now more than ever, a person has to be careful how he enjoys the permissible, especially if kedushah, holiness, is his goal.

"Not my goal," says one group. "Why should it be my goal?" says another. "It should be every Jew's goal," says the third.

First of all, there is the command from God to be holy at the start of this week's parshah, and once upon a time, that would have been reason enough. However, in today's generation many people remain unmotivated to do the right thing unless they can sense some kind of personal benefit from what they are going to do. In other words, for many today, being holy, truly holy, has to have some kind of personal payback as well.

It does, and this is what the Omer-Count is trying to teach us.

The starting point is in knowing that everyone wants to be happy. It's a universal value among all mankind, the only difference being the philosophy of happiness from people to people. For some nations happiness is about being a good person and achieving personal fulfillment. For others, it's about blowing up innocent people in the name of a cause that has no basis in truth for anyone else but themselves. The Americans have their idea of happiness, just as the Canadians have their own, both of which may be very similar to that of the British. The French have their own version, as do the Moslems and Chinese. But at the end of the day, everyone wants to be happy because it is the way we have been hardwired.

Who is right? Is there even a "right," or is happiness meant to be subjective and therefore destined to pit nation against nation? And, if there is one path to happiness, how does one know if he is in fact walking it?

The mishnah address this issue:

*Rebi [Yehudah HaNassil] used to say: Which is the right path for man to choose for himself?
Whatever is harmonious for the one who does it, and harmonious for mankind. (Pirkei Avos 2:1)*

The Omer-Count was the build up to Kabbalos HaTorah, which came 50 days after leaving Egypt. Just before receiving Torah, we are told, the Jewish people achieved a phenomenal level of national harmony:

They traveled from Refidim and came to the Sinai Desert, and they camped in the desert; they (written: he) camped opposite the mountain. (Shemos 19:2)

He camped opposite the mountain: k'ish echad, b'leiv echad—like a single person with a single heart. (Rashi)

Not coincidentally, as the Jewish nation built towards unity they also built towards being holy, because it was the latter that led to the former. In fact, an automatic result of true holiness should be harmony, which is why it was Aharon HaKohen, the Kohen Gadol, who became the symbol of that very harmony:

Hillel said: Be of the students of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them closer to Torah. (Pirkei Avos 1:12)

Because, and this is the main point: true holiness results in true selflessness, which results in true harmony, internally and externally. If what you are doing results in the opposite, no matter how many times you write or yell out "holy" with respect to what you are doing, it is not. And without true holiness there can be no true harmony, and therefore no true happiness, for the person himself and the world in which he lives.

Certainly this means staying away from what is forbidden by the Torah. But, it also means using that which is permissible in holy ways. The Omer-Count is meant to drive this point home, to help us to prepare for the receiving of Torah, and in truth, to help us prepare for life in general.

Text

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