

DECIPHERING THE MEDRASH'S LINKAGE OF OMER, MILAH, AND SOTAH

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 371 - The Mitzvah of Ve'Kidashto:
Honoring Kohanim. Good Shabbos!*

Deciphering The Medrash's Linkage of Omer, Milah, and Sotah

In Parshas Emor, the Torah details all the various Jewish holidays. In fact, Parshas Emor is the Torah reading for many of the days of Yom Tov. We are taught "and you shall bring an Omer of the first harvest to the Kohen" [Vayikra 23:10]. Nowadays, when we fulfill the mitzvah of "counting the Omer," we enumerate "Today is so many days in the Omer." What do the words "in the Omer" mean? [It is actually one word in the original Hebrew.] "In the Omer" refers to the number of days in the count from the second day of Pessach when the Omer offering was brought.

Due to our sins, we no longer bring an Omer offering. This, in fact, is the reason that some of the early commentaries give for not reciting a "She'hechiyanu" [the blessing 'who has kept us alive' recited upon reaching a momentous milestone] when performing this mitzvah. This bracha is not recited over a 'sad' mitzvah and, in a sense, this is a 'sad' mitzvah. Every day of the Omer counting we remind ourselves that we do not have a Beis HaMikdash and so an Omer offering was not brought this year.

The Medrash on the parsha quotes Rabbi Yochanan who says "Do not let the mitzvah of Omer be trivial in your eyes, for through this mitzvah Avraham merited to inherit the Land of Canaan." Rabbi Yochanan then quotes pasukim [verses] in Parshas Lech-Lecha as support for this linkage: "And I will give to you and to your seed after you the land in which you dwelled, the entire land of Canaan, for an everlasting inheritance and I will be for them a G-d. And the L-rd said to Avraham 'and you shall keep my covenant, you and your seed after you for all generations'" [Bereishis 17:8-9].

At first glance, this Medrash appears to be disjointed. It first talks about the mitzvah of offering the Omer mentioned in Parshas Emor and then it quotes pasukim in Parshas Lech Lecha that seem to be

talking about Bris Milah [circumcision]. What is the connection between the mitzvah of counting Omer and the mitzvah of Bris Milah?

To make matters even more confusing, Reish Lakish responds to the statement of Rabbi Yochanan in the Medrash by saying "Do not let the mitzvah of Omer be trivial in your eyes, for through this mitzvah G-d made peace between man and his wife." The idea alluded to by Reish Lakish is that the Omer offering is brought from barley flour. Barley flour is also used in the case of the Sotah offering, which is used to corroborate the guilt or innocence of a woman suspected of being unfaithful to her husband. Here, too, it seems like a far-fetched linkage between the Omer offering and marital harmony.

Clearly, this enigmatic Medrash needs explanation. What is the connection between the Omer offering, getting the Land of Israel, circumcision, and the mitzvah of Sotah [the suspected wife]?

Rav Shimon Schwab explains the connection. The Talmud refers to barley as "animal food." Humans eat wheat products. What is the significance of the fact that the Omer offering is brought from barley? The Torah is teaching us a lesson that explains the essence of all of Torah. Man has the capability within himself to take that which is worthy for animals and to elevate it and make it into an offering of sublime spiritual dimension. This is what Judaism is all about -- living the life of a human being, but at the same time elevating every mundane and physical activity into something holy and spiritual. This is what the Omer offering symbolizes.

The mitzvah of Bris Milah teaches a similar lesson. We make a sign of holy covenant in the very part of the body that can symbolize the animalistic nature of man. We sanctify the organ that represents raw passion, to show that even that aspect of our lives can be made holy. When G-d told Avraham that he is being given the Land of Canaan on condition that he 'keep the covenant.' G-d was telling the first Jew that the Land of Canaan is not meant for decadent people. The Canaanites were chased out precisely because they lived an animalistic existence. "I am giving you this land because I expect that you will elevate even your physical life into a matter of spirituality."

Finally, this is also the relationship to the Sotah sacrifice. The reason why the Sotah brings a barley offering rather than a wheat offering is because "she did an act fit for animals - by her brazen behavior - so too her offering is from food fit for animals." We tell her to take this "animal food" and elevate it into an offering, to symbolize that from hereon in, she too must begin to elevate her life as well.

This is the common denominator between Omer, Milah, and Sotah. All of them demonstrate the Jews' ability and obligation to take a life that tugs us down to this world and try to elevate it into a holier life.

The Chofetz Chaim's Wish Was Granted

This week's parsha contains the pasukim "And you shall not profane my Holy Name; and I shall be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel; I am the L-rd who sanctifies you. The One who took you out of the land of Egypt..." [Vayikra 22:32-33]. This is the positive Biblical commandment of Sanctifying G-d's Name.

The Sifra comments on the connection between this mitzvah and the description of G-d as 'the One who took you out of the land of Egypt': "It was on condition that you publicly sanctify My Name, that I took you out of Egypt." The whole purpose of the Exodus from Egypt was for the Jews to become the vehicle whereby the Name of G-d could be glorified and sanctified in this world.

If we take a poll among Jews, asking for the definition of "Kiddush HaShem" [sanctifying G-d's Name], the average reaction will be - martyrdom, dying for the sanctification of G-d's Name. This is a true definition. Come what may, under certain circumstances, we are called upon to give up our life to defend G-d's laws. A Jew must be willing and prepared to do that.

However, "Kiddush HaShem" does not only relate to death. It also relates to life. There is a mitzvah to live a life that sanctifies G-d's Name (living al pi Kiddush HaShem). Rav Pam interpreted a pasuk in Tehillim to illustrate this point: "By the sons of Korach, a psalm, a song whose foundation is in the holy mountains" Tehillim [87:1]. The pasuk speaks of the foundation of the Jewish people being in two holy mountains. One of those mountains is Mount Moriah, the place of the Binding of Yitzchak. The other mountain is Mount Sinai, the place where the Torah was given. Mount Moriah, says Rav Pam, is the place that symbolizes the Jewish obligation to die in order to sanctify G-d's Name. Mount Sinai, on the other hand, is the place that symbolizes the Jewish obligation to live a life that sanctifies G-d's Name.

Rav Pam quoted an incident from the life of the Chofetz Chaim. A young yeshiva student was once standing in prayer close enough to overhear the prayers of the Chofetz Chaim. He testifies that the Chofetz Chaim was pleading and begging the Almighty that he should be given the opportunity to die in sanctification of G-d's Name.

It would appear that the Chofetz Chaim's prayers were not answered. He did not die a martyr's death. He passed away in 1933, well before the Holocaust began. It would appear that the Chofetz Chaim's wish was not granted.

But, Rav Pam said, "G-d does do the will of those who fear him" [Tehilim 145:19]. The Chofetz Chaim wanted to fulfill the mitzvah in this week's parsha of "And I will be sanctified in the midst of the Children of Israel." That wish was granted. He did not die by way of Kiddush HaShem. He lived his entire life as a life of Kiddush HaShem. It is more difficult to live a life of Kiddush HaShem than to die through Kiddush HaShem. Martyrdom is a very difficult test. We should never know from it. But it only takes a minute and then it is over. To live a life of impeccable sanctification of G-d's Name for 90 plus years may be even more difficult. The Chofetz Chaim was granted his wish. He did fulfill the mitzvah of sanctifying G-d's Name in the midst of the Jewish people.

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