

# SHAVUOS

*by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff*

## SHAVUOS, 5639

The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar with a quote from the Zohar: "A person should hold tight to the special tahara (purity) that descends upon him on this night" (the night of Shavuot). For, explains the Sfas Emes, HaShem purifies Bnei Yisroel on this night, so we can be keilim tehorim (vessels in a state of purity), and thus fit to receive the Torah.

Continuing, the Sfas Emes quotes from Tehillim (12:7-8): "Imros HaShem imaros tehoros ... " (ArtScroll: "The words of HaShem are pure words; like purified silver ... refined sevenfold ("shiva'sayim"). Note this word -- "sevenfold". Later in the ma'amar, we will often encounter the number 49. This pasuk is the source from which that number is drawn.

The pasuk continues: "May, You, HaShem, protect them ...". The Sfas Emes explains that the "them" which the pasuk is asking HaShem to protect refers to the words of Torah. Their purity will be preserved by their being kept in the purity of our hearts. The Zohar (and the Sfas Emes) are telling us is that now, at our Matan Torah, we too should prepare our hearts to be vessels suitable for preserving the Torah in its purity.

Note the implication. If we do not make a special effort to preserve the words in their purity, they will be lost. Apparently, there are powerful forces in the world that erode the purity of our hearts, and thus, of HaShem's words. Those corrosive agents go under multiple names; but they share the same underlying identity. As Chazal phrase it (Bava Basra, 16a): "Hu hasatan, hu yetzer hara, hu malach hamaves". ["Satan, the Evil Inclination and the Angel of Death are all one and the same."] All of these names refer to the same basic feature of human existence: the dark forces of self-destruction that lurk deep within all of us.

The Sfas Emes explains that we can achieve the necessary preparation for receiving the Torah during sefiras ha'omer. Clearly, this process of purification is not automatic. How does it work? To help us understand what he has in mind, the Sfas Emes refers us to the Medrash Rabba on parshas Emor. The Medrash there comments on the pesukim in Tehilim that the Sfas Emes cited earlier in this ma'amar. The Medrash explains that Dovid Hamelech composed that perek (chapter) (Tehilim, 12) in a very specific historical context.

In the time of Dovid Hamelech, there were children who were extremely accomplished. These children were so advanced in Learning that they could discern many alternative "pahnim"

(perspectives; ways of looking at a case) on which to decide a halachic question. In fact, their intellect took them so far that they could see 49 ways of ruling a halachic case as being tahor (ritually pure) and -- in the very same case -- 49 perspectives to rule it tamei (ritually impure).

The Medrash is saying that working with their precocious intellect, these young talmidei chachamim came up with utter ambiguity. Consequently, they had no basis for knowing right from wrong. Further, ambiguity also means uncertainty and doubt - i.e., "safeik". And, as you may recall, the word "safeik" is exactly the same gematria (numerical value) as the name of our -- and HaShem's -- arch-enemy Amaleik.

This was the context within which Dovid Hamelech prayed to HaShem to protect them (the bright scholars and their Learning). The Sfas Emes extends this line of thought by presenting his non-pshat of the Medrash. During the 49 days of sefiras ha'omer, we work to separate ("levarer") the 49 pahnim of tahara which are mixed together with the 49 pahnim of tum'a. The mixture of purity with impurity can easily put us in a state of confusion. In the 49 days of sefiras ha'omer, we wrestle intellectually with life's ambiguities, doubts, and moral uncertainties. Apparently, the Sfas Emes sees this phase of struggle with doubt as a necessary part of the process of receiving the Torah. Ultimately, we can come through this stage of 49 levels of ambiguity, and reach the 50th gateway ("sha'ar") -- Shavu'os. There, receiving the Torah anew, we have access to unalloyed tahara!

Finally, the Sfas Emes notes an allusion that we may have missed. To the Sfas Emes, the word "pahnim" brings irresistibly to mind the fact of "penimiyus" -- the inner Presence of HaShem. The Sfas Emes tells us that the 49 pahnim of tum'a also contain HaShem at their penimiyus. Thus, the process of sefiras ha'omer can also include extracting the tahor from the tamei.

For these reasons, on Shavuos we bring the offering of the two Loaves of Chometz. (Note: leavened bread, i.e., chometz, symbolizes the yetzer hara.) For, with the Torah, we can (try to?) handle the yetzer hara. Also, by bringing this offering of chometz, we express another thought. If a person looks at the world with untutored eyes, he/she could well come to a metaphysics of dualism. That is, he/she could perceive good and evil -- tum'a and tahara -- as independent forces. By bringing the offering of chometz to HaShem, we make it clear (to ourselves) that at the Source, all is unity and tahara.

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