



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Emor 5774

The Power of Speech

Rabbi Meir Goldwicht

In parashat Eموr, the Torah relates the incident of the mekalel. The mekalel was the son of an Egyptian father and a Jewish mother from the tribe of Dan, and as a result he wished to make his home in the camp of Dan, claiming that he was their fellow tribesman even though his father was Egyptian. The tribe of Dan responded that what determines one's tribe is one's father, as it says, "*Ish al diglo l'veit avotam.*" When they came before Moshe Rabbeinu for a din torah, he ruled that the man had no connection to the tribe of Dan and therefore had no right to live there. Displeased with this ruling, the mekalel cursed Moshe Rabbeinu; unsure of the punishment for the mekalel, Moshe Rabbeinu had him imprisoned until Hashem would reveal to Moshe the proper punishment, skilah.

Immediately after Hashem reveals the proper punishment, the Torah teaches the laws of damages – *ayin tachat ayin, shen tachat shen* – essentially repeating laws we already know from parashat Mishpatim. At the conclusion of these laws, the Torah repeats, "And Moshe told B'nei Yisrael to remove the mekalel from the camp and to stone him." Why does the Torah interrupt the parasha of the mekalel with the laws of damages, especially considering the fact that we already know these laws from parashat Mishpatim? We never find anything like this – in the middle of discussing one topic, the Torah "takes a break," only to return several pesukim later to the original topic!

We must also question why the din of the mekalel appears in sefer VaYikra instead of in sefer BaMidbar, like all of the other incidents that took place over the forty years B'nei Yisrael traversed the desert. For example, the mekoshesh eitzim, which took place on the very first Shabbat after B'nei Yisrael left Mitzrayim, belongs in sefer Shemot, but because of the nature of sefer BaMidbar it was placed there instead. Why, then, does the mekalel appear at the end of VaYikra instead of BaMidbar?

To answer these questions, we must enter a very interesting sugya: the sugya of dibbur. Dibbur is not just movement of the lips that facilitates interpersonal communication. Dibbur is a reflection of one's thoughts. The Rambam rules in the third perek of Hilchot Terumot that if a person had intent to say terumah but said ma'aser instead, or olah but said shelamim instead, his words have no validity until his dibbur matches his thoughts.

Shlomo HaMelech, in Shir HaShirim, refers to the dibbur of Knesset Yisrael as "*umidbarech naveh,*" comparing it to a midbar. Through proper speech you can turn a midbar into a yishuv; conversely, through improper speech you can turn a yishuv into a midbar. In Yechezkel (20:35), the galut is referred to as "*midbar ha'amim,*" because this is where HaKadosh Baruch Hu wants to bring us to the *brit kerutah bisfatayim*, to teach us to use our dibbur properly. The power of dibbur is illustrated further by Chazal, who tell us that it is forbidden to "open one's mouth to the Satan," as we learn from Avraham Avinu – even though as far as he knew, he would be returning from the Akeidah alone, the Torah tells us that he said to his servants, "And we will bow and we will return," so as not to open his mouth to the Satan. The power of a tzaddik's speech is also demonstrated in the mishnah in Berachot 5:5: A tzaddik can tell who will live and who will die based on whether his tefillah for that person flowed smoothly. The Sefer HaChinuch writes that one who uses his speech improperly is worse than an animal, because it is the ability to speak and to express one's thoughts through speech that distinguishes us from the animals. The power of dibbur is tremendous in its ability to build and to save, but also to destroy.

Sefer VaYikra deals with all the different types of kedushah that exist: *kedushat ha'adam* (tumah and taharah); *kedushat hazman* (the yomim tovim); *kedushat ha'aretz* (shemittah and yovel). With the parasha of the

mekalel, the Torah teaches us that the key to all kedushah is *kedushat hapeh*, proper dibbur. This is also the reason why the Torah reviews the laws of damages within the parasha of the mekalel, to teach us that the destruction we can wreak with our mouths is no less than that which we can cause with a gun or a rock. As clear as it is that you can murder someone with a gun, it must be just as clear that you can murder someone with your dibbur as well.

How amazing is it, then, that the Torah juxtaposes Moshe's punishment of not being able to enter Eretz Yisrael after hitting the rock instead of speaking to it to Moshe's request to pass through the land of Edom. The king of Edom refuses to let Moshe and B'nei Yisrael pass through his land, even threatening war. Why was he so opposed? Essentially, Moshe Rabbeinu was telling the king of Edom that the two of them represented Yaakov and Eisav. Yaakov promised to meet Eisav in Seir (see Bereishit

33:14). Moshe wanted to fulfill the promise of Yaakov to Eisav. The king of Edom's response was that if Moshe really represented Yaakov, he would have used the power of Yaakov, of "*hakol kol Yaakov*," in dealing with the rock. Instead, Moshe used the power of Eisav, of "*hayadayim y'dei Eisav*." If so, the king of Edom was prepared to confront them in battle, since his power through Eisav was stronger than their power through Eisav. This is the connection between Moshe's hitting of the rock and the king of Edom's refusal to let B'nei Yisrael pass through his land.

During these special days in which we find ourselves, one of the ways we must improve ourselves is by working on developing proper speech. We must become more conscious of how we speak with our parents, our wives, our children, and our friends. Through proper speech we can create worlds. It is not for no reason that Shlomo HaMelech teaches us, "*Mavet v'chayim b'yad lashon*."

Completion and Happiness

Rabbi Ephraim Meth

Although we are commanded to rejoice on each of the shalosh regalim (three festivals)¹, in this week's parasha, the Torah articulates this commandment specifically in the context of Succos.² The Torah's literary emphasis is echoed in the halakhic realm by the Rambam, who states that the mitzvah to rejoice is predominantly relevant to Succos.³ What is the unique connection between joy and the festival of Succos?

The commentators point out that each of the shalosh regalim parallels an important event in the agrarian calendar. Pesach occurs at the beginning of the barley harvest. Therefore, the first harvested barley is offered as the korban omer on Pesach. Shavuot takes place at the beginning of the wheat harvest⁴, and the first harvested wheat is offered as the shte haLechem on Shavuot. Succos, however, corresponds to the gathering of produce from the field where it was left to dry over the summer, the culmination of the planting and harvesting effort.

According to this analysis, the rejoicing of Pesach and Shavuot is connected to beginnings, while the rejoicing of Succos springs from completion. Indeed, the Rambam mentions that the Torah obligates us to rejoice on festivals in the context of the shelamim offerings. The root of shelamim (shalem) means complete. The unique status of simchah (rejoicing) on Succos implies that culminating a task generates an elevated level of joy, while starting a task

generates an ordinary level of joy.

The verse states that "the dying day is better than the day of birth⁵." The Yalkut Shimoni (973) provides a parable to explain this seemingly anomalous statement. When a ship embarks on a voyage, its owners are nervous since it might not succeed in its mission. When the ship returns successfully, however, the owners rejoice. Analogously, the fate of a child's future is uncertain, and the joy of its birth is therefore tempered with trepidation. In contrast, the shivah (seven day mourning period) is designed to help appreciate and to celebrate the life of the departed.

Jewish minhagim (customs) tend to blend the two levels of joy. On Simchas Torah, we rejoice in the completion of the yearly Torah-reading cycle. At the same time, however, we begin to read the Torah anew, to blend the happiness of embarkation with the rejoicing of culmination. A parallel minhag governs the celebration of a siyum upon completing a major Torah-study project, such as finishing a tractate of gemara. At the siyum, both the last mishna of the completed tractate and the first mishna of the following tractate are read.

Succos contains a similar blend of completion and beginning. Counting from Nissan, the first month, Succos is the final festival. Counting from Tishrei, the universal birthday, Succos is the first festival. Agriculturally, Succos represents both the end of the gathering process and the

beginning of planting.

The custom of conflating these types of rejoicing is not random. Rather, it is symbolic of continuity, a central concept in the Jewish weltanschauung. In the Talmud, the theme of continuity is sometimes symbolized by a snake eating its own tail.⁶ This image represents the continuity of tradition, which the Rambam sums up in his principle of belief: “I fully believe that the Torah which we presently possess is the same Torah that was given to Moshe.” The continuity of Succos also suggests that our work is never done; our world is dynamic, and we can always

take another step in service of Hashem. By adhering to tradition and striving for untrammelled progress, we can merit rejoicing in the shechinah (divine presence) with Moshiach’s speedy arrival.

1 Rambam, hilchos Yom Tov 6:17

2 Vayikra 23:40, Devarim 16:14

3 Rambam, hilchos lulav 8:12

4 Rashi to Shemos 9:31-32 points out that barley is ready for harvest earlier than wheat.

5 Koheles 7:1

6 Bava Metzia 59b, 85a

The Special Status of the Kohen

Rabbi Beinish Ginsburg

Parshas Emor begins “Vayomer Hashem el Moshe emor el hakohanim.” It’s striking that the Torah uses the root ‘amar’ twice in this posuk which introduces the additional mitzvos and restrictions given to the Kohanim. Generally, when Hashem introduces mitzvos to Moshe, the verbs chosen are a combination of ‘daber’ and ‘amar’. Either it’s “Vayedaber Hashem el Moshe L’emor,” or “Vayomer Hashem el Moshe Daber.” It’s striking therefore that here the Torah doesn’t use the root ‘daber’ at all, rather only the root ‘amar’. Why?

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Drash Moshe, Parshas Emor) addresses this question. He points out that we know that ‘daber’ has the connotation of strong, firm speech, while ‘amar’ has the connotation of a softer tone in speaking. Rav Moshe quotes the Gemara in Makos (Daf 11) which explains that the Torah uses ‘daber’ because Hashem wants to emphasize that we have to do the Mitzvos. For example, regarding the mitzvah of Birkas Hamazon, Hashem is not saying “If you don’t mind, please bentch after you eat a bread meal.” No! Hashem is saying “After a bread meal you mustbentch.” So in order to emphasize that we are obligated in mitzvos, the Torah uses the strong, firm language of ‘daber’ when introducing most mitzvos. Why then are the mitzvos which apply only to Kohanim given with the double language of ‘amar’?

Rav Moshe continues: The Kohanim have a more restricted lifestyle than their fellow Jews. They are restricted in whom they may marry, and they may not defile themselves by coming into contact with a human corpse. The life of the Kohen can be viewed as being somewhat burdensome. Rav Moshe writes-”Lo Kal”- it’s not easy to keep all these extra laws of Kedusha.

The Kohanim, however, must realize that these added restrictions are part of a broader package - in keeping with their exalted position of serving Hashem in the Beis HaMikdash and of being the teachers of Am Yisrael. Hashem wished to emphasize, says Rav Moshe, that the Kohen should not feel restricted by these extra prohibitions, he should be happy with his special status which includes these additional laws.

The double usage of ‘amar’ therefore comes to teach us that the additional restrictions are not burdensome but for the Kohen’s benefit - he has been given a special exalted status within the Jewish nation - he serves in the Beis HaMikdash and he is the teacher of Torah to Am Yisrael. The Kohen should view these restrictions as soft ‘amiras’ and not as harsh ‘dibur’ and be overjoyed at being singled out for these commandments.

Rav Moshe applies this principle to the modern day Kohanim - those that are involved in chinuch and teaching Torah. Sometimes there are difficulties in the profession of chinuch, but the mechanech should recognize that despite the difficulties it’s a great zechus to teach Torah.

I think that we can apply Rav Moshe’s principle in a broader sense. The life of an Orthodox Jew is more restrictive than the life of one who is non-observant - it may at times appear more difficult. We must understand that these restrictions reflect our exalted status as being Hashem’s special nation. Just like Hashem wants the Kohanim in the Beis Hamikdash to act in a certain way, eat in a certain way, marry only certain women, so too, Hashem wants His entire nation, His ‘Mamleches kohanim’, to act in a certain way, eat in a certain way, and get married in a certain way It is wonderful to be an Orthodox Jew - life is

fulfilling and full of meaning. Our life brings us simcha and satisfaction in Olam Hazeh (and certainly more schar in Olam Habah). The mitzvos may appear more difficult, but we must accept them as 'amiras' - soft and pleasant.

I would like to present the following mashal: The President of the United States would probably enjoy lounging around dressed informally (t-shirt and cotton pants). It's generally more comfortable to dress that way. But, the traditional way a president runs an important meeting is dressed in a suit and tie. The President probably

finds it annoying to have to dress formally most of the time. However, I assume he feels it is well worth that sacrifice for a position of such magnitude. By the same token, it is great to be an Orthodox Jew and we must never forget what a wonder zechus it is. With that in mind, just like the Kohanim are supposed to accept their additional stringencies as soft 'amiros', we should all try and do our best to view and accept all the Mitzvos with 'simcha u'vtuv lavov', as soft and pleasant amiros.

My Issue Ain't Your Issue

Rabbi Shlomo Einhorn

The Kohen is not allowed to come in contact with a dead body except for one of his seven relatives. As our parsha states: "To a dead person he shall not become impure among his people; except for his relative. (21:1-2)" Rambam, in his Sefer HaMitzvos (37) and Sefer HaChinuch (264), includes in this mitzvah of a Kohen becoming impure for his relatives, the mitzvah of mourning that is incumbent upon every Jew when his or her close relative dies.

If the Kohen is supposed to be kept in a pristine state so that he can constantly remain qualified for his unique service in the Temple, why should there be any exceptions to this rule?

On one hand, we could argue that it would be too much to ask of the Kohen to have to resist being there for his closest relatives. But if this was the sole reason, then why should he be allowed to defile himself for an estranged relative?

Perhaps part of the reason can be explained by the powerful and yet simple words of Rav Eliyahu Dessler. Rav Dessler, in the middle of a moving essay on derech erez (proper character traits), states "לא צריך מפני שאני בצער, להשני לסבול", literally: because I am in pain, the other person does not need to suffer. Meaning, because I have an issue, why should somebody else have to pay for it?! The Kohen may need to keep himself pure, but when a relative is in need, my 'hang-up' must take a back seat.

"Temimot" in Sefirat Ha'Omer

Rabbi Meir Orlian

You shall count for yourselves ... from the day when you bring the Omer of the waving seven weeks, they shall be temimot (complete). (Vayikra 23:15) Indeed, the days of Sefirat Ha'Omer should be "complete" weeks, since they are days of preparation for Matan Torah, about which it says, "The Torah of Hashem is temima (complete)." (Tehillim 19:8) How is "temimot" expressed in Sefirat Ha'Omer, and what can we learn from this about our preparation for Matan Torah?

The Gemara (Menachot 66a) derives from "temimot" that the omer is cut and that we begin counting from the night, so that even this part of the day should not be lost. Tosfot derive from this that each daily count must be complete from the night, and therefore one who did not count at night cannot count anymore that day. [The Geonim argue, and therefore the halacha is that he should

count that day without a bracha. (O.C. 489:7)] This teaches that "temimot" requires us to maximize the time that is granted us.

A second aspect of "temimot" can be learned from the opinion of some Geonim that if someone missed one of the days of Sefira, especially the first day - he can no longer count. Since the continuity of the count is lost, the Sefira period is no longer "complete." [Tosfot argue and maintain that each day is an individual mitzvah, and therefore, again, the halacha is that he should continue counting without a bracha. (489:8) This teaches that "temimot" requires a continuity in the service of Hashem without pause.

The Midrash introduces a third aspect of "temimot." It says: "When are [the weeks] 'temimot'? When Israel do the will of G-d." (Vayikra Rabbah 28:3) "Temimot" requires not only completeness in quantity but also in

quality, in doing the will of G-d. This is an explicit mitzvah: “You shall be tamim (wholehearted) with Hashem, your G-d” (Devarim 18:13), which the Ramban explains to mean: “You shall not be lacking in fear of Him.”

It’s about Time

Rabbi Josh Hoffman

The latter part of parshas Emor consists largely of a section on the festivals. Included in this section is the commandment to bring the korban HaOmer, a meal offering made of barley, on the second day of Pesach, and, forty-nine days later, the korban Shte HaLechem, a meal offering made of wheat. We are also commanded to count the days and weeks in between these two offerings. This count is known as the mitzvah of sefiras HaOmer, counting forty-nine days from the bringing of the Omer. The rabbis tell us that this count also commemorates the response of the children of Israel to God’s announcement that they would receive the Torah at the end of this period. They counted the days until that anticipated event much as a slave counts the days until his anticipated manumission. This aspect of sefiras HaOmer is elaborated upon by the author of the Sefer HaChinuch. However, when we perform this mitzvah, we only mention the aspect of its connection to the minchas HaOmer. Perhaps this is because the Torah itself does not mention the connection of the count to the giving of the Torah. Still, both aspects are in the background of this mitzvah, and it would therefore be worthwhile to explore whether there is a connection between them.

The great medieval rabbinic authority, Rabbi Dovid Avudraham, in his classical commentary to the siddur, writes that the purpose behind the commandment of sefiras HaOmer is to remind us that on Pesach the world is in pain over the fate of the crops that were planted, and on Shavuot the world is in pain over the fate of the fruit of the trees. We are in need of God’s mercies for the success of both, and, so, we count the days in between to remind us of our dependency upon him for our continued sustenance. He then adds, citing the mishnah in Pirkei Avos, that this dependency on God for our sustenance has a connection to our learning of Torah as well, because if we do not have the sustenance we need, there can be no Torah learning. Following up on the Avudraham’s explanation of the significance of the count in terms of our need for sustenance, I would like to suggest a different explanation

If we utilize these days completely and with continuity to do the will of G-d – be”H we will reach Shavuot ready for Matan Torah!

for its connection to Torah.

Rabbi Yosef Salant, in his *Be’er Yosef*, also writes that this period of time makes us cognizant of our dependence of God for our sustenance. He marshals evidence from the midrash and the Zohar to show that, actually, the Omer brought on Pesach is an allusion to the manna, whose measure was an Omer, a tenth of an eipha, and which God provided us with during our forty years in the wilderness. The midrash says that just as God gave us one omer measure of manna per head, we offer him the Omer on Pesach. The idea embedded here, writes Rabbi Salant, is one of gratitude to God for granting us sustenance, and a recognition that the reason God provided us with the manna was in order for us to receive the Torah. The midrash elaborates on this connection between the manna and the Torah, and says that the Torah was only given to those who eat the manna. Actually, Rabbeinu Bachya, in his commentary to Beshalach, writes that when the nation left Egypt, they were not yet on a high enough spiritual plane to receive the Torah. The manna had a spiritual element to it, and by eating it, the people prepared themselves to receive the prophecy at Mt. Sinai through which the Torah was given. Rabbi Salant writes that the lesson taught us by the manna is our need to continually trust in God, and only through that recognition do we merit being given the Torah. I believe, however, that the connection between the manna, and by extension the Omer, and Torah goes beyond the idea presented by Rabbi Salant, as I will try to demonstrate.

As we have seen, the Omer is an allusion to the manna, which was given to us in the wilderness on a daily basis. This process of daily dependence on God for our sustenance continued for forty years, and was thus imprinted upon the collective conscience of the nation. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, zt”l, writes, in an essay included in a posthumously published volume, *Family Redeemed*, that there are two aspects to the study of Torah. Rambam, in his *Laws of Talmud Torah*, elaborates on the obligation to study Torah. In chapter one, *halochos*

1-5, he sets forth the obligation to study Torah whether one is rich or poor, etc., as well as the obligation to teach one's children. Then, in halacha 8, he seems to begin all over again, saying, "every Jew is under an obligation to study Torah, etc., to set aside a definite period during the day and at night for the study of Torah." Why, asks Rabbi Soloveitchik, is there a need to set up a specific time each day to learn? As long as a person attains the knowledge required, mastering the entire Torah, why should it matter how he schedules his learning?

Rabbi Soloveitchik answers that the obligation to set up specific times to learn is quite aside from the intellectual obligation to master the contents of Torah. In fact, the Tosafos to Sanhedrin 7a demonstrate that on the day of judgment, a person will be asked two questions in regard to the study of Torah: whether he was engaged in the study of Torah, and whether he set up times to study Torah. Torah

on the second level is a matter of having an encounter with Torah, a rendezvous. A Jew needs to create a relationship with Torah, and thereby with God, and this needs to be done on a daily basis. Perhaps, then, we can find a parallel between the daily count from the bringing of the Omer, and the count to the giving of the Torah to which it alludes. Our daily counting from the bringing of the Omer is an allusion to the manna that we received on a daily basis and which inculcated within us a relationship of trust in God. Parallel to that relationship, we need to develop a relationship with Torah, and that relationship also needs to be built up on a daily basis. By counting the days until the giving of the Torah, the Jews built up a sense of time - consciousness in relation to the Torah, which they then needed to carry through once they received it and were commanded to learn it.

The Honor of Hashem and the Jewish People

Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

Jewish history has, unfortunately, always known the reality of religious persecution and, as a result, it was necessary for Jewish law to offer guidance to those confronted with the tragic choice between observance and death.

While we are generally taught to "choose life," the pasuk, "I should be sanctified among the Jewish people" (Vayikra 22:32) is understood by the Talmud to indicate that there are exceptional circumstances – the three cardinal sins of idolatry, murder, and sexual immorality – which demand the ultimate sacrifice. In other words, in these rare situations, the obligation of kiddush Hashem, sanctifying God's name, requires a person to give up his or her life rather than transgress.

The Rambam, in his Book of Mitzvos (mitzvas aseh #9), codifies this ruling and in the course of his presentation makes a remarkable comment. When discussing the specific case of coerced idolatry the Rambam stresses that if someone acquiesces and – wrongly – bows down to an idol it might appear that the person's actual beliefs were compromised; even though this is a mistaken impression and not reflective of the person's true beliefs, the image of submission would be nevertheless created.

Many commentators have inferred from the Rambam's words that in a situation where someone worships avodah

zara under the threat of death there is, technically speaking, no transgression of idolatry. Belief in the divinity of the idol is essential to the prohibition and given that the person doesn't actually believe in the idol and only bowed down to avoid being killed, there is no violation. What emerges, therefore, is that the halacha demands that a person be martyred rather than creating the mistaken impression that a Jew can be coerced into surrendering his or her faith.

Upon reflection, however, this is very difficult to understand. If there is no violation of avodah zara – the person doesn't believe in the idol – then what is so bad about bowing down? Why not just "pretend" to worship and avoid death? (See, as well, the comments of Tosfos, Sanhedrin 61b.)

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik suggests that we can understand this ruling based on the continuation of the Rambam's presentation where he contrasts the behavior of Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya with that of others in their generation. When Nevuchadnezzar demanded that everyone bow down to an idol only they refused – despite being thrown into a fiery furnace – while other people yielded. The Rambam then notes that the result of those whose who did bow down was that, "ve'haysah ba'zeh cherpah le'kol Yisroel," great shame was brought on the

Jewish people due to this massive neglect of the mitzvah of kiddush Hashem.

Based on these words R. Soloveitchik explained that an essential component of kiddush Hashem is that our actions are supposed to bring honor and pride to the Jewish people and, conversely, an aspect of chillul Hashem is when we dishonor and disgrace to our nation. An astounding insight thus emerges: Hashem's honor is inextricably linked to that of the Jewish people. When our actions bring pride to Am Yisroel then Hashem is also honored – and a kiddush Hashem is created – but when we behave shamefully that reflects poorly on us – and Him – and thus creates a chillul Hashem.

Going back to our original question, R. Soloveitchik explained that the reason a person is required to give up his or her life rather than bow down to an idol is because even the appearance of worshipping avodah zarah is demeaning to the honor of the Jewish people and would create a grave chillul Hashem. Although technically there is no transgression of idolatry, nevertheless creating the impression that in a situation of danger one is willing to

betray God itself brings shame on the person, the Jewish people, and ultimately on Hashem

The opposite, of course, is also true; any action that brings honor to the Jewish people creates a kiddush Hashem. It is especially appropriate, therefore, to consider this lesson just a few days before Yom Ha-Atzmaut. After all, one of the profound results of the establishment of the State of Israel was the great pride that it brought to Jews around the world. In fact, R. Soloveitchik (Kol Dodi Dofek) stressed that this enhanced pride was one of divine blessings – what he refers to as “knocks” from Hashem – accomplished by the state. Especially when one considers the events of the Holocaust and the feelings of vulnerability and helplessness that Jews felt, the founding of the State of Israel was critical to restoring the honor and enhancing the pride of the Jewish people and was, therefore, truly a kiddush Hashem.

As we thank God and celebrate 63 years of the State of Israel we should to do whatever possible – whether we live in Israel or anywhere else – to enhance the glory of the Jewish people and by so doing enhance the glory of Hashem.

Why Do We Count?

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin

In the midst of the Torah's discussion concerning the festival cycle, immediately after the commandment concerning the Omer offering (a barley offering in the Temple which marks the beginning of the harvest and allows the use of that season's grain), the following mandate is found:

“And you shall count for yourselves – from the day after the Sabbath, from the day you bring the waved offering of the Omer – seven weeks; complete shall they be. Until the day after the seventh Sabbath, shall you count fifty days; and you will offer a new meal offering to the Lord.”

As codified by the rabbis, this mitzva, known as the mitzva of Sfirat Ha'omer, the Counting of the Omer, obligates each Jew to verbally count the days and weeks from the second day of the holiday of Pesach until the first day of the holiday of Shavuot.

Questions

What possible purpose can there be in verbally counting the days and weeks between Pesach and Shavuot?

The Torah offers no explanation for this mitzva.

Approaches

A: Most obviously, the Counting of the Omer is perceived by many scholars as an act of linkage between the two holidays that border the mitzva, Pesach and Shavuot. Through the act of counting we testify that the Revelation at Sinai (commemorated on Shavuot) was the goal and purpose of the Exodus from Egypt (commemorated on Pesach). This relationship is established at the outset when God informs Moshe at the burning bush: “And this is your sign that I have sent you: when you take the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

On a deeper level, our counting consequently affirms that the physical freedom of the Exodus is incomplete without the spiritual freedom granted by God's law; a truth mirrored in the famous rabbinic dictum: “No one is truly free other than he who is involved in the study of Torah.”

By counting the days between Pesach and Shavuot, many scholars continue, we also are meant to re-experience the sense of excitement and anticipation that marked this period for the Israelites, newly redeemed from Egypt. Just as we would “count the remaining days” towards an

extraordinary event in our personal lives, so too we should feel a real sense of anticipation each year as we again approach the holiday that marks the Revelation at Sinai.

B: Other authorities choose to view these days primarily as a period of “purification from” rather than “anticipation towards.”

By the time of the Exodus, the Israelites have been defiled from centuries of immersion in Egyptian society and culture. Numerous sources, in fact, maintain that they have descended to the forty-ninth of fifty possible stages of defilement and are on the verge of becoming irredeemable. With haste, at the last moment, God pulls the nation back from the brink. The newly freed slaves, however, must now undergo a process of purification before they can encounter God and receive the Torah at Sinai. Forty-nine days – to counter each level of defilement experienced – must elapse before Revelation can take place.

By counting the days between Pesach and Shavuot each year, we remember and mark this refining journey. Just as a married woman monthly counts the days leading to her immersion in a mikva we must count and spiritually prepare ourselves for our reunion with God at Sinai.

Based on this approach, the Ohr Hachaim explains why Sfirat Ha’omer begins each year on the second day of Pesach, rather than on the first. The Exodus, he observes, occurs on the first day of the festival. For a portion of that day, therefore, the Israelites yet remain in Egypt and the journey of purification cannot yet begin.

C: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik perceives yet another lesson embedded in the act of Sfirat Ha’omer. The Rav suggests that, in Jewish experience, an individual can perform the act of counting within two realms: the realm of Sfirat and the realm of minyan (the root of each of these terms means “to count”).

When you count in the realm of minyan, the Rav explains, all that matters is the attainment of the ultimate goal, the endpoint of your counting. Nine upstanding, righteous men can assemble for a prayer service but,

without a tenth, there is no minyan.

When you count in the realm of Sfirat, however, things are different. Although you still count towards a goal, each individual unit in the calculation becomes a goal, as well. While someone counting precious diamonds, for example, is certainly interested in the total number of diamonds he has, he also pauses and holds each gem up to the rays of the sun, admiring its unique facets, color and shape.

The act of Sfirat Ha’omer teaches us to “count our days in the realm of Sfirat” – to see each day as a goal unto itself.

Too often, we live exclusively goal-oriented lives; moving from accomplishment to accomplishment, from milestone to milestone, rarely stopping to appreciate the significance of each passing day. And yet, when all is said and done, the quality of the journey, in large measure, defines our lives – and the ordinary moments spent with family and friends are as significant, if not more significant, than the milestones themselves.

The Rav’s observation may also be mirrored in two versions of the verbal formula for Sfirat Ha’omer which have developed over the years. Some communities recite, “Today is the ----day la’Omer (literally “to the Omer”)” while others count “ba’Omer (literally “in the midst of the Omer”).” Taken together, these two versions form the balance that should mark our approach to life. On the one hand, without goals our lives are aimless. We therefore count la’Omer, towards the endpoint of the Omer count. On the other hand, never losing sight of the journey’s value, we also count ba’Omer, in the midst of the Omer.