

INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

by Zvi Shimon

PARASHAT EMOR

The Counting of the 'Omer'

I The period between the beginning of Passover and 'Shavuot' (Pentecost) is a period of counting. Every evening, Jews count the days and weeks that have passed since the first day of Passover. This counting is called the 'Sefirat HaOmer' - the counting of the 'omer.' Why is everybody counting? The answer to this question appears in our parasha. Chapter 23 of the book of Leviticus lists the holidays. Following the commandment to keep the Passover holiday the Torah states the following:

"The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first 'omer' of your harvest to the priest. He shall elevate the 'omer' before the Lord for acceptance in your behalf; the priest shall elevate it on the day after the Shabbat....And from the day on which you bring the omer of elevation offering - the day after the Sabbath - you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: you must count until the day after the seventh week - fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Lord. You shall bring from your settlement two loaves of bread as an elevation offering; each shall be made of two-tenths of a measure of choice flour, baked after leavening, as first fruits to the Lord....On that same day you shall hold a celebration; it shall be a sacred occasion for you; you shall not work at your occupations. This is a law for all time in all your settlements throughout the ages." ([Leviticus 23:9-11, 15-17, 21](#))

The day "after the Sabbath" an 'omer' (a measurement according to most commentators) of the first harvest (the barley harvest), is elevated by the priest in an offering to God. From this day "after the Sabbath" on which the 'omer' is offered, the Torah instructs us to count until the fiftieth day, a sacred holiday on which two loaves of bread are offered before God. The fiftieth day is commonly called "SHAVUOT" ("weeks," in reference to the counting of the seven weeks

leading to the holiday). The counting of these days is thus called Sefirat HaOmer (the counting of the omer) since one counts the days that have passed since the offering of the omer (the barely offering).

When is the omer offered? The verse states that it is elevated by the priest "AFTER THE SABBATH." This clause "AFTER THE SABBATH" has been the focal point of many different sects throughout the generations, including the Beitusees (called so after their leader, Beitus) and the Karaites, who rejected the validity of the oral tradition of the sages. These sects rejected the traditional interpretation and interpreted the clause, "after the Sabbath," in reference to the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, the day of rest. According to these sects the 'omer' should be offered on the Sunday following the Sabbath which falls during the seven days of the Passover holiday. When the verse states "after the Sabbath" it is referring to the Sabbath during Passover. The Torah did not state this explicitly since it relies on the fact that Passover is mentioned in the preceding section. According to the approach of these sects, 'Shavuot' would always fall on a Sunday, seven weeks later.

The Sages rejected the sects' interpretations on many grounds (see Babylonian Talmud, [Tractate Menachot 65a](#)). Rabbi Hoffman (Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman, Germany, 1843-1921) points out a flaw in the sectarian interpretation; In a case where Passover commences on a Sunday, the seventh and last day of Passover falls on the Sabbath and thus the day "after the Sabbath" falls after Passover. It is thus possible that the omer would be offered after Passover. This is awkward since the omer would occasionally be offered on Passover and occasionally after it. Therefore, according to the interpretation of the different sects, in certain cases there is no definite connection between the omer offering and Passover.

According to the Jewish tradition, as passed down by our Sages, the clause "after the Sabbath" does not refer to the seventh day of the week but rather to the first day of Passover. What is the connection between the word Sabbath and the first day of Passover? Sabbath means to cease working. On the first day of Passover it is forbidden to work as is written: "On the first day you shall celebrate a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations"(23:7). Thus

the word Sabbath is referring to the first day of Passover on which we are commanded to refrain from working. The Ibn Ezra (Rabbi Avraham ben Ezra, Spain, 1092-1167) cites other examples in the Torah where the word Sabbath does not refer to the seventh day of the week but to stoppage of work (see Ibn Ezra 23:11) . For example, the Torah states in relation to Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, "It shall be a SABBATH of complete rest for you, and you shall practice self-denial..." (23:32). So too, in our verse, the word Sabbath refers to the stoppage of work on the first day of Passover. The omer is always offered "after the Sabbath," the first day of Passover, and from this day we begin to count the forty-nine days till Shavuot. Passover and Shavuot are thus intricately connected, and adjoined through the counting of the omer.

II Before analyzing the nature of this connection between Passover and Shavuot and the significance of the counting of the omer, we will first probe some of the laws relating to the counting of the omer and their textual sources. The Torah instructs us as follows:

"And from the day on which you bring the omer of elevation offering - the day after the Sabbath - you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: you must count until the day after the seventh week - fifty days" (23:15,16)

What is meant by the requirement that the counting be complete? Rashi cites the following explanation of our Sages:

"This teaches that one has to begin counting in the evening, for otherwise they would not be complete."

According to the Torah, the day begins at night (for example, the Sabbath begins Friday evening) as it is written in the narrative of the creation, "And there was evening and there was morning, a first day" (Genesis 1:5). In order that the counting encompass forty-nine complete days it must be performed in the beginning of each day, namely at night.

Our sages also infer from our verse another law pertaining to the method of counting the forty-nine days. The verse instructs us to count seven weeks but it also instructs us to count until the fiftieth day (until but not including the fiftieth day). Are we to count weeks or days? Our Sages

answer that we must count both. Therefore when counting the omer we state the number of days and the number of weeks which have passed since the offering of the 'omer' on the second day of Passover.

III Let us now attempt to understand the significance of the counting of the omer. Why do we count forty-nine days between the offering of the omer and the bread offering? The commentators offer different explanations. We will begin with the explanation of the Baal Haturim (Rabbi Jacob ben Rabbi Asher, Germany and later Spain, 1270?-1340) in his long commentary:

"There are those who explain that the reason for the counting of the omer is that [the days of the omer] are the days of harvesting and the people are busy [working in the fields] and are not in their homes. They could therefore not be reached by the messengers of the courts to be informed when the new month begins. God therefore commanded us to count the days."

The Jewish calendar is unique in that it is both a solar and a lunar calendar. The months are determined by the lunar cycle. The new month begins with the appearance of the "new" moon, once it has completely waned and begins to wax. Since twelve lunar months are shorter than the solar year, during certain years, a thirteenth month is added in order to adjust the calendar with the solar year. As opposed to our present calendar which is pre-calculated, in the time of the Torah, there was no pre-determined calendar. The new-moon would be announced by the 'beit din,' the court, on the bases of visual sightings of the "new" moon. The court would then send messengers to inform all the communities of the beginning of a new month. Thus, all the Jewish communities functioned according to the same calendar and would celebrate the holidays simultaneously. According to the Baal Haturim, this system was inadequate during the reaping season, the period between Passover and Shavuot. The people would be too busy working in the fields and would not get word of the new month. In order to insure that they celebrate the festival of Shavuot on the correct day, the sixth day of the month of Sivan, the Torah instructed that they count forty-nine days from the second day of Passover. There is no intrinsic significance to the counting of the omer. Its purpose is simply to keep track

of the date so that every individual know when the holiday of Shavuot falls.

The Sforno (Rabbi Ovadia Sforno, Italy, 1470-1550) offers a different explanation for the counting of the omer:

"Now [the Torah] introduces the statement [regarding] the festival of Shavuot with the Omer because that is when the harvest of the Omer begins, and with the counting of the weeks, both of which relate to the festival that is called the harvest festival and 'Shavuot,' the Feast of Weeks, at which time thanks is given to God, the Blessed One, for the appointed weeks of the harvest which He kept for us (based on [Jeremiah 5:24](#)). For indeed, the purpose of the festivals is [to occupy oneself with] prayer and thanksgiving ... And being that the success of the harvest depends on the climate of the season from the time of ripening (Passover) until the harvest (Shavuot) as it says, 'The appointed weeks of the harvest He keeps for us' ([Jeremiah 5:24](#)), [therefore] the Omer is a thanksgiving for the ripening, as though one is offering the first fruits of the field to the owner. The offering which accompanies it (verses 12, 13), serves as a prayer for the future, and the counting is a remembrance of prayer each day, [while] the harvest festival (Shavuot) is [an occasion for giving] thanks for the good harvest, [and] the festival of ingathering (Sukkot) is for the goodness of the ingathering."

The Sforno's explanation focuses on the agricultural significance of the holidays. Passover is not only the time of our redemption from slavery in Egypt. It is also the period of the ripening of the grains. The omer, offered on the second day of Passover, is offered from sheaves of barley, the first grain to ripen. It is an offering of thanks for the ripening of the produce. Shavuot, the harvest festival, expresses our thanks for the harvest through the offering of two loaves of bread. Since Shavuot is the period of the wheat harvest, the offering is brought from wheat. The novelty of Sforno's explanation is his connection of this theme to the counting of the omer. The counting is a form of prayer for the success of the harvest. The period between Passover and Shavuot is the critical stage for the success of the harvest. The counting of the omer spans this critical period and is an ongoing prayer for its successful culmination. Therefore we can establish the

common theme that exists between the prayer and thanksgiving of Passover and the counting of the omer culminating with Shavuot that is expressed through the harvest offerings and the counting of the days between them. This interpretation finds much support in the text especially in the fact that the counting of the days of the omer links two harvest offerings thereby emphasizing the agricultural component of this complex of commandments.

The Sefer Hachinukh (Lists and elaborates the 613 commandments, anonymous author, Spain, 13th century,) offers a totally different explanation for the counting of the omer:

"At the root of the precept [of the counting of the Omer] lies the reason that the entire life of Jewry is nothing other than the Torah. On account of the Torah, heaven and earth - and the Jewish people were created. This is the principal element and the reason why they were rescued and went forth out of Egypt - so that they would accept the Torah at Sinai and fulfill it....Now, for this reason - because it is the main core of the Israelites' life, and for its sake they were redeemed and rose to all the distinction that they attained - we were commanded to count [the days] from the morrow after the festival day of Passover till the day the Torah was given - to show our great yearning for that distinguished day, for which our heart longs and constantly counts [and reckons] when the longed-for time will come when we will go out to freedom. For counting shows about a person that all his hope of deliverance and all his desire is to reach that time."

Each of the holidays has both agricultural as well as historical significance. Passover is the time of ripening and also commemorates our exodus from Egypt. Shavuot is both the harvest festival and the time of the giving of the Torah. Sukkot is the festival of the ingathering of the produce from the field and a commemoration of our travels in the desert during the exodus from Egypt. In contrast to the Sforno who stresses the agricultural theme of the holidays, the Sefer Hachinukh emphasizes their historical component. Passover and Shavuot represent a historical continuum from the salvation in Egypt to the giving of the Torah. The counting of the omer stresses the link between the two. It is an expression of our excitement and eager anticipation of the giving of the Torah.

It manifests our deep love for God's law. During the holidays we not only commemorate but we also re-live - we attempt to experience past events. After we undergo the exodus from Egypt in the Passover 'Seder,' we count the days till Shavuot, in anticipation of the giving of the Torah.

Rabbi Hirsch (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Germany, 1808-1888) expounds on this line of explanation for the counting of the omer:

"After the Shabbat,' when you have not only celebrated the Festival of your having attained freedom, but you have also brought to your mind before God the fact of your independence gained by possession and enjoyment of one's own land, so that you are conscious of both those possessions, freedom and prosperity which in general, are the aims which all national desires and all national efforts are directed to attain, then you are to consider yourself not at the goal, but only at the beginning of your national destiny and only then begin to count for the acquisition of another goal. Thus this command to count is expressed in [Deut. 16:9](#), in these terms: 'When the sickle begins at the standing corn, begin thou to count etc.' Where others leave off their counting, you begin your counting."

Rabbi Hirsch combines the historical and agricultural components of the holidays. The offering of the omer is intricately connected to the entrance to the land of Israel. The Torah states: "WHEN YOU ENTER THE LAND that I am giving you and you reap its harvest you shall bring the first omer of your harvest to the priest" (23:10). After expressing our ownership over the land of Israel and feeling a sense of freedom through the enjoyment of the fruits of our own labor we begin counting the days towards the giving of the Torah. Although living as a free and prosperous nation on our own land is of tremendous importance, it is not the ultimate national achievement. While other nations may satisfy themselves with physical material accomplishments, the goal of the People of Israel lies in the spiritual domain, in the establishment of a nation which lives according to the precepts of the Torah.

Rabbi Hirsch points out a certain peculiarity with regard to the date of the festival of Shavuot:

"The fact that the day which is elevated to a Festival should be NOT the day of the revelation on Sinai, but the final day of the counting which leads up to that, the greatest event in our history; that it should be, according to the generally accepted reckoning, the day before the Lawgiving, which did not occur on the fiftieth but on the fifty first, that fact should surely have a deep and important meaning for us.

It is not the fact of the revelation of the Torah, but our making ourselves worthy to receive it, that our festival celebrates. It is the day before the Lawgiving, the day on which the nation finally presented itself as ready and worthy for the great mission to the world, to be the receivers and bearers of the Law of God, it is that day which the fiftieth day of the counting of the Omer represents. As we have remarked elsewhere, this Festival, differently to all the others, is not called after that which characteristically has to be done on it, but Shavuot, after the counting of the weeks which PREPARATORILY lead up to it."

The sixth of Sivan, the festival of Shavuot, is not the day of the giving of the Torah but the day immediately preceding it. Why then do we celebrate the day before the giving of the Torah? Rabbi Hirsch explains that Shavuot was the final day of preparation, the day when the people of Israel were ready to receive the Torah. This invests the period of the counting of the omer with additional significance. The forty-nine days between the exodus from Egypt and the day before the reception of the Torah are not just days of anticipation. They are days of preparation, of moral and spiritual growth. As we count the days of the omer we must evaluate our spiritual state. We must use this period to improve ourselves and correct our flaws and deficiencies. It is this period of preparation which makes us worthy of receiving the Torah.

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