

The Agricultural and Historical Significance of Sefirat HaOmer

Harav Yaakov Medan

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By Rav Yaakov Medan

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Each of the chagim (holidays) has a dual significance which is rooted and expressed in the duality of our calendar. The Jewish calendar is based on the movement of both the sun and the moon, in contradistinction to the solar calendar of ancient Egypt (and the Western world) and the lunar calendar of ancient Babylon (and the Islamic world). We calculate the months according to the waxing and waning of the moon (29 or 30 days to each month), but adjust the years based on the cycle of the sun and the seasons. (The lunar year is only 354 days long, as opposed to the 365 days of the solar year. In order that Pesach should fall out in the spring, we add an extra month every few years.)

Correspondingly, each holiday has both a historical and an agricultural significance. Pesach commemorates Yetzi'at Mitzrayim (the Exodus) and marks the beginning of the barley harvest. Shavuot commemorates Matan Torah (the Giving of the Torah) and marks the beginning of the wheat harvest. Sukkot commemorates the wanderings of Israel in the wilderness and marks the season when the produce is gathered in from the fields. The agricultural significance of the chagim is connected with the solar cycle that determines the seasons and represents the stable, natural, unchanging flow of time. However, the historical element of each holiday is linked to a specific day of a specific month and is, thus, connected with the lunar cycle - one that involves constant flux as expressed in the appearance and disappearance of the moon. This phenomenon is representative of the waning and waxing of the

nations of the world who rise to power and then fade away.

The combination of these two cycles into one unit is an assertion of faith: Hashem, who is responsible for the creation of the world and who causes plants to grow, is the one who controls history. The God of Nature is He who redeemed us from Egypt. However, there is also a unique link between each festival and the time of year that it is celebrated - as will presently be explained.

The Torah (Devarim 16:1) assigns great importance to the period of the year when Pesach must be celebrated - Chodesh Ha-Aviv (Spring). The Festival of Freedom, which commemorates the unique historical event of the Exodus, must coincide with the start of the annual agricultural season - the harvest. What is the connection between the two?

For the six months from Sukkot until Pesach, the farmer is a slave to his land. He must clear the fields of stones, plough, sow and water without seeing the fruits of his labor. However, when the middle of Nissan comes, a dramatic change takes place. The farmer is transformed from one who "sows in tears" to one who "reaps in joy." He is now master of his land and earns his daily bread from it. This new-found freedom commences on Pesach when the barley harvest begins, as beforehand one is not permitted to benefit from the current year's grain. Thus, the two freedoms - agricultural and historical - go hand-in-hand. A barley offering (korban omer) is brought in the Temple on the second day of Pesach, expressing our recognition that it is God who causes the rains to fall and the grain to grow, just as it is He who redeemed us from bondage.

We are commanded to count fifty days from Pesach until Shavuot (Vayikra 23:15-18). This is called Sefirat Ha-Omer (counting of the Omer) and is so termed because it commences on the day that the Omer is offered. From the verses in the Torah, it seems that the significance of this counting relates purely to the agricultural cycle: we mark off the days between

the barley offering of Pesach and the wheat offering (shte ha-lechem - the two loaves) which is brought on Shavuot. Since barley ripens before wheat, these fifty days represent the interlude when only barley is being harvested. The farmer eagerly anticipates the new crop that he will soon harvest. In the words of our Sages, he waits as "a bride awaits her wedding day."

Barley is used primarily as animal fodder; it is the superior wheat that will serve as food for him and his family. Furthermore, the barley offering permits the current year's grain to be eaten only outside of the Temple; whereas the wheat offering permits it to be used in the Temple itself as part of the sacrificial service. Just as a bride is not satisfied with her engagement to her groom, but awaits their marriage, so too the farmer awaits the time when his grain will enter the House of God - symbolic of the close relationship between man his Maker. With every day that passes, the farmer gives thanks to Hashem for having sustained and blessed him in the inheritance that was promised to his forefathers.

However, our Sages identify Shavuot as the date of the giving of the Torah, and it is the historical significance of the day that lends the central meaning to the analogy of a "bride anticipating her wedding day." The Exodus is compared to an engagement between God and Israel. By redeeming us from bondage, He chose us to be His people, His beloved (see Shir Ha-Shirim, Yirmiyahu 2:2, and Hoshea ch. 2). However, the union was only sealed at the foot of Mount Sinai where we voluntarily accepted the Torah, thus forging a special bond with God. Upon leaving Egypt, the Jews counted each day that brought them closer to Shavuot, to the intimate connection that they yearned to have.

Every year, we relive this feeling of longing and anticipation. We eagerly await the festival of Shavuot when our covenant with Hashem is re-affirmed and renewed. We hope and pray that the bread of affliction - the poor man's bread

of Pesach - is transformed into the full, rich loaves of the Shavuot service. Thus, Sefirat Ha-Omer as a period of transformation and longing is relevant in both the agricultural and the historical senses. The satisfaction and fulfillment of Shavuot is also to be experienced in both these realms, although the Sages place more emphasis on the historical overtones of the day. Note, however, that the focus of the historical experience is not merely recollection of the past, but reliving it in the present.

It is somewhat puzzling that while the Torah speaks directly of both aspects of Pesach - agricultural and historical - it focuses solely on the agricultural significance of Sefirat Ha-Omer and Shavuot. In fact, it is the Sages who calculate that Matan Torah took place on the selfsame day that we are commanded to offer the shte ha-lechem. Why does the Torah not mention the historical significance of the day at all?

While it is true that there is no direct mention of Shavuot as the commemoration of the revelation at Sinai, the connection is very strongly hinted at in the verses by the use of Sefirat Ha-Omer as the link between Pesach and Shavuot, as will be explained.

Sefirat Ha-Omer is very similar to the mitzva of Sefirat Ha-Yovel, whereby we are enjoined to count 49 years and consecrate the 50th year as the Yovel (Jubilee). This similarity is expressed both in the verses themselves (compare Vayikra 23:15-16 to 25:8-10) and in the laws relevant to the actual counting. (For example, with regard to Sefirat Ha-Omer, we are commanded to count seven sets of seven days - each set comprising a week; with regard to Sefirat Ha-Yovel, we are commanded to count seven sets of seven years - each set comprising one shemitta cycle where the ground is worked for six years and left untouched in the seventh year. In both cases it is a mitzva to count each day or year AND each individual set.) It is clear that the similarity between the two is not accidental and by taking a closer look at Sefirat

Ha-Yovel, we can better understand Sefirat Ha-Omer.

On Yom Kippur of the fiftieth year, a shofar is blown throughout the land to proclaim the Yovel year. Another term for shofar is "yovel," and hence the name of the year. The basis of this practice has its roots in Matan Torah, where Hashem announced His presence with "the powerful sound of the shofar" (Shemot 19:19) and signified that His presence had departed from the mountain by a long shofar blast ("bimshokh ha-YOVEL," Shemot 19:13). The sound of the shofar on Yovel parallels the shofar at Sinai and, thus, the counting of the Yovel is strongly reminiscent of the build-up to Matan Torah.

Furthermore, on the Sukkot following the shemitta year, there is a mitzva of Hak'hel (Gathering) where every able-bodied man, woman and child is enjoined to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and gather together to hear words of Torah from the mouth of the king (Devarim 31:10-12). The purpose of Hak'hel, in the words of the scriptures, is: "In order that you may hear and in order that you may learn to fear the Lord your God." This, too, is cited as the purpose of Matan Torah (see, e.g., Shemot 20:18), where the entire nation congregated to hear the words of Hashem.

In the Yovel year, this assumed greater significance, as all slaves were freed on Yom Kippur and were, thus, able to participate in the communal acceptance of the Torah that took place on Hak'hel. Thus, the Sefirat Ha-Yovel was in fact a countdown to the freedom from slavery and embracing of the Torah. By way of comparison, it follows that Sefirat Ha-Omer expresses the same idea.

The special nature of the Sefira - preparation for the bond between God and His people - is strongly hinted at by the Korban Ha-Omer itself. There are only two instances when an offering of barley is brought: the Omer offering and the Sota offering (brought by a woman whose fidelity to her husband is under suspicion). The period between the Exodus and the Revelation at Sinai is one of trial. The betrothed (Israel)

is tested to verify the extent of her loyalty to the groom (God). Only once her unquestioning faithfulness has been proven can the union be finalized.

In a similar vein, we find only two places where the name of God is cast into water: At the sota ceremony and at Mara. (After crossing the Red Sea, the Jews wandered for three days without water. When they came to Mara and found a well whose water was too bitter to drink, they complained to Moshe and he was instructed by Hashem to cast a piece of wood into the water to sweeten it - Shemot 15:22-25. According to the midrash, the wood contained the name of God.) In both cases, the betrothed must prove herself and her faithfulness.

The allusion to the Sota ceremony makes it clear that Israel were not redeemed to be free from responsibility. Rather, we were taken out of bondage in order to assume the difficult task of being "a light unto the Nations." Nevertheless, as our Sages state in Pirkei Avot: "There is none as free as he who is totally involved with the Torah."

This is the message of the Omer - in order to be worthy of the gifts of Hashem, both on a material (agricultural) plane and on a spiritual plane (Matan Torah) - we must prepare ourselves correctly.

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