

It's About Time

By Rabbi Joshua (continuously known as The Hoffer) 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 Shtei 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 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 epha, 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, halachos 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 Tosafot 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.

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