

COUNTING the days



Building a bridge between Pesach and Shavuot

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

BEYOND THE OBVIOUS PHYSICAL LIBERATION

from the bondage of slavery, the primary purpose of our being redeemed from Egypt was to receive and fulfil the Torah, the very essence and definition of the Jewish people. Each year, we busy ourselves with the mitzvah of counting the 49 days between the anniversary of our going out from Egypt, which took place on Pesach, and the anniversary of the giving of the Torah, which took place on Shavuot, building a bridge connecting these two events. By counting these days, we are meant to demonstrate our emotional attachment to, and tremendous anticipation for, the anni-

versary of that long-awaited moment. But we only start the counting on the second day of Pesach – the day after Hashem took us out from Egypt. If the connection between Pesach and Shavuot is so fundamental, then why delay the counting?

One answer that's suggested is that the entirety of the first day of Pesach was set aside solely to commemorate the great miracle of our redemption from bondage, which was a truly wondrous event, a singular occurrence in the world involving fantastic deviations from the natural order of things and which serves as the very foundation of our faith in G-d's detailed

and personalised supervision of His world and all of mankind. Accordingly, it would be inappropriate to mix with that day any other celebration or to call to mind on it any other matter, and, therefore, we only begin counting immediately after the anniversary of that remarkable event.

COMPLIMENTARY IDEAS

The counting of these 49 days also happens, however, to be intimately connected to what later transpired annually on that second day of Pesach, which was the bringing in the Temple of an offering from the new barley crop, known as the “omer” offering, so-called in reference to the volume size of the offering (it would be like calling it the “litre offering”). The omer offering was intended to cause us to reflect upon the great kindness that

Hashem does with His creation by annually renewing the crops of grain that sustain us.¹ Just as we're not meant to benefit from the produce of the world without first making a blessing on the things that we consume, thereby acknowledging the very source of that benefit, so too we are not permitted to benefit from the new crop of grain before bringing the omer offering, thereby demonstrating our recognition of its source as well.

Each of the first two days of Pesach has its own purpose. On the first day we recall the going out from Egypt and that, through its many miracles, especially the Ten Plagues, we learn the foundation of our faith that Hashem created the world and it's in His power alone to change and deviate from the natural order of things. On the second day, we reflect on the never-ending chesed (kindness) of Hashem – on the on-going miracles related to how Hashem constantly conducts and watches

over us and His world, feeding and sustaining us. The two days also share a common theme: just as the miracles of the going out from Egypt showed that Hashem conducts the natural order of the world and can even deviate from it in large, grand ways, the omer demonstrates Hashem's mastery over the seemingly normal, everyday happenings within the natural world. Our Sages teach² that as much as we toil and labour for our food – be it by plowing, sowing, hoeing, trimming, harvesting, threshing, etc. – if Hashem so much as held back the wind, thus prevent-

ing us from winnowing our grain, we would simply starve! We get so caught up in thinking we are the ones responsible for the fruits of our labours that we can forget that it's actually Hashem who causes the sun to rise, the rains to fall, the winds to blow, the plants to grow, and the fruits to fatten.

The primary purpose of the offering of the omer is to see that everything is from Hashem and to recognise that His supervision and control exist even within nature itself! In other words, even what appears to be a normal, fixed, dependable

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process – nature – is only the will of Hashem. Even the very measure of the omer offering serves to remind us of this. When we were in the midbar (the wilderness), with absolutely no effort on our parts, we miraculously received our food each day from Hashem in the form of manna, bread which literally fell from the heavens, in a daily measure of one omer per person. After finally making it to Israel, we were the ones who gave an omer to Hashem – a single omer on behalf of the entire nation. Hashem isn’t interested in quantity, but rather, in recognition; the recognition that everything is from Him. This is what is at stake in the omer offering – to see that even nature itself is a miracle – and that everything is the will of Hashem, no matter how much it is obscured and obfuscated by the superficial appearance of the natural order of things.

OUR FOOD COMES FROM HASHEM

We didn’t need to bring an omer offering in the midbar because Hashem’s hand in our sustenance was unmistakable – everyone clearly understood that his food came from Hashem. It was only when we came to Eretz Yisrael and became involved in exerting effort to provide for our own daily sustenance, via working the earth, that there came the danger that we might think that it was our own labour that was responsible for what we took out from the land. Precisely at that point, it became incumbent upon us to recognise that although our bread no longer came from heaven, the fact that it now came from the ground was no less miraculous. By bringing the omer – specifically in the exact same measure that we received when we ate the manna that fell from heaven – we’re meant to realise: just as the omer of the manna came ev-

ery day from heaven, so too bread that comes from the ground is as if it also descended from heaven. In other words, both of these breads come through the will of Hashem.

WHAT WE CALL NATURE IS, IN FACT, MIRACLE

What we often perceive as normal and ordinary in the natural world is actually not at all, it’s miraculous. For example, the wondrous miracles that take place with the sowing of a single seed are no less magnificent than those that will take place in the future with the resurrection of the dead. The idea that the dead will rise again, one of the thirteen fundamental beliefs enumerated by the Rambam, is to everyone’s mind a profound miracle; a seemingly impossible and wondrous thing that has never happened before. But nobody views the growth of crops in this way, as such a thing appears natural and ordinary. Imagine, however, a person watching for the very first time the process of seeds being sown. He sees a perfectly good seed – in some cases, one that is even edible – placed in the soil, where it slowly begins to rot. The observer will think that it’s a chaval (an incredible shame and waste) that such seeds have been thrown away to rot. And just a few weeks later, when it has become evident that something has sprouted and grown from these seeds, the person will cry out: It’s a miracle!

We are accustomed to viewing the resurrection of the dead as a miracle and the growth of seeds as something natural and ordinary, but we must recognise that there is really no difference between them: just as burying a man in the ground and his rising to live again is considered wondrous, so too planting a seed in the ground and something growing from it is nothing less than a miracle. What’s the

difference? Simply the regularity with which we experience the thing. Planting and growing, which we are used to seeing regularly, are no longer in the category of being a miracle in our eyes, but the resurrection of the dead, which has not been seen in the world – that amounts to being a miracle and a wonder. The truth of the matter is that they are both miraculous.

THE OMER AND THE LAND OF ISRAEL

Our Sages teach that it was in the merit of the mitzvah of bringing the omer that we received the land of Israel, as it says: “When you will come to the land...you will bring the omer.”³ In other words, the verse isn’t merely describing a mere occurrence that will take place upon our arrival, but actually tying our coming into the land to the bringing of the omer. So what exactly is the connection between the two? Just as the purpose of the going out from Egypt was to receive the Torah, the reason we received the land of Israel was as an additional means by which to fulfil the Torah. In other words, in an utter reversal from what we normally see in the world (as is the case with our entire history), the Jewish people first became a nation, then, only much later, we received our constitution – our Torah, and then we spent 40 years wandering in the midbar. Only then were we given our long promised land, as an additional tool with which to fulfil the Torah.

So, as we count each night between Pesach and Shavuot, connecting our going out from Egypt to our receiving the Torah, and preparing ourselves to rise to that occasion, we must recognise that Hashem is still in charge, running the show, albeit in a more subtle and subdued way, and that what we mistakenly call nature is really only miracle – and that everything is from Hashem. **■**

¹See Sefer HaChinuch, 302

²Vayikra Raba 28:1

³Vayikra 23:9

Adapted from a sicha by the Sifsei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, z”l.