

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

Counting The Omer; an Enormous Opportunity (Portion of Emor)

It was our first Masah', our first forced march. We were barely two weeks in the army, and Itzik, a sadistic little first sergeant who had made it his mission to make us, or rather, break us into soldiers, owned us for the night.

Whenever a unit in training goes out on any maneuver without an officer, the rule in the Israeli army is that the unit has to stay within sight of the base. Officers undergo intensive training in navigation and map reading, and the point is to be sure men don't get lost out in the field. Theoretically, this should have been good news, as it meant the distance we could cover was limited. But as we soon discovered, Itzik was not to be deterred.

We were based in a miserable little hole not far from the Mediterranean shore, and unfortunately this meant there were lots of sand dunes for them to run us through. As we soon discovered, running in sand dunes is an exercise in futility. For every two steps forward, you end up taking one step back, and the weight of the sand pulling against each step is an ever-growing agony.

In addition to our regular gear, I was carrying a twenty-liter Jerry can on my back, and this dead weight added to the agony. As it was our first Masah, we didn't know and had not yet been told that we could switch off and take turns at carrying the heavier loads. Nor did we realize, when Itzik decided that the heaviest soldier amongst us (probably about two hundred pounds...) was 'wounded' and needed to be carried on a stretcher resting on our shoulders, that we could signal each other to step in to relieve us at regular intervals. These were all things we learned later, and in fact, the point of the evening was to begin our education by teaching us all the mistakes a unit could make on a maneuver....

I will never forget that feeling of despair, struggling to reach the top of a fifty-foot-high sand dune that seemed endless, the stretcher pole digging into my neck (we hadn't yet learned to take a piece of foam from a mattress and slip it under our shirt collars...) the jerry-can threatening to pull me back down the hill.

And I still remember the look of sheer misery on my closest buddy Pinny's face, when we reached the top of that dune, with the illusion that we had somehow made it, and there, stretched out before us as far as the eye could see, was an endless sea of sand dunes just waiting for that sadistic drill sergeant to march us through. I was sure this was the darkest point of existence I could imagine; it couldn't possibly get any worse. I was wrong.

What seemed like hours later (I had long since lost track of time...), we finally came full circle around the never-ending base fence and could suddenly see the main gate to the base ahead of us. At this point, Itzik began to run us double time towards the base, and we could sense that salvation was at hand. As we neared the gate, panting and heaving under the weight of the stretcher, every muscle screaming in agony Itzik suddenly yelled at us:

"Nu, Tashiru!" "Sing!"

And, as we drew near the base gate, our first march now seemingly under our belts, we actually began to sing! And just as we were feet away from entering the base, tents and showers almost within our grasp, Itzik screamed out those two terrible words that I will remember forever:

"Yeminah...P'nei!!" "Right... Turn!"

We turned along the outside of the base, exactly where we had started our ordeal hours earlier, and proceeded to do the entire thing all over again.

I don't recall a single experience in my entire army career that came close to matching the utter despair of that moment, as we realized we had no idea where we were going, how long it would be till we finished, and the depressing fact that Itzik the sadist could play with us as long as he liked.

So often in life, it seems like we are just running up and down sand dunes, and we find ourselves wondering: where are we going, and how did we end up in this seemingly pointless, endless journey?

We try to set goals for ourselves, and then seem to lose track of how to get where we thought we were headed, wondering what our goals really are, why we bother setting them, and whether they are really worthwhile after all?

Does Judaism offer a recipe for how to keep life on track, and ensure we don't lose sight of living in the midst of the struggle we call life? How can we be certain we are really getting somewhere, especially when we feel like we are just plodding through a seemingly endless routine of details, with no beginning and no end, no point of departure or destination in sight?

In order to pursue what may be Judaism's secret to dealing with this challenge of life, it is worth discussing a particular Jewish ritual in the Jewish calendar: the counting of the *Omer*.

Beginning with the second night (the beginning of the Jewish day) of Passover, we begin to count the days leading up to the Jewish festival of Shavuot, which commemorates the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

For seven weeks (49 days), every evening between Passover and Shavuot, we recite the blessing thanking G-d for the mitzvah (commandment) of the counting of the *Omer*, and proceed to count the first night of the *Omer*, and then the second night of the *Omer*, and so forth.

What is this 'counting of the *Omer*'? What exactly is it we are trying to achieve? Sadly, for many Jews, this nightly ritual has become a detail focused on recalling which particular night of the *Omer* it is and has lost any of the meaning the mitzvah was meant to inspire.

Every mitzvah we have been given is meant to be a vehicle for inspiration and motivation, helping us to become better human beings and enabling us to achieve our purpose here in this world. What then, is the message and the meaning of this strange commandment?

There are a number of questions worth considering, in attempting to understand this mitzvah, and it may well be that hidden within the ritual of the counting of the *Omer* is one of the most crucial messages Judaism has to offer on the meaning of life and the challenge of living it to its fullest capacity.

First of all, what exactly is it that we are counting? What is the *Omer*, the first night and then the second, third, etc. nights we are counting?

The *Omer* was actually a sacrifice of barley (the beginning of the harvest of the grain) offered up in the Temple on the second day of Passover. It is from the time of this offering that we begin to count the days until the festival of Shavuot, seven weeks later. But putting aside what the actual significance of the *Omer* offering was, why do we count the days of the *Omer*? If we are counting the days till Shavuot, why don't we just count the days? Why not just count the first day till Shavuot, and the second day till Shavuot, etc.? What is the meaning

of counting the days of the *Omer*, an offering that by the time we are counting the last day of the *Omer* had been offered seven weeks earlier?

Furthermore, if we are counting days until Shavuot, why are we counting up? Why not count down?

I remember the nightly ritual in the army of one of my veteran soldiers, Chaim Berro, who, like most of the veterans in the unit who were getting close to the day they would finish their regular service, had a huge chart with each day marked in a box till the last day he was due to get discharged.

Every night, he would gather his buddies together, and make a big ceremony of marking an X in the box of the day just passed. In fact, he patterned his ritual after the counting of the Omer, and would yell out:

“HaYom Yom....” “Today is twenty-seven days, which are three weeks and six days left until Chaim Berro gets out of Hell!!”

Why don't we count *down* twenty days till Shavuot, and then ten days till Shavuot, building up the excitement at the approach of the day when 3,200 years ago we received the Torah? Why do we count up?

In fact, the source for this mitzvah appears in the portion of *Emor*, and it is worth taking a closer look at the way the Torah gives us this particular commandment.

“U'Se'fartem Lachem, Mi'Macharat HaShabbat, Mi'Yom Havi'achem Et Omer Ha'Te'nufah, Shevah Shabatot Temimot...” (Leviticus 23:15)

“And you shall count for yourselves, from the day after Shabbat, from the day you bring the waved Omer offering, seven complete weeks...”

It is interesting to note that the day we bring (and wave before the altar) the *Omer* sacrifice is called here *Macharat HaShabbat, the day after Shabbat*. Our oral tradition teaches, however, that Shabbat here refers not to the seventh day of the week, but rather to the first day of Pesach, also called Shabbat.

This important point was the source of great controversy in Jewish history. Over two thousand years ago, a sect of Jews who believed only in the literal translation of the Bible, known as the Sadducees, understood this verse to mean that the counting of the *Omer* always began on the first Sunday after Passover, a point bitterly contested by the Rabbis of the time.

So, if this wording became the source of such controversy, one wonders why the Torah chose to use such ambiguous terminology. Why not just say that the counting of the *Omer* begins on the day after Passover? Alternatively, as is done with each of the other festivals listed here in our portion, it could simply have said that the counting begins on the sixteenth day of the first month (of Nissan), which would have left no doubt as to the day specified.

Because the Torah uses this same term to describe this day in describing the *Omer* offering as *Omer* itself (v. 11), there must be some connection between this mitzvah of the *Omer* and the theme of Shabbat. So, what does Shabbat have to do with the *Omer* and for that matter with Pesach (Passover)?

It is also worth noting that the Torah enjoins us to count “*Lachem*”, “*for ourselves*”. What does it mean that we are meant to count them *for ourselves*?

Lastly, the Torah, concluding its description of the mitzvah of the offering and counting of the *Omer*, continues on to the temple ritual of the festival of Shavuot, towards which we seem to be counting.

On the fiftieth day, the culmination of the journey begun on Passover, noted with the daily counting of the *Omer*, now concludes with the special Shavuot sacrifice, the *She'tei Ha'Lechem*. This sacrifice consists of two whole loaves of bread, offered up in the temple, and clearly the goal of the entire mitzvah of the counting of the *Omer*.

When one stops to consider this, it is nothing short of incredible! Just seven weeks earlier, one of the central mitzvot, and indeed one of the most important mitzvot not only of Passover, but also of the entire Jewish year, is the injunction against chametz, unleavened bread.

So total is this ban in the Torah that not only are we forbidden to eat *chametz* on Passover, we are also forbidden to gain any pleasure from it, or even to keep it in our homes. We dedicate an enormous amount of energy to rooting *chametz* out in all of its various forms from our homes and environment. Walk into any supermarket in Israel the day before Pesach with a bagel, and watch how seriously the Jewish people take this injunction!

(I recall the year one of our children started pulling down the butcher-block paper covering the chametz still on the supermarket shelves though sold to a non-Jew for the holiday. It nearly started a riot...!)

So how is it that seven weeks later, the same *chametz*, which is so terrible, is now offered up in the form of two loaves of bread, as the central offering of Shavuot?

In fact, if *chametz* is so terrible, why is it that immediately after Pesach, we go right back to eating the same *chametz* we were immersed in right before the holiday? How can we be burning and destroying *chametz* one day and then back in the pizza store the next? What, in the end, did we accomplish? And isn't this the same notion of plodding up and down the sand dunes, without seeming to get anywhere?

The mitzvah of the *Omer* is all about counting. We are counting days and weeks; but we are really counting time.

What does it mean to count a day? We live in an age where our inbox and notifications have turned our days into a list of 'to do's'. We think a day is a project list, but in truth we have lost sight of what a day is really meant to be.

Have you ever found yourself repeating the same script your parents were stuck in, that you swore you would never fall prey to? I think of this every time I ask my kids at the end of the day those meaningless four words: 'How was your day?'

Has anyone ever really gotten a great answer to this question? When you ask your roommate or friend this question, do you even really want the answer?

'Time is money'. Is this really what a day is? Is it just a unit of potential for more things, and more money? Judaism suggests that nothing could be further from the truth.

The **Lubavitcher Rebbe** once said that time is life. A day is a piece of life, but do we really see this? When we fall into bed at the end of another long day, do we really feel we have lived a piece of life, or have life's endless trivialities and mundane details actually *prevented* us from really living?

I recall a long discussion with a housewife who finally decided to take some time for herself now that her youngest child had finished high school, and came to Isralight to join one of our summer programs in the Old City of Jerusalem.

There was one sentence that stands out in my memory. In describing what she called her mid-life crisis, and her challenge at deciding what to do with her life now that her kids were out of the house, she said:

“For thirty-five years I have been shopping, cleaning, wiping, packing, and car-pooling. So where did my life go?”

Where, indeed does life seem to disappear?

We long for purpose and meaning in our lives, and yet life somehow seems to get in the way of living! All the self-help books say you need to sometimes get away and make time for yourself, so you can really live. But is this really the answer? If two weeks a year I go on vacation, and finally get to live a little, that means that fifty weeks a year I am really *not* living! A sobering thought to say the least...

It is interesting to note that there is no word for vacation in traditional Hebrew, or in the Torah, perhaps because vacation isn't something G-d created, it is something we created. In fact, the Modern Hebrew word for vacation is 'chofesh' or 'chufshah', whose root is the word *cha'pes*, which means to seek out, or look for something. Perhaps because many people who go on vacation, do so because their life is missing something, which they are looking for.

In fact, the reason 'getting away' is not really the solution, is because I can't do away with all those mundane details in my life, even if that were the ideal. The laundry has to get done, and the dishes have to be washed, so how, within all of the seemingly mundane details of life can I make life meaningful?

How do I achieve my goals, remaining certain that those goals are good, without getting lost in the details? How do we get over all the sand dunes, without getting so caught up in the hill above us and the weight on our backs that we completely lose sight of where we are headed and how to get there?

A fellow was taking a break to finish his prayers in the middle of his job. The foreman happened across him while he was in the midst of the Shema.

“What are you doing reading on the job?” he challenged the worker.

“I am praying”, responded the worker.

“Well, what are you doing praying in the middle of your job?” the foreman countered.

“Isn't it interesting”, said the worker,

“That when I think of work in the middle of my prayers, no-one is bothered by it, so why can't I think of prayer in the midst of my work?”

There is a beautiful Mishnah in Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers that says that if person, in the midst of learning Torah, happens across a beautiful tree and interrupts his learning to exclaim “*Mah Na'eh Ilan Zeh*”, “*How beautiful is this tree!*”, then “*Mitcha'yev Be'Nafsho*”, *His life is forfeit*”!

In other words, allegorically, for interrupting his Torah study to admire a tree, he has lost the right to live! This is an incredible statement. What is wrong with admiring the beauty of nature, even in the midst of Torah study, after all, isn't such a person admiring the beauty of how G-d created the world?

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests a beautiful idea: if seeing a beautiful tree is an interruption of a person's Torah study, then he is missing the entire point. The beauty of nature is not an *interruption* of my relationship with G-d; it is an *extension* of it.

Changing my children's diapers, doing the laundry, and cooking dinner are not chores that prevent me from living; they are gifts, which are an essential part of the beauty of life.

And this is the secret of the *Omer* .

The *Omer* offering is an offering of barley, the coarsest of grains. Raw barley is actually animal fodder, and it is symbolic of all the seemingly mundane parts of daily living, which seem, at first glance to be a distraction from the joy of life. The challenge of the *Omer* , is to learn how to see all of my 'barley', all the chores and details which seem so insignificant, as much a part of the meaning of life, as the mountain views we love to escape to.

Imagine how different my day becomes, if, in the midst of changing my children's diapers, I consider how many families in Israel, with an empty crib where a baby, now a victim of terror, once slept wish only for the joy and the gift of bonding with a child who needs their diaper changed. How many wives, longing for the husband who isn't coming home anymore; wish they could be doing his laundry again, with only the dreariness of such a chore on their minds.

In fact, this may well be the meaning of the reference to Passover as the day after Shabbat. The first Mitzvah the Jewish people are given as a nation, is the mitzvah of the new moon, the lunar calendar. Because when, in the midst of leaving Egypt we became a free nation, the gift we were really given, was the gift of time.

As we have learned, a slave has no concept of the true value of time, because his time is not his own. Only when they became free did the Jewish people re-discover the gift of time. But time is not an achievement; it is a responsibility.

Now that we were given the gift of time, was what we were going to do with it. Freedom was not the goal, it was a challenge, and the festival of Pesach represents that challenge. It was not the end of the journey; it was, rather, a beginning. Hence, the day after Pesach, we begin counting the *Omer* . As if to say, in the midst of the headiness that must have accompanied the incredible events surrounding the exodus from Egypt, understand that life is not just the splitting of the Sea. It is also all the seemingly insignificant details represented by the barley; the animal fodder the Jews had to feed their cattle, even in the midst of the exodus from Egypt.

This of course, is the essence of Shabbat. Shabbat, more than any other part of the Jewish experience, represents the gift of time; of transforming every given moment into the beauty of life. Shabbat is the opportunity, every week, to look back at my week, my life, and appreciate all the details.

So what is the counting of the *Omer* all about? I am offering up my barley, the most mundane aspects of my life, and I am marking life as a whole new experience, (a "*Minchah Chadashah*", v. 16, a "*New offering*"), the result of appreciating the gift of the *Omer* .

For one week every year I desist from *chametz*, but only as a means to re-discover how much that very same *chametz* can be a gift to elevate my life. Eventually, after 49 days, I am ready to turn this *chametz* into loaves of bread on the altar of life.

What are these two loaves? Traditionally they represent the two types of bread: bread from heaven (“Lechem min Ha’Shamayim”), like the Manna, and bread of the earth (“Lechem min Ha’Aretz”). There is the bread in our life we have done nothing to earn. It is purely a gift from heaven. And then there is what we do with it, how we transform the gifts we are given, into gifts we give back; to those around us; to the world, and to G-d.

This is why we count up. Because the point is that we are growing every day, every minute, as a result of this relationship we can have with our ‘barley’.

Counting the *Omer* every night is really an enormous opportunity, to consider all the different pieces of ‘barley’ in our lives, and how much these things that seem to distract us from life, are really the essence of the beauty of every single day and every single moment.

And when one considers just how much richer our lives can be when embracing this idea, it becomes very obvious why this counting, as the Torah suggests really is “*La’Chem*”, ‘for us’. And, as with all the seemingly banal rituals that form the backbone of Judaism, this mitzvah is an incredible opportunity to better ourselves, to live every moment and every day to its fullest, and to make the entire world a better place to be.

May Hashem bless us that soon, all of us, as a people and as a world, may merit to see beauty in all that we do, and in everyone we are with, so that the dream of that day, when nation will no longer lift up sword against nation, may finally be realized.

Make every moment count.

Shabbat Shalom,

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