

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Parashas Emor consists of the following elements: the "extra" level of holiness of Kohanim (Vayikra 21:1-15), the prohibition against Kohanim with physical blemishes (21:16-24) or in a state of spiritual impurity (22:1-16) serving in the Temple; the prohibition against bringing offerings with physical blemishes (22:17-25) and other limitations regarding offerings (22-26-33), the holidays (23:1-44), aspects of the menorah (24:1-4) and the "showbread" (24:5-9), and the narrative about the "son of an Israelite woman" who cursed G-d (24:10-12) and the consequences of his doing so - along with the consequences of other types of actions (24:13-23). The "western mind" can easily relate to the observance of the holidays and the problem with cursing G-d. The objective "western mind" can also relate to the Temple service and how it was (and hopefully will soon be again) an integral part of getting closer to G-d, why it would be inappropriate to bring imperfect offerings when trying to accomplish this, and could accept/acknowledge the existence of spiritual purity and impurity. The thinking objective "western mind" can relate to the need for a priestly class, and how having entire families dedicated solely to G-d's service enables them to be more effective in their own spiritual growth and to better help the rest of the nation with their growth. What about the prohibition against Kohanim with physical blemishes serving in the Temple? Is this an example of the Torah not being "politically correct" by differentiating between individuals based solely on their physical condition even if it wouldn't affect how the effectively service was performed?

The Sefer HaChinuch (mitzvah #275) gives two reasons for this prohibition, one based on perception and the other based on practical considerations. For better or worse, some people will devalue the service if it is performed by someone with physical imperfections, so anyone with these imperfections was disqualified from serving in the Temple. Additionally, the person for whom the service is being performed is supposed to focus on G-d, and may be distracted by the unusual physical properties of a Kohain with such blemishes. In order to avoid the service being less effective because it is harder for the one bringing the offering to concentrate on improving (or repairing) his relationship with G-d,

these Kohanim are prohibited from performing the service.

Both of these reasons speak to how the Kohain's physical blemish will affect others; they have nothing to do with the Kohain himself. Even if a blemish is not visible to others (such as "mero'ach ushech"), it is possible that since it is part of the category of "physical blemishes" it still disqualifies a Kohain from the Temple service.

Rav Shelomo Kluger ("Imray Shefer") discusses the change in the wording of the prohibition from the future tense, when the Torah discusses a Kohain who "will have" a physical blemish, to the present tense, when it states that "any Kohain who *has* a physical blemish" cannot perform the service. He attributes this change to the fact that at the time this prohibition was taught, there were no Kohanim (or anyone from the Tribe of Levi) with physical blemishes. At Mt. Sinai, before the sin of the "golden calf" (when the nation had reached the level of Adam before he sinned), all physical blemishes had healed. After they sinned, though, the blemishes returned. However, since the Tribe of Levi did not participate in the sin of the "golden calf," their blemishes did not return. Therefore, it would only be a "descendant of Aharon" in "later generations" (see 21:17) that could get a blemish, if they sin; the reason any future Kohain with a physical blemish can't serve in the Temple is "because any Kohain with a physical blemish" (21:21), i.e. who *has* (present tense) such a blemish, cannot serve in the Temple.

I would have suggested that the use of the "future tense" was a result of there being a grand total of only three Kohanim at the time (Aharon, Elazar and Isamar). Not only were none of them "blemished," but using the "present tense" would have been a sort of implication that (at least) one of them was worthy of becoming blemished. Nevertheless, Rav Kluger's approach indicates that future Kohanim becoming blemished was a result of sin, as until the Kohanim (as an entity, not necessarily the particular Kohain that was blemished) were no longer on the level achieved at Mt. Sinai, none of them got any blemishes. This doesn't necessarily contradict the reasons given by the Chinuch; no Kohain would ever have gotten a blemish had they maintained their high spiritual level, but once they lost that level, the reason Kohanim with a blemish can't serve is because of the way they would be perceived by, and/or cause a distraction to, others. Nevertheless, this line of thinking may provide another

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possible reason why Kohanim with a physical blemish are disqualified from performing the Temple service.

As previously mentioned, the Temple service was a vehicle for attaining a higher spiritual level, and the Kohanim (and Levi'im) were the "experts" who helped others gain new spiritual insights, improve in areas that needed (and were within reach of) improvement, and get closer to the Creator. They were "chosen" for this role when they stepped forward and helped Moshe try to repair the damage caused by the sin of the "golden calf," a sin they did not partake in. Already in Egypt they were designated to be the nation's teachers, choosing to study Torah rather than work for Pharaoh (and thereby never becoming slaves). When the rest of the nation fell from their high level, and their physical blemishes returned, the Tribe of Levi retained their level, and remained blemish-free. The fact that, generations later, there were also Kohanim (and Levi'im) with physical blemishes, meant that they also (at a later date) fell from their previously high level. How could a spiritual-seeker turn to any Kohanim for guidance if they weren't able to maintain their spiritual level, and were, so far, unsuccessful in bringing the nation back to their previously-experienced high level?

Since the Kohanim were still the most qualified to help others grow spiritually, it was still appropriate to turn to them for guidance. However, if the Kohain a person was turning to for such guidance, the one who was going to bring his offering to G-d in the Temple and facilitate a stronger connection to G-d, had a physical blemish, it was as if he was wearing a large sign announcing that Kohanim themselves weren't completely successful at attaining (or maintaining) their spiritual level. Therefore, even though Kohanim (in general) were the appropriate individuals to perform the Temple service, those that had this "sign" that reminded others that Kohanim were also far from perfect were disqualified from performing the Temple service. © 2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“Remove the blasphemer to the outside of the camp" (Lev 24:14). Our Biblical portion of Emor concludes with a strange and almost mythical tale of what appears to be the son of a mixed

marriage ("the child of an Israelite woman and of one who is an Egyptian man") who picks a fight with an Israelite and publicly blasphemes. In response, G-d commands that those who heard his blasphemy must place their hands upon the blasphemer's head and pelt him with stones (Lev. 24:10-23).

The rather terse Biblical account is fraught with textual difficulties. Why does the Bible delineate the same capital punishment in three separate verses (Lev.24:14, 16, and 23)? And why tell a gossipy tale of mixed marriage as the prelude to the law of the blasphemer? Why not simply record the crime and its punishment, as is usual in the Bible? And if the background story is to be told, why not give all of the details? We are left with many gaps, especially as to the background of the two individuals who intermarry and their son's attitude to his identity.

The nature of the punishment is also strange. Why do the people who hear the blasphemous words have to place their hands on the head of the criminal? "Laying of the hands" in the Bible generally signifies either a conferral of authority such as when Moses gives over his authority to Joshua (Numbers 27:23) or a transference of guilt such as when the High Priest places the sins of the nation upon the head of the scapegoat (Leviticus 16:21,22). Neither of these symbols applies to the blasphemer.

Finally, the Biblical description of the blasphemer's punishment concludes with the seemingly superfluous phrase "he shall be pelted, yes, be pelted, by the entire witness - congregation, stranger as well as citizen" (24:16). The next verses in the very same chapter seem to be presenting a totally disparate crime, "If a man smites the soul of another, he shall die, yes die" (24:17). The Bible goes on to record the laws of smiting animals and causing blemishes to other individuals adding kind of obiter dictum: "There shall be one law for you, stranger as well as citizen, for I am the Lord your G-d" (24:22). The chapter concludes by returning to the blasphemer, who is to be removed from the encampment and pelted with stones (24:23). Why all of this extraneous material in the midst of the tale of the blasphemer?

I believe that the Bible is explaining to us what might have caused a Jew to stoop to publicly blaspheming the Lord, who had just taken the Israelites out of Egypt with wonders and miracles. The crime was particularly strange since it was a transgression from which the perpetrator derived no "pleasure of the moment" (as in the case of the cohabitation with Midianite women or the orgiastic dancing associated with worshipping the Golden Calf); it served only to express his bitter anger, rebellion and disillusionment.

We have already seen that father Jacob needed to discover and accept his own proud identity. He achieved this by freeing himself from his obsession with the hands of Esau which were internally wreaking havoc with the "wholehearted man, dweller of tents" -

his real persona. Only when he had succeeded in doing this could he truly accept "the Lord G-d of Israel" and merit the name Israel. (Indeed each of us receives our basic identity, certainly in the most formative stages of our lives, from our parents, from their sense of identity and from the way in which they relate to each other and to us).

The Midrash, cited by Rashi, gives us a fascinating insight into the parents of this Israelite born to a mixed marriage: his Egyptian father was the taskmaster who smote the Hebrew slave and was, in turn, smitten by Moses. Apparently, this man's self-image was severely damaged, and he yearned for acceptance by the Hebrews! His mother, Shlomit bat Divri from the tribe of Dan, was constantly chattering (the word "dibur" means speech), greeting everyone in sight again and again ("shalom lakh, shalom lakh," Shlomit would always prattle). She too, desperately sought acceptance from everyone around her, and became easy prey for the sexually promiscuous. Two such parents, who came from two very different cultural backgrounds may well have married for the wrong reasons and could hardly have given their son a strong sense of identity as a proud child of Israel.

A Midrash, cited by Rashi reinforces this idea. Picking up on the phrase, "the son of the Israelite woman went out..." it asks: "Where did he go out from? Rabbi Levi answered, 'He went out from his world of Judaism.'" Even though as the son of a Hebrew woman, Jewish law defined him as a Hebrew, the fact that his father was Egyptian (even though the Midrash states that he converted) caused him to be treated as an outsider. He neither felt himself to be a full Jew, and nor did other Jews accept him as one. The Midrash goes on: "He went out frustrated from Moses' religious court. He wanted to establish his tent in the encampment of the tribe of Dan (from his mother's side), but he was rebuffed - the tribal inheritance followed the male lineage. When Moses sided with the decision of the tribe, he went out and blasphemed" (Vayikra Rabbah 33: 3).

This young man, certainly an Israelite from a halakhic, legal perspective, yearned for acceptance; instead he was rejected and rebuffed. His fight with an Israelite was against the tribe of Dan who removed his tent from their encampment. His resulting sense of alienation caused him to feel alienated from and rejected by the G-d of Israel as well. Indeed, it is almost natural for us to strike out against those whom we perceive as having attacked us!

The Talmud similarly teaches that when Timna, a Mediterranean princess, was rejected in her quest for conversion by our Patriarchs, she became mistress to Elifaz (son of Esau) and bore him Amalek (B.T. Sanhedrin 99b). Amalek became Israel's arch-enemy. Rejection breeds rejection and thus the Divine imperative that the rejecting Israelite community must place its hands on the head of the blasphemer -

because they are grafting onto him their sin of rejection. The blasphemer becomes the community's scapegoat.

The primary message of our redemption from Egypt is that we must "love the stranger [the other], because we were strangers in Egypt." Hence our Biblical passage emphasizes that the stranger must be treated as a citizen and that rejecting a human being is tantamount to smiting his soul. Only when we truly accept the stranger will G-d truly accept us as His redeemed people! © 2010 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

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The dangers of establishing a priestly class are apparent to all. It can breed and lead to discrimination against others, corruption, misuse of power and position and an unwarranted sense of hubris and entitlement amongst the priests.

In the ancient world all societies had a priestly class. But these priests usually had temporal power as well and were seen as possessing magical and supernatural powers. In a world of idolatry and superstition this naturally gave them additional stature and powers.

To a great extent this situation was inherited and sanctified by the Church itself when Christianity became the dominant religion of the Western world. Because of this, the Church has suffered scandal and rebellion throughout its centuries and certainly in our day as well.

Papal infallibility has only added to the problem already existing because of a strongly entrenched priestly hierarchy that often disdains the public it is meant to serve. Yet no faith can exist without leadership and committed public servants. The Torah recognizes this in this week's parsha with the special role it assigns to the kohanim-the descendants of Aharon- in Jewish life, especially in times of the Temple.

The service of the kohanim and the existence of such a group itself were deemed essential by the Torah to assure a full Jewish life of G-dly values and public worship. The kohanim served to bind the disparate tribes of Israel together in the service of G-d and to give direction to national life and moral goals. The kohanim were the "angels" of G-d to the people, the guardians of the faith and the teachers of Israel. They were also to always serve as the role models for proper moral behavior and holy probity.

Thus the special laws and standing applied to kohanim, as described in this week's parsha, came to serve as a safeguard against their potential abuse and exploitation of power and position. The kohein was not to be the king, he owned no land by right of being one of the tribes of Israel and he was subject to special familial restrictions-all meant to enhance his position of a servant of G-d and of the people.

In Tanach we read that in spite of all of these safeguards, the kohanim in both the First and Second Temple periods were eventually corrupted by power and avarice. The prophets became the true "priests" of Israel, the moral role models and spiritual leaders of the Jewish nation. The Hasmoneans who were kohanim, in spite of their initial great piety and heroism, violated the rules of balance of power ordained by the Torah and usurped the monarchy for themselves in spite of being kohanim.

Eventually this led to disastrous consequences for the Jews. The Second Temple saw great corruption in the ranks of the kohanim with the office of the Kohein Gadol being bought and bartered. Thus the rabbis of the Mishna and later the Talmud became the spiritual "priests" of Israel. Yet the kohanim have retained their special identity and position within the Jewish world over these many millennia. They are to be respected and we are to be grateful to receive their blessings and services. © 2010 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Our Torah portion talks of the fifty days between Passover and Shavuot commonly known as Sefirat Ha-omer. From a biblical perspective, these days relate to the barley offering brought on the second day of Passover and the wheat brought on the festival of Shavuot. These days are days of hope and prayer that the produce from the ground grow fruitfully and plentifully.

In addition, this period of time certainly has something to do with the counting of time from Passover, the holiday marking our physical exodus from Egypt, to Shavuot, the holiday commemorating the giving of the Torah. So great is the anticipation of Shavuot that we count joyously one day after the other for seven full weeks hoping to reach higher and higher as we approach that moment in history when the Torah was given. It is fitting that we count up to forty nine. This is because the number seven in Judaism, symbolizes completion, wholeness and spirituality, for it is the number of Shabbat. Forty nine is seven sets of seven, therefore the Omer period is the ultimate completion of the completion, the holiest of the holiest.

As time progressed in the history of our people, these joyous days turned into sad ones. It was between Passover and Shavuot that the students of Rabbi Akiva died. According to tradition, death came because these learned men were involved in endless dispute. The relationships between these individuals that carried the potential for such greatness broke down resulting in back-biting and a totally ruptured community.

My son, Rabbi Dov Weiss, pointed out that perhaps it is not a coincidence that Rabbi Akiva's students were killed during the very days when we count toward the giving of the Torah. No doubt, the rabbis led the way in the count toward Shavuot as the rabbis are the teachers par excellence of Torah. Yet, it is these same rabbis who became involved in deep conflict. Rather than these days being joyous they became days of mourning.

Too often Torah scholars to become so engrossed in the understanding of Torah that they begin to believe that their approach is the only correct one. They often cannot see the truth in any other view. In our communities we, too, often see how rabbis and community leaders fail to see any truth in someone else's view even if it legitimate, creating havoc and endless strife.

It has been suggested that different views are recorded in the Talmud to remind us that while one should continue to focus and deepen his or her view of Torah, it should not lead to tunnel vision. Different outlooks should respect one another. Sefirat Ha-omer reminds us that we should intensely journey toward Torah, but while we do so, we should not possess tunnel vision; we should open the windows and let the winds enter our minds, our bodies and our souls.

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CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The festival of Shavuot is a mystery wrapped in an enigma. Here is how this week's sedra describes and defines it: "From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks. Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord... On that same day you are to proclaim a sacred assembly and do no regular work. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live." (Leviticus 23:5-21)

These are the difficulties. In the first place, Shavuot, "the feast of weeks", is given no calendrical date: all the other festivals are. Pesach, for example is "on the fifteenth day" of the "first month". Shavuot has no such date. It is calculated on the basis of counting "seven full weeks" from a particular starting time, not by noting a date in the year.

Secondly, as long as the New Moon was determined on the basis of eyewitness testimony (i.e. until the fourth century of the Common Era), Shavuot could have no fixed date. In the Jewish calendar a month can be long (30 days) or short (29). If Nisan and Iyar were both long months, Shavuot would fall on 5 Sivan. If both were short, it would fall on 7 Sivan. And if one were long and the other short, it would fall on 6

Sivan. Unlike other festivals, Shavuot is (or was) a moveable feast.

Thirdly, the point at which the counting of days and weeks begins is signaled in a profoundly ambiguous phrase: "From the day after the Sabbath". But which Sabbath? And what is the reference to a Sabbath doing here at all? The previous passage has talked about Pesach, not the Sabbath. This led to one of the great controversies in Second Temple Judaism. The Pharisees, who believed in the Oral Law as well as the Written one understood "the Sabbath" to mean, here, the first day of Pesach (15 Nisan). The Sadducees, who believed in the Written Law only, took the text literally. The day after the Sabbath is Sunday. Thus the count always begins on a Sunday, and Shavuot, fifty days later, also always falls on a Sunday.

The fourth mystery, though, is the deepest: what is Shavuot about? What does it commemorate? About Pesach and Sukkot, we have no doubt. Pesach is a commemoration of the exodus. Sukkot is a reminder of the forty years in the wilderness. As our sedra says: "Live in booths for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in booths so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your G-d."

In the case of Shavuot, all the Torah says is that it is the "Feast of the Harvest", and the "Day of Firstfruits". These are agricultural descriptions, not historical ones. Pesach and Sukkot have both: an agricultural aspect (spring/autumn) and a historical one (exodus/wilderness). This is not a marginal phenomenon, but of the essence. Other religions of the ancient world celebrated seasons. They recognized cyclical time. Only Israel observed historical time-time as a journey, a story, an evolving narrative. The historical dimension of the Jewish festivals was unique. All the more, then, is it strange that Shavuot is not biblically linked to a historical event.

Jewish tradition identified Shavuot as "the time of the giving of the Torah", the anniversary of the Divine revelation at Sinai when the Israelites heard the voice of G-d and made a covenant with Him. But that connection is not made in the Torah itself. To be sure, the Torah says that "In the third month after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai" (Ex. 19:1), and Shavuot is the only festival in the third month. So the connection is implicit; but it is not explicit. For this, as for the festival's date, we need the Oral tradition.

What then was the view of the Sadducees? It is unlikely that they linked Shavuot with the giving of the Torah. For that event had a date, and for the Sadducees Shavuot did not have a date. They kept it on a Sunday- they observed it on a specific day of the week, not on a specific date in the year. How did the Sadducees view Shavuot?

There is a fascinating episode recorded in the rabbinic literature (Menachot 65a) in which a Sadducee

explains to R. Yochanan ben Zakkai why, according to them, Shavuot is always on a Sunday: "Moses our teacher was a great lover of Israel. Knowing that Shavuot lasted only one day, he therefore fixed it on the day after the Sabbath so that Israel might enjoy themselves for two successive days." Shavuot gave the Israelites a long weekend! From this starting point we can begin to speculate what Shavuot might have meant for the Sadducees. The late Louis Finkelstein argued that they were landowners and farmers. In general, they were wealthier than the Pharisees, and more closely attached to the State and its institutions: the Temple and the political elite. They were as near as Judaism came to a governing class.

For farmers the agricultural significance of Shavuot would have been clear and primary. It was "the festival of the harvest, of the firstfruits of your work, of what you sow in the field" (Ex. 23:16). It came at the end of a seven-week process that began with the bringing of the Omer-"a sheaf of the first grain of your harvest" (Lev. 23:10), i.e. the first of the barley crop. This was the busy time of gathering in the grain (this is the setting of the Book of Ruth, and one of the reasons why we read it on Shavuot). Farmers would have a specific reason to give thanks to G-d who "brings forth bread from the ground". They would also, by the end of harvesting, be exhausted. Hence the Sadducee's remark about needing a long weekend.

We can now see the outline of a possible Sadducean argument. Pesach represents the beginning of the Israelites' journey to freedom. Sukkot recalls the forty years of wandering in the desert. But where in the Jewish year do we recall and celebrate the end of the journey: the entry into the promised land? When, in fact, did it take place? The Book of Joshua (5:10-12) states:

"On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate of the produce of Canaan."

It is this text that Maimonides takes as proof that "the day after the Sabbath" in fact means, as the text states here, "the day after the Passover". Seen through Sadducean eyes, however, this text might have held a quite different significance. The Omer recalls the day the Israelites first ate the produce of the promised land. It was the end of the wilderness years-the day they stopped eating manna ("bread from heaven"-Exodus 16:4) and started eating bread from the land to which they had been traveling for forty years.

The reason Shavuot is given only agricultural, not historical, content in the Torah is that in this case agriculture was history. The fifty day count from the first time they ate food grown in Israel to the end of the grain harvest represents the end of the journey of which

Pesach was the beginning and Sukkot the middle. Shavuot is a festival of the land and its produce because it commemorates the entry into the land in the days of Joshua. So the Sadducees may have argued. It was Israel's first Yom ha-Atzma'ut, Independence Day. It was the festival of entry into the promised land.

It is, perhaps, not surprising that after the destruction of the Second Temple, the Sadducees rapidly disappeared. How do you celebrate a festival of the land when you have lost the land? How do you predicate your religious identity on the State and its institutions (Temple, priests, kings) when you have lost those institutions? Only a movement (the Pharisees) and a festival (Shavuot) based on the giving of the Torah, could survive. For the Torah was not completely dependent on the land. It had been given "in the wilderness". It applied anywhere and everywhere.

To be sure, the Pharisees, no less than the Sadducees, loved the land. They knew the Torah in its entirety could only be kept there. They longed for it, prayed for it, lived there whenever they could. But even in exile, they still had the Torah and the promise it contained that one day Jews would return, and recover their sovereignty, and rebuild what they had lost.

The argument about Shavuot turned out to be fateful for Jewish history. Those who celebrated it as "the time of the giving of the Torah" ensured Jewish survival through nearly 20 centuries of exile and dispersion. And we, who live in the era of the return, can rejoice in a double celebration: of the Torah and of the land. © 2010 Rabbi Sir J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI BENJAMIN YUDIN

Torah Web

We find ourselves in the period of the Omer. In Parshas Emor (23:15) we are taught "You shall count for yourselves, from the morrow of the rest day when you bring the omer of the waving, seven weeks they shall be complete". A few basic questions are in order. We know that an omer is a dry measure. We first encounter the term in conjunction with the manna, Shemos (16:16): "This is the thing that Hashem has commanded, gather from it for every man according to what he eats, an omer per person." Why then is the korban brought on the second day of Pesach known as the Korban Omer? Yes, an omer's worth of barley was brought as a korban, but it seems strange that it should be called "the dry measure korban". Moreover, in the bracha instituted prior to the counting why not say, "V'Tzivanu al sfiras shavuos-and He commanded us to count weeks", for indeed we are counting the weeks to the holiday of Shavuos; why do we instead say "al sfiras haomer-to count the omer"?

Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg zt"l in his Haksav V'Hakabalah offers a novel fresh interpretation. He says that we should not focus on the omer as a dry measure but rather as it is used in Devorim (24:7) "If a

man is found kidnapping a person of his brethren, among the Children of Israel 'V'Hishamer Bo-and he enslaves him or subjugates him' and sells him, that kidnapper shall die and you shall remove the evil from your midst".

The word omer means to subjugate and that is the application and understanding in relation to this time, korban, and mitzvah of counting. The Torah refers to the Korban Omer in Vayikra (2:14) as a "Minchas Bikurim-a meal offering of the first grain to Hashem". When one is blessed with prosperity, represented by the first grain, there is always the possibility of erroneously attributing the success of their labor to themselves, as the Torah cautions in Devorim (8:17) "and you may say in your heart, my strength and the might of my hand brought me all this wealth". Therefore, the Torah mandates that the kohein take the omer of barley and wave it in all directions to indicate that this produce and bounty came from Hashem. In addition, the designation of this time as "omer", as for example the title of chapter 493 of Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim is "the laws applicable in the days of the omer", may be interpreted in light of the above as days of subjugation, or our willingness to yield to a Higher Authority. Thus, for each individual, starting with the second day of Pesach, a psychological and intellectual commitment is being reinforced by their personal counting of the omer. In a sense one is declaring, "count me in". This also sheds light on the minhag Yisrael to study Pirkei Avos during this time of omer, providing concrete formulae of true omer-subjugation to Hashem.

The Gemorah Shabbos (31A) explains the verse from Isaiah (33:6) "V'Haya emunas eatecha..." as referring to the six sections of the mishnah. "Emunas" refers to the section of the Zeraim, which deals almost exclusively with the agricultural laws of Eretz Yisrael. It is called "emunas-faith", explains the Yerushalmi, because the farmer who sows his seeds places his faith in Hashem. The subsequent teaching by Rava is that when each individual is brought before the heavenly tribunal for judgment, they will be asked (a) did you conduct your business honestly, or, more precisely, with faith? (b) did you set aside fixed times for Torah study?, for if one believes that his business success or livelihood is from Hashem, then it follows that he was afforded this blessing to enable him to set fixed times for Torah study. (This is the one form of the subjugation of the omer period).

In Parshas Emor, each holiday is presented and its specific laws taught in a paragraph dedicated exclusively to that holiday. The paragraph of Shavuos, however, concludes (23:22) with a description of seemingly irrelevant agricultural gifts to the poor such as leaving the corner of the field (pe'ah) for the poor to harvest themselves and leaving the fallen gleanings of the harvest (leket) for the poor. The paragraph of Shavuos concludes this way because these laws embody the message of the omer. If the produce is

mine, the result of my knowledge, expertise, and farming acumen, then why should I necessarily share my produce with the less fortunate? However, if I recognize and acknowledge that it all comes from On High, I subjugate myself to His Higher Authority, and His requiring the dispensing of my assets to the poor and needy is very much in place. A greater commitment to needs of others and of the community is an implementation of the true character and essence of the omer. © 2010 Rabbi B. Yudin and torahweb.org

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

The Timeless Rav Hirsch

Finally, there is a holiday observance that all Jews can get behind. Attending a seder remains pretty popular, but there is that chametz rule that gets in the way for the non-observant. Apples and honey on Rosh Hashanah has a shot at the distinction, but would the committed Jew really consider it a major observance? Yom Kippur and its fasting? No chance. Too much of an association with sin and guilt, concepts which, to the non-Orthodox, are so... retro. Shavuot doesn't have a chance. Outside of the Orthodox world, no one even heard of it.

Sukkos, however, provides a bona fide mitzvah that can bring a smile to the most liberal Jew. Taking the four species of plants, the four minim, works for everyone. Celebrating Nature is PC. It sounds like it should be good for the environment. With the four minim, Jews rejoice in the grandeur of Nature. We thank Hashem for the beauty of His world in general, and for His generosity to us in granting us a bountiful harvest. It would be nice, were it not for the fact that it is patently untrue. Wrong plants; wrong message. The Torah elsewhere specifies the trademark products of the Land. If we need symbols of the fullness of the produce of Israel, we turn to the verse (Devarim 8:8) that lists them: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates. Besides, the four minim are no cause for a grower's celebration. How many farmers are overjoyed to learn that their toil has been richly rewarded by a bumper crop of willows and myrtles? These are no symbols of a successful harvest season.

We need to find a better way to understand the symbolism of the minim. We stand with the four minim divided asymmetrically between our two hands. With one hand, we take three of them; the esrog finds prominence in a solo performance in the other. According to Chazal, the esrog deserves the accolades. It combines the admirable features of all the other three. In fact, its very description—peri eitz hadar, "the fruit of a beautiful tree"—points to its concentration of gifts. Those gifts are all found distributed throughout the other three.

Like the esrog, the lulav is associated with luscious fruit—the dates that grow at the top of the tree. As we hold it in hand, however, we plainly see that it is

no competition for the esrog. The esrog tree distinguishes itself in containing in its woody substance the same fragrant material as gives scent to the fruit. This is what makes it a "beautiful tree", according to the Gemara (Sukkah 32B): "its attractive aroma is dispersed through all of it." The lulav may come with a lovely fruit, but it is no "beautiful tree."

The myrtle is the mirror image of the lulav. Its braided formation of fragrant leaves surrounds a fragrant stem. It bears, however, no fruit. It is "beautiful tree" without the "fruit."

The simple willow has nothing, really, to put on its brag sheet—no fruit, and no fragrance. It is woody stuff, tree, unaccompanied by fruit or beauty.

The four minim, therefore, can be seen as points on a continuum of desirable traits. At the end of the continuum we find beauty throughout the esrog plant, and in all its aspects. At points along the way, we find the other gifts. Despite the unequal distribution of assets among the four minim, halachah mandates some commonality. To fulfill the mitzvah, each specimen must be tam, and must possess some aspect of hadar. None of the four may be damaged to the point of lacking some of their expected substance. Each one in its own way is a tam, an integrated whole. Each one is also perfect and beautiful in its own right.

The Torah instructs us to "rejoice before Hashem" with the minim. We can stand in His presence without self-consciousness only when we are not tainted by transgression. The taking of the minim must be "for yourselves," which means that they must fully belong to us, rather than be acquired through theft. The same phrase according to the Gemara also implies that we are to make them entirely ours, not simply borrowed from another person.

Putting all these halachic requirements together, we can see what is taking shape. The minim represent the continuum of berachos that Hashem's providence provides us. From our standpoint as mortals, we do not see all these berachos as equal. Yet the Torah tells us to take the lot of them, and make each and every one a part of ourselves. Each situation, strength and talent that He grants us can be used constructively to build our personalities. We are to cherish each one, and utilize it to better stand before Him in joy. Whatever Providence offers us, we are instructed to find beauty in it, and to take it and make it fully ours.

Sometimes we recognize the gifts we receive as splendid fruit from a splendid tree, like the esrog. Sometimes, they enable us to stand strong, straight and resolute, like the lulav. That is a good thing, even if it is not accompanied by the glory of producing visible fruit.

At other times, we shine with an inner beauty, like that of the fragrant, plaited leaves of the myrtle. Other times leave us feeling like the willow, which has no beauty, no strength, nothing that endears itself to others. Yet the aravos—moments of our lives are not

times of failure. A Mishnah (Bikurim 3:8) informs us that the lowly willow was put to good use. Its branches were woven together to form inexpensive baskets. With no special feature to recommend its desirability, even this simplest, seemingly least attractive gift from G-d allows us to hold, carry, and preserve.

Whatever kind of day-or life-Hashem orchestrates for us, the lesson of this mitzvah is that we can and must find joy in it. Moreover, we are not simply to react to it, to deal with it, to learn to live with it. Each day, each new kind of experience, offers us nothing less than the stuff with which we build more uplifted and elevated souls. (Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Vayikra 23:40) © 2010 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein and torah.org

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Mitzvah Watchers

The Torah tells us in this week's parsha, "u'shmartem es mitzvosai, v'aseesem osum-watch the mitzvos and do them" (Leviticus 22:31). What does watch mitzvos mean. If one does a mitzvah, he is surely doing more than watching them. Watching mitzvos seems quite passive. Observant Jew is a term used for those who actually perform them and adhere to the laws, and the curious word observant, perhaps, indeed comes from the Hebrew word u'shmartem. But doesn't Hashem want us to be more than just watchers. If He tells us to do mitzvos, then surely we watch them! Why the double, if not redundant, expression? Rabbi Yisrael Zelman zl, grew up in Chicago long before the flourishing of Torah institutions in that city. As a married man, every Saturday night after the conclusion of the Shabbos he would pass a newsstand on the way home from shul and pick up the days newspapers. As the Shabbos had just ended and Reb Yisrael did not carry any money with him, he had made an arrangement with the vendors to return on Sunday morning to pay for the papers.

He walked in for Havdallah with a stack of newspapers in his hand. But Rabbi Yisrael Zelman was not interested in the sports pages nor was he interested in the headlines. In fact he was not interested in the paper altogether. Rabbi Zelman bought the papers for his mother. She also was not interested in the sports or the news. She was interested in the dead.

You see, every Saturday night she would comb the newspapers looking for announcements of tombstone unveilings that were to take place the next day at the Jewish Cemeteries in the Chicago area.

An unveiling is a time when people are charitable, and the elderly Mrs. Zelman would go every Sunday to the cemeteries and raise funds from those gathered for Yeshivos in Europe in Israel. She would eventually turn the coins into bills and send the money overseas. A plaque hangs today in the Slobodka Yeshiva in Israel and various other Yeshivos commemorating her efforts. The word "watch" in the

Torah is often used in very interesting context.. When Yoseph retold his dreams and the brothers scoffed, the Torah tells us that Yaakov "watched the happenings (genesis 37:.)" Rashi explain that he was more than observing. He was watching and waiting for the events to occur. He was watching in anticipation of future results. Perhaps when the Torah uses the words "watch the mitzvos," the Torah is telling us more than just observing mitzvos. It is telling us to watch out for mitzvos. Be on guard. There are hundreds of opportunities to find mitzvos and to do them. But we must be observant and vigilant. There are hundreds of mitzvos that pass by our very eyes. Scores of Good Mornings. Hundreds of packages, as well as spirits, that we can help lift. There are hundreds of hearts we can help heal as well as small acts of charity we can fulfill.

Perhaps the Torah is telling us more than to watch the mitzvos that come our way. Perhaps it may be telling us to be on the lookout for those mitzvos that are out there waiting for us to observe them. © 2010 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Emor contains the commandment to count 49 days from the bringing of the omer barley offering on the day after Passover to the holiday of Shavuot. Although the Torah does not spell out the rationale for this mitzvah, the later Rabbinic literature identifies this 49 day period as a time for personal development; just as the Jews needed 49 days to rise from the level of impurity they reached in Egypt to the level of holiness required to receive the Torah on the first Shavuot, so too every individual should utilize the 49 days to ready himself to commemorate the giving of the Torah on each Shavuot.

There is a famous legal dispute as to whether counting the omer is one mitzvah with 49 parts or 49 separate mitzvot. Practically, both opinions are respected:

If one forgot to count on a given day, he continues to count on the next day, in accord with the second view, but he no longer recites a blessing because according to the first view he has spoiled his fulfillment of the mitzvah.

Perhaps each of these positions is relevant not just to the counting itself, but to the spiritual development for which we strive during this period of time. On the one hand, spiritual accomplishments must be approached one step at a time. Each of the 49 days stands on its own and each step we take has great value. On the other hand, individual steps that are intermittent are not enough to reach the goal. For true success, continuity is needed as well, maintaining the effort for 49 days without fail. May we merit to use the remaining days of this year's counting of the omer to reach new heights. © 2010 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.