

# Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



S'FIRAT HA-OMER

## S'FIRA & SOCIETY

This title expresses the idea that the activity called S'FRAT HA'OMER carries greater meaning than just the process of counting the days and weeks between the second day of Pesach and the holiday of Shavuot. Because when we count we are simultaneously preparing for a new reality for the Jewish nation.

Besides the actual counting, what else are we trying to achieve? The Noam Elimelech (Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk) believes that the secret purpose is in the very word US-FARTEM (and you shall count, Vayikra 23:15). Reb Elimelech explains that this term comes from the word SAPIR (a shining stone, like sapphire). Our 'count' is casting a bright light on this time period helping us prepare for Revelation at Sinai, just a few weeks away.

According to many authorities, we use these weeks to cast a bright light on our own behavior. We want to purge ourselves of any negative traits in order to be worthy of receiving the Torah at Sinai. We recreate the effort of our ancestors, who threw off the

impurities of their long stay in the corrupt society of Egypt.

K'dushat Levi presents us with a syllabus of how to prepare for the great day: The first of the seven weeks is devoted to recognizing that after 2500 years of human existence, we acknowledge its Creator and his favorite people, Israel. The second week is devoted to embracing God with reverence and awe, recognizing in Him as the Originator of all existence. The third week is devoted to ensure that God will have reason to "boast" about His people and their accomplishments. The fourth and fifth weeks are devoted to deepening our faith in the Creator, our ability to withstand any doubt of His being the only God. The sixth week is devoted to strengthening our ties to Him through the intensity with which we serve Him. Finally, the seventh week is devoted to declaring Him as the King of Kings.

Cool! The Ohev Yisrael (Reb Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, the one who lived 1748-1825) tells us never to underestimate the power of this Mitzva, because it brings us to such a profound spiritual place. He explains that we went from illiterate slaves to sophisticated servants of God. He sees this idea represented in the move from sacrificing barley, which is animal food, at the beginning of this period, to bringing the fine wheat loaves on Shavuot.

He sees the GEMATRIYA of CHITA (wheat), which is 22, as establishing this point. This is the number of letters in our Hebrew alphabet, and represents the idea of us becoming literate on the way to becoming the 'People of the Book'.

The ultimate importance of the S'firat Ha'Omer period to our national identity is connected to a famous argument. Did God give us the Torah on the fiftieth day, immediately upon completion of the Count or one day later, the fifty-first day. The first idea is the more commonly held position, and is, of course, that this day is the anniversary of receiving the Torah from God. This is the true beginning of our nation, and often is compared to a wedding ceremony between us and our God. This is how Rav Ya'akov Medan of Yeshivat Har Etzyon describes it:

The Exodus is compared to an engagement between God and Israel. However, the union was only sealed at the foot of Mount Sinai where we voluntarily accepted the Torah. 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 Shavuot when our covenant with Hashem is re-affirmed. 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, S'firat Ha-Omer as a period of transformation and longing, is relevant in both the agricultural and the historical senses.

But what about the other point of view? What is the great significance of the 50th day if we really received the Ten Commandments only the next morning? Rav Shimshon Rephael Hirsch holds this position and he describes it this way: The fact that the day which is elevated to a Festival should NOT be the day of the Revelation, but the final day of the counting which leads up to it... It is not the Revelation, but our making ourselves worthy of it, that our festival celebrates. The day on which the nation presented itself as worthy of the mission to the world, to be the bearers of the Law.

Excellent! And what character traits make us worthy to be God's representatives here on earth? Well, Rav Hirsch, I believe answers that question in his comment to verse 22 in our chapter. In that verse, we are told to leave parts of the harvest (the corners and the fallen sheaves) for the poor and the landless. Rav Hirsch explains that without those laws the harvest would only belong to the landed and the wealthy. The poor would lose their dignity and have to rely on the good will of others, which is humiliating.

**This is the true meaning of the word TZ'DAKA, from the word TZEDEK, 'righteousness'. It's not charity; it's the right of the poor to this part of the harvest. Everyone in Israel attains human dignity. And he concludes: This concept of TZ'DAKA is the greatest social triumph of God's Law within the people of God.**

**A society is judged by how it treats its weakest and poorest members, usually the widow, orphan and stranger. This coming week is Yom HaAtzma'ut, the anniversary of the birth of our Medina. It's a time for celebration. But shouldn't it also be a day of contemplation and self-awareness. Shouldn't we use this day to not only dance but also examine our values?**

**Let's have our barbecue, but let's also compare our national reality to our moral obligations. Are we living up to the TZ'DAKA of the Torah and the stated goals of our Declaration of Independence:**

**THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee**

**freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.**

**Do we live up to the vision? 🙏**