

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

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The Deeper Message of 'On the Morrow of the Sabbath'

With reference to the Torah's discussion of the mitzva of Counting the Omer, there is a well-known question raised by many. The verse begins: "You shall count for yourselves - from the morrow of the Sabbath ... seven weeks..." (Vayikra 23:15). Rashi (ad loc) quickly points out that when the Torah employs the word 'Sabbath' (in this context), it does not refer to Shabbat, but to Yom Tov. In other words, the counting of the 49 days between Pesach and Shavuot commences on the day after the first Yom Tov of Pesach and not after the weekly Shabbat. This understanding was the view of Chazal, the Perushim, who contended strenuously with their adversaries, the Tzidukim, who chose to understand the Sabbath of the pasuk in its literal sense - Saturday.

The question, however, remains. If the Sabbath of the verse refers to Yom Tov and not Shabbat, why did the Torah choose ambiguity over clarity and not simply state, "from the morrow of Pesach?" The Meshech Chochma offers this insightful explanation. (on Vayikra 23:21) Typically,

Yom Tov is that festival which was created because of HaShem's special relationship with the Jewish people. Pesach - Gd liberated us; Shavuot - Gd gave us the Torah; Sukkot - Gd protected and cared for us in the desert. We played a critical role in each of the festivals. Therefore, it is Israel that sanctifies the Yom Tov. M'KADEISH YISRAEL V'HAZMANIM. Shabbat, on the other hand, which commemorates Creation, is independent of the Jewish people. Thus, on Shabbat, only HaShem who sanctifies the day. M'KADEISH HASHABBAT. We do not control its holiness; we did not earn it. However, says R. Meir Simcha, Pesach, notwithstanding its Yom Tov designation, is most like Shabbat. If we did not merit Shabbat - it was a gift, so too on Pesach, we likewise did not deserve to be liberated. Had it not been for HaShem's act of supreme compassion and His pledge to our Forefathers, we would have slipped and descended into the bottomless pits of tuma, never to be redeemed. The Exodus was thus also an undeserved gift from Gd.

As such, according to the Meshech Chochma, when the Torah employs the word SHABBAT to refer to Pesach, both of these occasions have as their common feature of being a magnificent present bestowed upon us by the Almighty. With this insight, we can answer another question

about the Omer. Why begin the counting on the morrow and not on the first day of Pesach? Of course, the simple answer might be that we generally avoid co-mingling two mitzvot, either to afford each mitzva its own moment of simcha (EIN M'ARVIN SIMCHA B'SIMCHA), or to give each mitzva its due significance (EIN OSIM MITZVOT CHAVILOT CHAVILOT).

However, Rav Nachman Brestlov, quoting his great-grandfather, the Ba'al Shem Tov, advances a fascinating observation which suggests a very different answer to the above question. Why is it, he wonders, that when a BA'AL T'SHUVA begins his path to a fuller Jewish life, the journey is always exciting and bright. His spiritual drive is full of passion, and his learning is sweet and pleasant. And then, with time, all of the enthusiasm and freshness begins to fade. The Torah study becomes increasingly difficult, and the performance of mitzvot, once so spiritually enthralling, now is so disappointingly routine and fraught with frustration. To simply dismiss this phenomenon as the result of behavioral habituation is a bit too simplistic when applied to mitzvot. For, after all, if the aim of every mitzva is to deepen our connection to HaShem, how can its increased practice result in diminishing returns? Why the more I do, the less I feel?

As Rabbi Breitowitz explains the Besht's insight: When a child learns to walk, the doting parent will support the child to prevent him from falling. But then, there comes that moment when the parent must let go and let the child walk on his own. Of course, the child will inevitably fall, but there is no other way for the child to learn. Now, if the child could verbalize his discomfort, he might ask: "Why, just a little while ago, it was so easy and now it's so difficult? Have I regressed?" Obviously, the answer is that: "Up until now, your parent was there to help you; now, that you can see it's possible to walk, the rest is up to you."

When a Jew, once alienated from HaShem, feels a spiritual stirring to return to Him, HaShem, in His bountiful chesed, carries him, and the returnee experiences his religious t'shuva as something wonderful, smooth and sweet. As the prophet exclaims (Yirmiyahu 31:2) - 'From long ago, HaShem appeared to me; With everlasting love have I loved you; therefore have I drawn you to Me with loving-kindness.'

But then, at some point in that person's religious odyssey, it is as if HaShem says: "I've shown you how beautiful and meaningful Judaism is. It's time I put you down and let you go. Your job is to make it on your own. You have the capability and the

wherewithal to advance further; it's all up to you. Of course, when that transition occurs, the Jew will experience many a setback and experience an annoying unease. He will typically face all sorts of obstacles in his turning to Gd - in his AVODAT HASHEM. However, none of this is a sign of failure, but rather a sign of Divine confidence. True, you're on your own, but HaShem remains ever in the shadows; His kind hashgacha watching, and every now and then, mysteriously helping and proudly signaling that, "You're ready for the next step. What was before something unearned and artificial when I held you up, you must now internalize through your own struggles and achievements."

With this important observation, we can return to our question. The Ba'al HaTanya explains that on Pesach, there was a sudden intense revelation of godliness quite beyond what we were capable of appreciating. We were naked of mitzvot and were forced to leave Egypt hurriedly, B'CHIPAZON. We were neither ready nor deserving, and yet, at the Splitting of the Sea, even the simple maidservant experienced prophetic ecstasy. True, all this was necessary, but nevertheless, the spiritual high was artificial and unearned.

As the Sefer HaChinuch (Emor, Mitzva 273) states, the purpose of the

Omer is for us to count the days and grow incrementally until the festival of Shavuot. The count does not begin on Pesach which, much like Shabbat, is all about the Almighty and, in the case of Pesach, His miraculous deliverance of His people. Rather, the morrow of Pesach/Shabbat is all about us! After the gift of redemption - after the Pesach/Shabbat event, after HaShem held us, supported us, carried us - it is now our turn to begin the count, set out on the journey toward Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah. Someone once quipped: "What you are is what HaShem gives to you. What you do with what you are is your gift back to HaShem."

On the verse in Shir HaShirim (1:4) MOSHCHEINI... "Draw me, we will run after you, the king has brought me into his chambers", the S'fat Emet comments that MOSHCHEINI refers to Pesach and NARUTZA refers to the 7th of Pesach and counting of the Omer, all leading to HEVI'ANI HAMELECH CHADARAV, the holiday of Shavuot. Indeed, on Pesach, HaShem draws us close, and then MIMOCHORAT HASHABBAT, after that glorious first day of Yom Tov, we begin the arduous task of counting up, one day at a time, until we merit, with that heroic climb, the giving of the Torah. 🙌