

# Shavuot: Torah and Middot Linked Together

Rabbi Zev Reichman

*Director, Mechina Program, Yeshiva University*

## The Unique Holiday of Shavuot

A careful reading of the section of holidays in Parshat Emor reveals that Shavuot is unique among all holidays of the Jewish calendar. While other moadim are determined according to a date on the calendar, such as Pesach being on the fifteenth of the first month, and Sukkot being on the fifteenth of the seventh month, Shavuot is not on a set date. The Torah does not say, "On the sixth day of the third month celebrate a holiday." Instead, we are told to bring the Omer offering on Pesach, then to count seven weeks, and then at the end of seven weeks to offer the two loaves and celebrate the day as a holiday. This raises a question: Why is Shavuot different? Why did the Torah not establish Shavuot on a set day as it did for the other holidays?

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveichik z"l taught that this scriptural anomaly highlights an innate difference between Shavuot and other holidays. The other moadim are bound to a date on the calendar, regardless of the actions of man. For example, when Shabbat arrives the world is filled with a special kedushat hayom, sanctity of the day, which then creates obligations. So too, when the fifteenth of Nissan arrives the holiness of Pesach fills the world and as a result there are special Mitzvot to be performed such as eating matzah, refraining from work, and avoiding chametz. So it is with Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. The arrival of the date causes the sanctity to appear and the unique celebrations for each holiday are the ways in which the holiness of the time should be expressed.

Shavuot is different. The counting of the Omer creates the holiness of Shavuot. Were there to be no counting of the Omer, then theoretically there should be no Shavuot. The counting of the Omer is what enables Shavuot. Once the seven weeks have been counted and the fiftieth day arrives, the holiness of Shavuot enters the world. The date is not set on the calendar, but rather is dependent on the nation of Israel counting the Omer. In theory Shavuot can be on the fifth, sixth,

or seventh of Sivan. It is not dependent on a date at all. After Jews count the Omer the holiday arrives regardless of the date. Shavuot needs the Jews to count Omer to make it happen.<sup>43</sup>

This observation can reveal to us a new understanding of the counting of the Omer. One might have thought that the counting of the Omer is a mitzvah linked to Pesach. Indeed, in the Code of Jewish Law, the laws of counting the Omer are in the sections that deal with the laws of Pesach. However, according to the Rav, the counting of the Omer is also an intrinsic part of Shavuot. Counting the Omer is what creates the kedushat hayom for the holiday of receiving the Torah.

## Counting Down, Counting Up

Perhaps this can be understood based on the lesson of the Sefer Hachinuch. The Sefer Hachinuch teaches that our exit from Egypt was an incomplete redemption. When we left Egypt we were physically free yet spiritually shackled. We therefore looked forward eagerly to zman matan torateinu, the Torah-giving time, to receiving the Torah at Sinai. Once we would be bound by the strictures of Torah, then we would be truly free. We count Omer to relive those excited yearnings for Torah guidance. Each day we count brings us one step closer to reliving the acceptance of Torah, which is when we arrived at real freedom.

One might ask, if the point of counting is to express our anticipation for Torah as the culmination of the exodus, why do we count in an ascending order? Why do we say on the first day, "Today is the first day of the Omer" and on the second "Today is the second day of the Omer?" We should count in a descending order. On the first day we should say, "There are forty nine days to go before we will receive the Torah," and on the second we should say, "There are forty eight days to go before we receive the Torah."

Perhaps our counting style teaches us a lesson. We must climb to receive the Torah. If we would count in descending order, then on each day, the previous day would be lost. One who hears the count on the third day, "Today we count forty seven days to Sinai" would be unaware of the days that preceded it. By counting in an ascending order we are reminded each day of the days that passed. The process is thus preserved. Each day is lasting. When we work to change ourselves, each step in that effort is eternal and valuable. Each day is important for what we achieved on that day. On the first day of the Omer we are to fix one aspect of our nature, on the second day another, until finally after climbing a ladder of 49 days we have created the vessel for Torah. This creative work is what brings the holiness of Shavuot into the world.

## The Link Between Omer and Shavuot

The Shem Mishmuel in his Pesach haggada raises a problem with the view of the Sefer Hachinuch. According to the Sefer Hachinuch, that the theme of the count is to prepare for receiving the Torah, then we should have called it the count of Shavuot, the countdown to Sinai,

---

<sup>43</sup> See the extensive analysis of this thought in Mo'adei Harav, by Rav Shlomo H. Pick, pages 159-167.

or the count of the two loaves, (the offering brought on Shavuot). Why do we link the count with the Omer and Pesach, and call it Sefirat Haomer?

Perhaps the answer is based on the idea we have been developing. The counting of the Omer is more than a mere recording of time as it passes. It is a chance to change ourselves. It is a mandate to make each day count. In it we are to prepare ourselves for the Torah by changing our middot and feelings. Only when we have transformed our personality, one day at a time, will the holiness of Shavuot enter this world. Forty nine days of personal growth creates the holiday of Shavuot.

This is the significance of the name Sefirat Haomer. The Omer was an offering of barley, animal feed. The word Sefira means to count but it also brings to mind the word, Sapir, a glowing clear panel. These are forty nine days to transform the animal part of man. To turn the opaque earthy spirit into a glowing source of Divine illumination. This transformation is what creates the holiness of Shavuot.

As we celebrate Shavuot these thoughts might serve as an inspiration. On Shavuot we received the Torah. The Torah contains ideas and guidance for our minds. Yet to receive the Torah we need forty nine days of fixing our middot. We need to transform our personalities into vessels fitting to hold the light of Torah. This is why we learn Pirkei Avot during this season. Ethics of the Fathers teach us how to refine ourselves. This process of character development creates the holiness of Shavuot. Torah and middot share a link. Forty nine days of fixing our character create the sanctity of this holiday. Now it is up to us. Let us struggle with the beast within ourselves and thereby create the special kedusha of zman matan torateinu.