

The Two-Fold Nature of Chag HaShavuot

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And you shall count from the day following the Shabbat, from the day you have brought the Omer, seven complete weeks. Until the day following the seventh week you shall count fifty days, and you shall bring the new mincha offering for your God.

Vayikra 23:15-6

Seven weeks shall you count, from the bringing of the Omer shall you begin to count seven weeks. And you shall celebrate Shavuot to the Lord your God.

Dvarim 16:9-10

וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת מיום
הביאכם את עמר התנופה שבע
שבתות תמימת תהיינה: עד ממחרת
השבת השביעת תספרו חמשים יום
והקרבתם מנחה חדשה לה':
ויקרא כג:טו-טז

שבעה שבעת תספר לך מהחל חרמש
בקמה תחל לספר שבעה שבעות: ועשית
חג שבעות לה' אלהיך
דברים טז:ט-י

The counting of the *Sfira* connects Pesach with Shavuot. What is the nature of that linkage?

When does the counting begin and when does it end? What does the counting reveal about the character of *Shavuot*? Let us study the words of one of the *Rishonim*, *Rabbenu Yerucham*:

We should recite two brachot over the mitzvah of sefirat haOmer because there is one mitzvah to count weeks, and a second to count days. Just as we recite two brachot over tfillin since the tfillin worn on the arm and the tfillin worn on the head are two independent mitzvot, the same applies to the counting of weeks and the counting of days.

... However, since the Torah introduces the commandment to count weeks with the words "from the day you have brought the Omer", this mitzvah depends upon the Omer which is not brought in our times. Only the mitzvah of counting days, which is introduced by the words "from the day following the Shabbat", and is not dependent upon the Omer applies

ליל שני של פסח מברכין אק"ב על ספירת העומר ותמה
הוא שהיה לו לומר על ספירת הימים כי ספירת העומר
אינו שום דבר וה"ל לומר על ספירה לעומר או על ספירת
הימים ועוד למה אין מברכין ב' ברכות אחת לימים ואחת
לשבועות שהרי ב' מצות הן והן כתפילין של ראש ושל יד
דאמר ב' ברכות אפילו לא שח ועוד איך אנו סופרין היום
י"ד יום שהם ב' שבועות והיום כ"א יום שהם שלשה
שבועות והיה לנו לומר היום י"ד יום והיום ב' שבועות אבל
מה לנו לומר שהן ב' שבועות וכי אין אנו יודעין שי"ד יום
הן ב' שבועות. ונראה לן משום דכתיב ז' שבועות תספור
לך וגו' וכתיב נמי מיום הביאכם את עומר וגו' ז' שבתות
תמימות תהיין נמצא שלא נכתבה ספירת שבועות כי אם
גבי העומר אבל ספירת הימים לא כתיב גבי עומר נמצא
דספירת הימים הוא מן התורה אפילו בזמן הזה וספירת
השבועות בזמן דאיכ' עומר והיו מברכין זה על זה בזמן
שבית המקדש קיים והיינו דכתיב עד ממחרת השבת הז'
תספרו נ' יום וה"ל למכתב עד מחרת אלא ר"ל ממחרת

in our day. It is for this reason that we only recite one blessing over the mitzvah of counting 49 days. Today we only count weeks in order to remember the Mikdash.

Rabbenu Yerucham, Netiv 5, Part 4
(translation of underlined section only)

הספור ועד מחרת ר"ל שלא תלה מיום הביאכם אלא ממחרת ובזמן הזה אנו סופרים לשבועות זכר למקדש ובדב' שהוא זכר למקדש לבד אין מברכין עלין מדי דהוה אכריכ' דליל פסח ואערבה דז' של סוכות לכך אנו אומר' שהם כך וכך שבועות שאין זו ספירה ממש וכו' רבינו ירוחם - תולדות אדם וחיה נתיב ה חלק ד

From the words of Rabbenu Yerucham we learn that the mitzvah of *Sfirat HaOmer* is in fact not one, but two distinct mitzvot. There is one mitzvah to count weeks, and another to count days. In the formulation of the Torah, the mitzvah of counting weeks begins with: מיום הביאכם את עמר והתנופה, and ends with: והקרבתם מנחה חדשה לה'. The mitzvah to count days, on the other hand, begins with: עד ממחרת השבת השביעית תספרו חמשים יום, and ends with: ממחרת השבת.

It would seem that the difference between the two is fundamental and goes beyond the distinction between counting weeks and counting days. The mitzvah of counting weeks is engendered by, and dependent upon, the bringing of the *Korbanot* in the *Beit HaMikdash*, the *korban haOmer* at the beginning of the seven-week period, and the *korban shtei haLechem* at its end. In our day, lacking the *Beit HaMikdash*, the mitzvah of counting weeks is no longer active, and we mention the weeks only to remember the *Mikdash*. The mitzvah to count days, on the other hand, is engendered by the holiday of Pesach, “*mi-machrat HaShabbat*”, and ends with the completion of the counting of seven cycles of seven days each, “*ad mi-machrat HaShabbat*”, for a total of forty nine days. This mitzvah is not dependent upon the *Mikdash* and is still in force in our day.

We suggest that these two mitzvot define the dual nature of *Chag HaShavuot*. One dimension of *Shavuot* is reflected in the connection between the two *korbanot*, the *Omer* at the beginning of the seven weeks and the *Shtei HaLechem* at their conclusion. The second dimension of *Shavuot* is inherent in the concept of Shabbat; it is the day following the Shabbat of Pesach, and the day following the seventh Shabbat which defines the nature and goal of *sfirat haOmer*. In the formulation of the mitzvah of counting days, the Torah replaces the word “Pesach” with the word “Shabbat.” This change is critical as we shall see.

The Nature of *Chag HaShavuot*

Rabbi Eliezer offers two options for the fulfillment of *Yom Tov*; to dedicate oneself totally to prayer and Torah study, or to dedicate the day to eating and drinking. He agrees, however, in the case of *Shavuot*, that the first approach is not acceptable. On the day which commemorates the giving of the Torah, one must enjoy the physical pleasures of eating and drinking.

Pesachim 68b

A person's table atones for him.

Berachot 55a

רבי אליעזר סבר או כולו לה' או כולו לכם. ורבי יהושע סבר חלקהו, חציו לה' וחציו לכם. אמר רבי אלעזר הכל מודים בעצרת דבעינן נמי לכם. מאי טעמא - יום שניתנה בו תורה הוא. פסחים (סח:)

שולחנו של אדם מכפר עליו ברכות נה.

Unlike *Pesach* and *Sukkot* that are colorful holydays, there are no special *mitzvot* that mark the day of *Shavuot*. On the one hand, the mitzvah of *Simchat Yom Tov*, of eating and drinking,

applies on *Shavuot* and highlights the physical enjoyment of the day. On the other hand, there is a special dedication to the study of Torah, emphasizing the spiritual character of the day. These performances appear to be inconsistent, yet they reflect a dual approach to the holiday of *Shavuot*. Let us examine the origins of these elements of the *kedushat hayom*.

Why does mortal man deserve the Torah?

The Gemara (Shabbat 88b) records the great debate that took place on high regarding the giving of the Torah. The heavenly angels demanded the Torah for themselves. Moshe was called upon to counter their claims and defend the rights of mortal man to receive the Torah. According to one version of this episode – as recorded in the *Medrash* – Hashem caused the countenance of Moshe to appear as that of Avraham Avinu, and asked the angels, “are you not embarrassed in the presence of Avraham [to deny man his rights to the Torah]? Didn’t you partake of the meal that he offered you [a reference to the episode recorded at the beginning of Parshat Vayeirah]?” The underlying idea of this Midrashic presentation is that man has the capacity to transform physical bread into manna, the bread that even angels can consume. Man has the capacity to elevate the physical and convert it to the spiritual. Man is not meant to flee from the physical world; on the contrary, his challenge is to bring spirituality down from the higher spheres into the physical realm and transform this world into an abode for the Divine *Shechina*.⁶ The concept of the *Beit HaMikdash* represents the ability of man to bring G-d into the material world. The central goal underlying the practical observance of halacha is to convert this world into a *Mikdash of Shechina*.

This mission of man is rooted in the concept of the Divine ownership of the universe. As King David declares, *LaHashem HaAretz U’Meloah*, Hashem is the *Adon Kol*, master and owner of the universe. Man’s ability to elevate the world he inhabits is dependent upon his success in enjoying G-d’s world in accordance with the rules and guidelines set down by the Master of the universe.

And God commanded Adam ‘from all the trees in the garden you may eat; but from the tree of knowledge you shall not eat’.

Bereishit 2:16-17

ויצו ה' אלקים על האדם לאמר מכל עץ הגן
אכל תאכל: ומעץ הדעת טוב ורע לא תאכל
ממנו

בראשית ב:טז-יז

By observing the Divine decree and abstaining from those pleasures from which he is enjoined, man acknowledges the sovereign authority of the Master of the universe and sanctifies the mundane aspects of this world.

The Mitzva to Count Weeks

There is a three-stage process of sanctification that begins with *issur*, moves on to *heter*, and culminates in *kiddush*. The entire enterprise is symbolized by the mitzvah of the *omer*.

And bread or roasted kernels or plump kernels you shall not eat until this very day, until you bring the [omer] offering of your God.

Vayikra 23:14

ולחם וקלי וקרמל לא תאכלו עד
עצם היום הזה עד הביאכם את
קרבן אלהיכם
ויקרא פרק כג:יד

⁶ See Rav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, *Assufat Maarachot* on Sukkot, and Rav Yosef Dov Soloveichik, *Halachik Man*

Man is enjoined from eating of the new produce harvested from the fields. The *omer* is the *matir* which lifts the prohibition, permitting man to enjoy the grains. The waiving of the *omer* in the presence of G-d represents a symbolic declaration that all belongs to Him; He is Creator, Master, and Owner of the universe. Now man is permitted to partake of the new crop. The process, however, is incomplete and will only culminate when the *shteit halechem* is offered on the holiday of *Shavuot*. The message of this offering is that we must connect our physical eating with the *mizbe'ach* of HaShem in His *Mikdash*. Thus we are taught to elevate our *achila* to the level of *achilat mizbe'ach*.

Once we have brought the *omer* on the second day of Pesach and have acknowledged G-d as Master and Owner, we are permitted to enjoy His universe. However the Torah commands us to go beyond the level of *matir*, and ascend to the level of *kiddush*, of holiness.

To bridge the gap between *heter* and *kiddush* will require of man a process of hard work extended over a long period of time. Just as in the realm of the farmer in Israel where the achievement of *kedushat shvi'it* requires a gradual process extended over a period of seven years culminating in the sanctification of the produce in the *shmitah* year, so too, in the personal realm of the *kiddush* of one's eating and drinking, a period of gradual growth is required to ascend the ladder of sanctification. For the farmer the unit of time is the year; each year is counted until the seventh is reached and the fruits are sanctified. In the private sector, however, the unit of time is the week, and the process realizes its fruition at the end of seven weeks. In both cases, the ultimate *kiddush* is achieved when the number 50 is attained. The *shteit halechem* offered on the day following the seventh week represents man attaining a new spiritual height of *kiddush* which makes him worthy of receiving the Torah. The goal of the Torah is the enterprise of transforming the mundane into the holy. The linkage between the *omer* [the *matir*] and the *shteit halechem* [i.e. the *kiddush*] is demonstrated by the mitzvah of counting weeks.

The Mitzva to Count Days

There is a second dimension to the goal of man and the receiving of the Torah and this one is represented by the mitzvah of counting days. In the context of this mitzvah, the *Mikdash*, a physical structure in a particular location, is replaced by the Shabbat. The mitzvah of counting days is engendered by "*mi-mochrat haShabbat*". Both Shabbat and *Mikdash* represent the essential goal of man, i.e. *kiddush*. In the case of *kedushat haShabbat* the time unit is the day, as we count each day of the week "today is the first day of Shabbat", etc. What does Shabbat represent? Man in search of G-d! Whereas in *Mikdash* man endeavors to bring Divinity down to the secular realm through human activity, in Shabbat man strives to discover G-d within nature itself. Rav Soloveitchik, zt"l, emphasized the contrast between Pesach and Shabbat. Pesach is the holiday which commemorates the great miracles of the redemption from *Mitzrayim*. But the ultimate goal of this redemption was achieved seven weeks later at the moment of the giving of the Torah. The Torah teaches man how to live in the world of nature, not in the supernatural world of miracles. The challenge is not to find G-d when He acts in a way that is contrary to the cosmic order, when He reveals Himself by abrogating the laws of causality, but rather to discover G-d within the natural order. This is a more difficult task. Shabbat represents the world of nature, the Divine revelation through the daily sustenance which He provides for all of creation, for the sunrise and the sunset. Shabbat is the celebration of the orderliness of creation and

demands that man discover G-d within the physical world. This is why the Torah used the phrase “*mi-mochorat ha-Shabbat*” to indicate that our celebration of *Matan Torah* would reflect our observance of the Shabbat. The process of man preparing himself for the challenge of receiving the Torah would require 49 days of hard work. Day by day man must ascend the ladder of spirituality until he is ready for the challenge of receiving the Torah.⁷

Whereas the *sfira* of weeks linking the *omer* with *shtei halechem* represents the world of action, man’s challenge to penetrate the physical and elevate it to the spiritual, the *sfira* of days that begins and ends with Shabbat, represents the world of thought and feeling, the all-encompassing mitzvot of *ahavat HaShem* and *liMud HaTorah*. The connections between Shabbat and Torah in the statements of *Chazal* and in our liturgy are manifold, and reflect a single underlying principle. How is man expected to discover G-d in the natural universe? What wisdom can guide man through the dark alleyways of sunrise and sunset, the world of causality, and allow man to reveal Divinity? Where are the tools? They are in the Torah, they are embodied in the 613 mitzvot which represent the 248 limbs and 365 sinews of physical man. Halacha teaches man – sometimes explicitly more often subtly – how to connect to the world in which he lives and to reveal G-d everywhere. The *sfira* of 49 days represents the ongoing process of discovering G-d through the study of His Torah. The mitzvah of *sfira* is very demanding; “don’t miss a single day!” Although the ultimate goal is achieved at the culmination of the 49 days, each day must be designated by the act of *sfira* as a day dedicated to the search for and the service of HaShem. The principle which underlies the mitzvah of counting days can be formulated simply: love of Torah equals love of HaShem. As the Ramban has expounded in his famous essay “*Torat HaShem Temima*” [the Torah of Hashem is perfect], the ideal method of discovering G-d is the study of His Wisdom embodied in His Torah. Yes, find HaShem in nature, but know that the faultless way to find HaShem is through His Torah. The holiday of *Shavuot* represents the realm of the intellectual and the emotional service of HaShem, of *Ahavat HaTorah* and *Ahavat HaShem*. It is readily apparent why no special mitzvot are necessary on this day. It is a day of rendezvous between the Jew and the Torah, the Jew and Almighty G-d. But as we have seen, *Shavuot* also represents the *Mikdash*, the link between the *omer* and the *shtei haLechem*, and the world of sanctification through action. Thus the *kedushat hayom* of *Shavuot* is an integration of *tfillin shel yad* and *tfillin shel rosh*, the hand representing action, the head representing intellect; it is a merger of the counting of weeks and the counting of days. Even *Rabbenu Yerucham* grants that in our day, lacking the *Mikdash*, we nevertheless count the weeks of the *omer*, albeit as a rabbinic requirement. This is an application of the principle of *zecher leMikdash*. Although today we lack the actual *korbanot* of *omer* and *shtei halechem*, we do experience the abstract idea they represent, and we are motivated by the act of counting weeks to achieve the same goals that were instilled in us by the counting of the *omer* at the time the *Mikdash* stood.

To reflect the dual nature of *Shavuot*, we observe the day in two realms. On the one hand, we rejoice through eating and drinking [“*chetzyo lachem*”], and at the same time, we rejoice through the study of His Torah [“*chetzyo laShem*”]. We strive to increase sanctity in this world by elevating our mundane activities and to reveal His presence in the causal order of the natural universe.

⁷See Rabi David Shapiro “*Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat ha-Omer and Shavuot*”, page 205