



INTRODUCTION: REACHING HIGHER

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our religious life in many ways. Yet there is one mitzvah that remains relatively unaffected by the circumstances that have entirely reshaped communal Torah observance — the mitzvah of Sefiras HaOmer. A simple act marking the passage of time between Pesach and Shavuot, this delineation establishes a clear continuity between the independence achieved at yetzias Mitzrayim and the purpose of such freedom: to embrace the values and expectations of Torah as central to our religious identity.

The initial performance of any mitzvah that is not performed regularly is usually celebrated with the bracha of Shehechyanu. This bracha affirms our sincere sense of privilege and joy at having arrived at the opportunity to perform a particular mitzvah. Yet the mitzvah of Sefiras

HaOmer does not mandate a bracha of Shehechyanu.

The *Baal HaMaor*, at the end of *Maseches Pesachim*, famously suggests that the contemporary observance of Sefiras HaOmer, which is devoid of the sacrificial element present in the Beis Hamikdash, is a halachic memorial to the original Mikdash-based experience. Therefore, we lack the defining sense of simcha that is required for a mitzvah to qualify for the recitation of Shehechyanu. However, the *Levush* suggests an alternative explanation. The *Levush* (O.C. 489:1) explains that the true purpose of Sefiras HaOmer is to teach us not to live in the moment of the particular day of counting. Rather, the mitzvah is intended to give expression to the existential sense of longing that exists within the heart and soul of every Jew in anticipation of Matan Torah. Since the act of counting is,

by its very nature, aspirational, it is inconsistent with the sentiment of the bracha of Shehechyanu — which conveys a certain intentionality to embrace the “moment” of “*lazman hazeh*” — this moment.

Sefiras HaOmer gives voice and substance to a critical element of Torah, and we aspire to connect to its greatness. Beyond the accomplishments of substance is an underlying sense of reach that manifests our love and spiritual connection to Torah. Each day of Sefiras HaOmer expresses in concrete terms our momentum toward our ideals.

This year, as we all contend with the extraordinary challenges of COVID-19, and we find ourselves distant from our traditional rhythms of religious life, let us recognize that our desire to return is, in and of itself,



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sacred and holy. Our aspiration to return to our shuls, batei midrash, schools, organizations — these hopes are expressed in the anticipatory nature of Sefiras HaOmer.

The pandemic has claimed the lives of many loved ones and true heroes of our community. One of those heroes is Rabbi Hy Arbesfeld zt"l. Rabbi Arbesfeld and his wife Ann's vision for bringing the Torah of RIETS to the broader Jewish community can be seen through the many initiatives that they have supported, most

notably this very publication. Rabbi Arbesfeld was a deeply aspirational Jew. He would call me often with comments and feedback about the publication, always with the intention of making it greater. When he knew an issue of *Torah To-Go* would soon be published, the very anticipation filled him with unrestrained simcha. We are planning to devote an entire issue to Rabbi Arbesfeld and his legacy when we can return to our normal form of distribution.

The day will ultimately arrive that we

will return to our traditional modes of religious observance. Upon finally re-engaging our beloved spaces of spiritual growth, let us hope and pray that we never lose the sense of aspiration and ambition that accompanies the necessary restraint in connecting to these spaces.



In these challenging and confusing times, as we confront the vast and devastating fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, one source of comfort has been our outstanding array of communal leaders who have selflessly and tirelessly given of themselves, and literally turned nights into days in their attempt to care for the spiritual, physical, educational, and emotional needs of the Jewish people. We would also like to express our endless gratitude and heartfelt hakaras hatov to all of the doctors, nurses, Hatzalah members, synagogue rabbis, yeshiva administrators, rebbeim, teachers, mental health professionals, mikvah attendants, chevra kaddisha members, restaurant proprietors, grocery store owners, and communal organizers who have enabled our communities to continue to function in the midst of a regional and national shutdown.

We dedicate this issue of Torah To-Go to

Harav Herschel Schachter shlit"a and Harav Mordechai Willig shlit"a

Their leadership and counsel, sage advice, and halachic expertise has been a reassuring beacon of light for all of those involved in communal affairs. They are accessible to anyone and everyone on various platforms and at all times, and they have accepted the courageous responsibility of guiding the community during these stormy times.