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PARSHAT EMOR

Reflections

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A Catalyst in Time

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I have always loved summer camp, and not just because I met my wife as a teenager in sleepaway camp. We often see the phenomenon that our kids will go off to camp and come back as changed people. More than one parent has bemoaned that nine months of Jewish schooling seem less impactful and inspirational than a mere two months in summer camp. Perhaps that is not indicative of a fault in our schooling, but of the tremendous capacity for summer camp to affect growth. In science, a catalyst is used to speed up a chemical reaction, and I have long thought that camp is a catalyst for growth. What a child does during the weeks in camp can have a long-lasting impact on their lives specifically because of its catalytic nature.

Similarly, Sefirat HaOmer presents about two months that are ripe for growth. The Sefat Emet (Emor, 5638) teaches that just as these springtime weeks see the growth of plant-life, these weeks are a time of growth for us. Our parsha instructs "וספרתם לכם - You shall count for *yourselves*" (23:15). Why the emphasis on the personalized counting? While halakhists see it as the source of our personal obligation to count Sefira, the Gerrer Rebbe saw it as an enjoyment to engage in the opportunities these weeks provide. As we build toward Kabbalat HaTorah on Shavuot, we mimic the greenery around us and grow as well.

If any Sefira were ripe for growth, it is this year's Sefirat HaOmer amid a stay-at-home order. Like a pressure cooker speeds up the food inside, the walls of our homes and the confines of our quarantine act as a "pressure cooker" on us. Wise men and women have declared that once this pandemic comes to an end, we will forever be different. Yet wiser people have shared that we *must* be different after this seismic event. This quarantine is a catalyst for change, and for growth. What will we look like when we walk out of our homes? Will we be different? Will we be better? Will we look back having utilized these auspicious weeks of Sefira to grab onto growth, in our character, in our relationships, in our commitments to our family, our health, our faith? Will we plant the seeds toward focus in our tefillot, see the sprouting of closer relationships with our loved ones, and realize the growth in our character.

As we look around us, reflects the Sefat Emet, we see that nature has heard the call to grow, now it is our turn.

Shabbat Shalom

PARSHA QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- 1. What is the connection between the two primary themes of our parsha: Kohanim and Holidays?**
- 2. Why are the features that invalidate a Kohen from temple service *physical* and not *spiritual*?**
- 3. Why does the list of holidays start with Shabbat?**
- 4. What halacha doesn't appear to fit in the list of holidays?**
- 5. What is the appropriate punishment for cursing Hashem (י"ד)? Why punish in that way?**

