

The Changing Tides of the Omer

Moshe Taragin

Jews experience time very deeply. Different stages of our calendar are suited for different religious experiences. During the forty days leading up to Yom Kippur, Hashem is available for human penitence, as He extends mercy to errant children. The month of Av witnessed horrible tragedies during the mikdash era. Sensing that that this overlap of tragedies wasn't incidental, our sages instituted a period of national grieving.

As we navigate history, we aren't just passive subjects of time, but sometimes, we can "flip the script". Haman assumed that he could install Adar as a month of genocide and murder, but valiantly, we changed the narrative, converting this month into a celebration. Likewise, Zecharya, the prophet predicts a Messianic conversion of Av from sorrow to festival. We have the capacity to change the dynamics of time. The Jewish calendar is historically fluid.

We interact most profoundly with our calendar during the counting of the Omer. During this period, we actively mark days and weeks, as we voyage from Pesach to Shavuot. Three epic events occurred during this period, creating a kaleidoscope of Jewish history. It is crucial that our Omer incorporate all three historical layers.

The March to Sinai

Though we were liberated on Pesach, we clearly weren't prepared for our encounter with monotheism. We had suffered a long and debilitating slavery, which hollowed out our faith and shuttered our imaginations. Multiple events during the seven intervening weeks leading up to Sinai stimulated our national maturation process. We witnessed spectacular miracles at the sea, received abundant supplies of heavenly food, gulped cold water drawn from boulders, triumphed over fierce armies of Amalek, and hosted a princely dignitary from Midyan. These milestones transformed us from a band of slaves into a nation of priests.

Each year we relive that journey, as we rally to our own embrace of divine will. Receiving the word of Hashem requires introspection and self-improvement. The omer counting is a reenactment of that voyage.

Our personal Omer transformation occurs against an agricultural backdrop. Though early-ripening barley matures by Pesach, most other crops and fruits require more time and development. On Pesach an initial korban is offered from "new barely", but full usage of the new crops is still weeks away. During this interval we count down toward the Shavuot and toward the full maturation of crops. On Shavuot when our counting concludes, a higher-grade korban is offered from fully matured wheat. Agriculture mirrors religion. Though we achieved peoplehood on Pesach, our national identity is merely the platform upon which full religious identity is constructed seven weeks later. Counting omer is an annual religious journey.

When Tragedy Struck ..Twice

About 1300 years after Sinai our entire world collapsed. Having betrayed the covenant at Sinai, we were exiled from our land and expelled from our mikdash. Would this be a quick exile followed by a speedy return, as the first seventy-year exile had been? Unfortunately, it soon became evident that this would be a very different process, and that a long historical odyssey had begun. The sudden and unfathomable death of 24,000 Torah scholars during the Omer punctuated this hard truth. The gemara attributes their tragic death to their mistreatment of one another but, still, so much death in so short a period had broader connotations.

After these deaths, it was now clear that history was in flux. It was now clear that Hashem was no longer satisfied with his people. It was now clear that this exile would be more ferocious than the first one. Death during the Omer was a signal of hard times ahead. The Omer period, which had once been a march to Sinai, now became a milepost on our way out of the land of Israel, and into the wilderness of history.

About a thousand years later tragedy struck again. Though we had been scattered across the globe, we had constructed viable Jewish communities in an Arab world, which was, by and large, friendly toward

us. Slowly we started inhabiting Christian Europe, seeking additional host countries. In 1096, during the Omer, we were dealt a harsh and deadly lesson. Beginning with the Crusade of that year, Christian Europe unleashed a millennia of unabated violence toward the Jews. The massacre of thousands of Jews during that Omer was just the start of a thousand years of pogroms, blood libels, inquisitions, deportations and finally, attempted genocide during the Holocaust. Evidently, our exile would not just be lengthy, but grisly and brutal. A thousand years after the death of Rebbi Akiva's students and halfway through our odyssey, the Omer became a second milepost of exile. The Omer was transformed by these dual and overlapping historical tragedies into a period of sorrow and national mourning.

Historical Renewal

The world has now shifted, we have returned to our homeland and we have opened the door to the fourth and final phase of history. And, we have flipped the script upon this sad and gloomy period. Twice during the modern Omer period, we were privileged to divine reconciliation and to the soft caress of Hashem. In 1948, during the incipient stages of the Omer, we received statehood. Only nineteen years later, toward the end of the Omer, the world was overhauled in a mere six days, as we were restored to our capital city and to the hinterland of Jewish history. Shir Hashirim, the book of Jewish history, describes the spring revival of nature and the merry chirping of the birds throughout our land- kol hator nishma b'artzeinu. The birds are chirping because redemption is at hand. An Omer period that had been sullen and tragic has now become illuminated with the glow of our national resurrection.

The Omer period has undergone dramatic historical shifts. From a march to Sinai to signposts of exile, to harbingers of redemption. Historical sensitivity demands that we weave all three into one fabric of Jewish identity.