

Geulas Yisrael #150

The Omer: A Mirror of History and A Roadmap to the Cosmos

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Originally, the Omer period served as a countdown between Pesach and Shavuot. Each of these festive *chagim* is marked by a distinctive korban offered from the new harvest: Pesach is highlighted by the *omer korban* from fresh barley while Shavuot in the *Mikdash* is centered upon the *shte Halechem* breads baked from fresh wheat. Bookended by Pesach and Shavuot, the period of the Omer indexes the interval between these two colorful *korbanot*.

In addition to clocking the interval between *korbanot*, the counting process augmented our anticipation and preparation for *Matan Torah*. It was a period of joy, expectation, and heightened religious consciousness.

Omer in Galus

Throughout our tortured history in *galus* this joyous period turned dark. About two thousand years ago, Rebbi Akiva lost 24,000 of his talmidim to a lethal pandemic. Some claim that they were soldier-scholars who were brutally killed during the Bar Kochba rebellion while defending our quickly dissolving sovereignty.

Whether they died in a pandemic or were killed by Roman swords, their deaths occurred during a very depressing period of Jewish history. We had just lost the *Mikdash* and were beleaguered by unrelenting and punishing Roman persecution. Watching our best and brightest Torah scholars suddenly vanish further demoralized our already deflated national spirit. The joyous Omer period became bleak.

About a thousand years later this period, once again, turned ominous. In the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Crusaders tore through the Rhineland en route to Yerushalayim viciously murdering and brutalizing innocent Jewish communities. This barbaric attack signaled the beginning of institutionalized Christian antisemitism which

would leave a sad legacy of hatred and a trail of blood through the ensuing millennia.

Based upon these two tragedies, the Omer became a period of mourning. Though we mourn these two particular events, in reality, we mourn the entire 2000-year exile which was punctuated by these two traumas. During the original era of Jewish sovereignty, the Omer was celebratory and anticipatory. As Jewish history shifted into exile this same period became tragic and sorrowful. The Omer is a mirror of Jewish history.

### The Renaissance

In the modern era, the Omer period has undergone partial reconstruction. Jewish history is fluid and dynamic. Just like the Omer changed in exile, it also has transformed as we inch our way closer to redemption. Two major milestones on the road to full Jewish sovereignty occurred during this once catastrophic period. In 1948, our sovereign state was declared in the beginning of Iyar. In 1967 our return to Yerushalayim and to the Biblical corridor of Israel occurred during the tail end of Iyar. The Omer season has begun to morph from a period of unmitigated disaster into a period of joy and triumph. Though we must not discard *minhagim* and we cannot suspend the mourning elements of the Omer, we must also celebrate the overhaul of history and the resuscitation of this period. The Omer is a mirror of Jewish history.

### A Roadmap of Kabbalah

Though the Omer has undergone historical transformations, it is also a roadmap to a realm which lies *beyond* history and *beyond* human affairs. The arithmetic structure of the Omer counting closely resembles the substructure of the upper worlds which kabbalah maps, known as *olamot elyonim*. These realms are structured upon a lattice of "features" which reflect elements of the divine essence. These microcosmic "emanations" of divine features are referred to as "*sefirot*" and are the attributes by which Hashem administers to His cosmos.

Though the respective lattices of each of the upper realms is assembled with 10 *sefirot*, these 10 further subdivide into 3 “upper *sefirot*” and 7 “lower *sefirot*” known to us as: *chesed*, *gevurah*, *tiferet*, *netzach*, *hod*, *yesod*, and *malchut*.

These 7 lower features of the upper worlds are woven into the seven weeks and seven days of *sefirat Ha'Omer*. Kabbalah asserts that counting the Omer is both inspired by, but also impacts these 7 *sephirot* of the upper worlds. For this reason, even people who don't typically practice or even contemplate kabbalah, allude to these *sefirot* while counting the Omer, by associating each day with a different combination of *sephirot*. Additionally, many conclude their counting with a kabbalah-inspired tefillah requesting that our personal counting repair upper worlds.

In addition to the mathematical parallels between the Omer and the upper worlds, this is a different association between the Omer and kabbalah. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the author of the Zohar, the major work of kabbalah, passed away on Lag Ba'omer. His *yahrzeit* on this distinctive day of the Omer further cements the influence of kabbalah upon the Omer.

The Omer then, is a period of historical resonance, but also a period to ponder the metaphysical realities which hover above our terrestrial realm. Though these kabbalistic echoes are relevant every year they are even more crucial during our current Omer, as we continue our struggle and our war. During this difficult year, kabbalistic thoughts are even more essential.

## A Different Order

First a definition. Kabbalah is often mistranslated into as *Jewish mysticism*, which implies a nonrational experience. In reality, the study of kabbalah is extremely rational and was adopted by most of the great Jewish thinkers. Though analysis of kabbalah is *logical*, it isn't *empirical*. Science and logic can only detect elements of our world. By contrast, kabbalah depicts upper worlds which aren't part of our own universe, but still impact our universe. As these details can't be discerned empirically, they can't be "proven" and must be accepted as delivered or inherited truths. Hence the term *kabbalah* or "received ideas". Once these truths are delivered, they can be studied and evaluated through rational analyses. There is

nothing "mystical" or irrational about the study of kabbalah. A better translation for kabbalah would be the *cosmology* or the study of the broader cosmos which Hashem created beyond our own small and limited universe.

By pondering the realms of the cosmos which lie beyond and above our own, we realize that there are larger forces which shape history. When events in our own world are puzzling and depressing, it is helpful to remember that these larger forces are built into Hashem's creation. There are preprogrammed conclusions to history which may not always be evident in human affairs.

One of those larger "built-in" forces is redemption. Redemption in kabbalah isn't limited to the return of a chosen people to their homeland. It isn't even limited to the spiritual restoration of humanity. Redemption is the comprehensive reunification of a divided world into one indivisible entity reflecting, in part, the indivisibility of the Creator.

Additionally, the cosmos is constantly surging toward an inevitable redemption and restructuring, which will be centered upon the restoration of the Jewish people to their homeland. The inevitability of broader cosmic redemption boosts our confidence during dark and frustrating periods such as our own, when *geulah* appears to stall or even regress. It may appear to pause in our realm but cycles on, inexorably, in the larger reality.

We are not an escapist culture, and we don't employ kabbalah as an escape hatch to flee from real-world issues and from real-world struggles. The inevitability of redemption and the acknowledgement of larger forces influencing history doesn't exempt us from wrestling with hardships on our own planet. However, the inescapability of redemption buoys our spirit against the type of depression and frustration which our war has aroused. During adverse moments of Jewish history kabbalah stresses that our world isn't the only realm which shapes that history.

### Everything is Everything

Since kabbalah is centered upon the unification of the entire cosmos, it is *holistic* and *integrated*. Events and aspects of our own reality which seem unrelated are *jointly* impacted by upper worlds and are therefore related. Redemption in

kabbalistic terms incorporates every feature of this world and of the human condition even if they seem unrelated to us.

Part of what makes this war so confusing is the cacophony of opposition and hatred which we face. We were brutally attacked by a barbaric group of homicidal maniacs. Not only have these rapists been supported by most of the Arab world but also by hyper-liberal progressives across college campus and European capitals. Joining this alliance of hate are minority groups who should be supporting the forces of democracy and the culture of life rather than a culture of death and bigotry. Our battle has become entangled with a raging culture war and has also awakened the grotesque monster of antisemitism. The intensity of the protests may forecast a general societal deterioration into violence and anti-establishmentism. The world is spiraling.

Kabbalah stresses that everything is integrated. It should not be surprising that a local battle for our homeland and for our security, has escalated into a struggle for Jewish identity, Jewish survival, and a cultural battle. The integrative nature of kabbalistic thought stretches our imagination, forcing us to think panoramically rather than myopically.

### Endless Love

Finally, kabbalah, and the Zohar in particular, highlights the great indefatigable love between Hashem and His chosen people. This is why kabbalah resonated so deeply during periods of crisis, such as after the destruction of the second Mikdash, the 16<sup>th</sup> century period after the horrific Spanish inquisition, and in the gloomy aftermath of the Khmelnitsky massacres of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Amidst gloomy periods of tragedy and *hester panim*, kabbalah restored our faith in an ancient love which history cannot conquer.

During the past 7 months of *hester panim* it has sometimes been difficult to detect the loving hand of Hashem's *hashgachah*. The kabbalistic resonance of the omer reminds us that, despite the confusion and despite our many questions, Hashem's love hasn't expired, and we are still His children.

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