

"MEMAAYAN HACHAIM"

Mussar talks from the Masgiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit"a

The Days of Sefira: A "Building" of Spirituality, In Preparation for the 'Mincha Chadasha', the New Offering of Shevuos

The Holy Zohar (Raya Mehemna Emor p. 98) cites the connection between the counting of the seven weeks of the Omer and the counting of seven clean days with no impure discharge in the purification process of the zivah:

"(The idea of "seven" in reference to both of these concepts is): the seven lower Sefiros, emanations of the Divine light. (Hebrew: chesed, gevura, tiferes, netzach, hod, yesod, and malchus; kindness, restraint, harmony, dominance, empathy, foundation, and kingship. – this translation of the Sefiros stems from Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan zt"l.'s works, specifically, Innerspace—Trans.)"

And according to the explanation of the Maharal: (the countings) constitute a spiritual "building" in this world.

Rav Dessler zt"l. explains (Michtav M'elياهو vol. 2, p. 24) the zivah's counting of seven clean days to attain purity:

"The 'impurity' of a zivah (a woman who experiences an unusual discharge not during the time of her regular flow) can be construed as a Divine expression of a subtle "sin", and it must be removed through repentance. It is for this reason that she must experience seven completely clean days in a row, for it is the nature of human efforts for improvement to weaken over time. Hence, one who wishes to go from a state of impurity to holiness must experience a continual repetitive review sevenfold. This is the explanation of the counting of seven clean days: days which are totally free from any impurity, one after another, in such a way that if there would creep in an expression of impurity, in the slightest degree, the individual would have to start counting anew. Only in this manner can one hope to build a strong, complete, firm building of spiritual growth."

We see from the words of Rav Dessler, zt"l., in order to strengthen ourselves and to "go from a state of impurity to holiness" one must have a teshuva-experience of seven consecutive days of complete purity. That is, spiritual growth requires constant, consistent improvement within a

program of daily review, because, as Rav Dessler writes: "it is the nature of human efforts for improvement to weaken over time." Therefore, he explains that the zivah must count seven clean days, so that the impurity not return and that the state of purity she has attained through repentance in her first day of cleanliness can be maintained.

We would like to clarify the above explanation offered by Rav Dessler, zt"l. We must recognize that the path from impurity to purity is a single day's journey; that is, the very first day a zivah is pure, without flow, establishes her status as unsullied. The implication of this fact is only this—the seven clean days is not simply a period of time, a week; rather, it is that very first day of purity, repeated by seven. The number seven is an expression of reinforcement, of strengthening the zivah's commitment to positive change. Through the repetition of that "first day", the day of purity, over and over, laxity or weakness is overcome. This repetition constitutes the foundational underpinning of the repentant's spiritual structure to establish its purity, in the words of the Maharal cited above.

Thus, the deeper understanding of Sefiras Haomer would be "seven times seven", that is, a redoubling of our efforts to strengthen ourselves in repentance and to establish a solid foundation, a repeated seven, of our growth from impurity to purity. As Rav Dessler explained, only through a dedicated continual daily review, "can one hope to build a strong, complete, firm building of spiritual growth." (The idea of "review" here in the context of zivah connotes a check to ensure that she has not seen any impure flow in the middle of her counting. So, too, in our discussion of Sefiras Haomer, we are referring to a check of our spiritual growth to insure we have not fallen in the midst of our 49-day process of character development.)

It is worthwhile to note in our analysis of the building of a spiritual edifice as a re-establishment of the accomplishment of the initial day's change, that the language used in the counting of the Omer—"today is the

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thirty and third day of the Omer”—the plural form of the word “days” is not used. The plural would indicate only a period of time in the counting. Rather, our counting liturgy uses the singular form—today is the X day of the Omer—to reference our deepening of the spiritual growth of the first day for 49 days. Only by establishing a positive change and deepening its effect can we successfully build our spiritual framework.

Similarly, we find in the text of the marriage document, the Kesuba, that an exactly parallel use of “day” as in Sefiras Haomer is used, as it, too, establishes the spiritual home being built by the new chosson and kalla. The clear implication: the sanctity of this special day is to be repeated day in, day out for the rest of their lives. The text of the Kesuba states: “On Monday, the Thirty and Third day of the month of Kislev . . . Ploni the son of Ploni says to Plonis the daughter of Ploni, ‘Be my wife . . .’. Yet, in striking contradistinction, the Bill of Divorce (Heb. “Get”), which rends asunder that spiritual home, says: “On Monday, Thirty three days of the month of Kislev... I Ploni ben Ploni, of my own free will, wish to divorce Plonis bas Ploni” A period of time has passed . . .

The lesson from this textural insight is that one must not only feel “the passing of time” during the counting of the Omer as we approach Shavuos. Rather, a person should be sensitive to the spiritual edifice he is building, growing day after day, deepening the experience of that first day of redemption after leaving Egypt, strengthening that accomplishment and constantly adding to it, never standing pat on the same level. In this way, the days of the counting of the Omer function as days of preparation and growth to properly reach the pinnacle of the Acceptance of the Torah at Sinai-- atop, in Rav Dessler’s words, “ a strong, complete, firm building of spiritual growth”.

In his Sefer HaChinuch, R’ Aharon HaLevi, zt”l., writes to his son (Mitzvas Aseh 306) the explanation of Sefiras Haomer: “. . . The roots of this mitzva, according to their simple explanation, is as following: since the entire essence of the Jewish People is the Torah . . . and it is the reason, the rationale why we were redeemed and taken out of Egypt, in order to receive the Torah at Mt. Sinai and to fulfill it . . . and it (the Torah) is why we have merited to attain our spiritual greatness, therefore, we are commanded to count from the day following the holiday of Pesach until the day of the Giving of the Torah to show the tremendous desire in our souls for that honored and looked-forward-to-in-our- hearts day, as a slave would pine for the shade in summer. We must count, to show our passionate desire and articulating the thought: “when will arrive that time (i.e. Kabbolas HaTorah), for which we were taken out of slavery to freedom!?”. Counting towards a specific date shows a person’s devotion and commitment that his entire desire and yearning is to reach that time.”

In light of the Sefer HaChinuch’s exposition that the underlying principle of the mitzva of Sefiras Haomer—that the entire purpose of Yetzias Mitzrayim and the days of counting was to reach the level of Matan Torah, the Giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai—why then in the Torah itself is the holiday commemorating this seminal event, Shavuos, not called “the holiday of the Giving of the Torah”?! Furthermore, what might be the significance of the names which Shavuos is called in the Biblical text, the Day of the Bringing of the First Fruits (Heb. Yom Habikkurim) or the holiday of the sacrificial service offering the New Meal Offering (Heb. mincha chadasha)? How do these names reference the primary aspect of the day, the giving of the Torah?

I would like to share what I believe is the greatest gift we can take away from the Yom Tov of Shavuos. Rav Dessler, zt”l., (ibid. p. 25) explains the unique “Two Loaves” (Heb. Shtei Halechem) which were offered on Shavuos, an offering from the new crop of grain, the “mincha chadasha”:

“The objective of the Two Loaves which the Torah commands to be brought and offered in the Beis HaMikdosh on Shavuos is so that we may attain the requisite spiritual level to be able to receive the Torah from G-d. Therefore, these loaves are called the “New Meal Offering” (Heb. Mincha chadasha) because any increased level of awareness, in comparison to one’s previous understanding, is literally an absolutely new phenomenon—a new world of perception. Concerning the matters of this physical world, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Koheles 1:9). Here, in the physical world, no innovation is possible. All pleasures are equivalent, all acquisitions of physical lust have a single attribute (i.e. they fulfill our desire Trans.) To the extent that a person dedicates his attention to these physical pleasures, over time, he begins to be disgusted with them. Even in a state of hunger, he only momentarily “forgets” and considers his meal a new experience.

This is a profound revelation, warning us and clarifying for us the undeniable truth of our Faith and the sweetness of our Divine Service—in the spiritual world, with every morsel of growth a person finds himself in an entirely new world . . . In the symbolic thought-language of the Torah, (the above description of the process of elevation into hitherto fore untold universes of knowledge) is called “The New Meal Offering”, which can only be accessed by overcoming spiritual impurity through continual, purifying effort.”

From this analysis, we can establish the following principles:

A. Concerning aspects of this physical world, “there is nothing new under the sun”. That is, there is no renewal or true

progress in physicality. All is naught but temporal illusion.

B. Torah, in its essence, is a “mincha chadasha”, a new offering (or perhaps, an offering of “newness”—Trans.). Torah brings to our existence awareness of novelty. Thus, every additional understanding, every higher level of spirituality is an absolutely new level, a literal new world in relation to the previous level of understanding.

Thus, we can see that the Torah, in the description of the holiday of Shavuos, does not “hide” the historical fact that Shavuos is the day of the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. When Shavuos is described as the holiday of the “New Meal Offering”, the Torah is not simply describing one of its sacrificial offerings— this is the Torah itself! More than anything, the Torah, in its spiritual nature, brings to our world newness.

We live in a generation of all-encompassing progress—be it in the realm of computers, the media, or space research. Yet, we must recognize that “there is nothing new under the sun”—nothing in the physical world is a novelty. Only in the world of the spirit—Rashi, Tosofos, Prayer, Limud HaMussar—only in this realm does real innovation exist. In the world of Torah novellae, a man can derive unlimited pleasure. All other areas of our physical existence only offer a temporary “new experience”, titillating for the moment.

To make ourselves ready for spiritual development, we need “Seven Weeks—Seven times seven”—constant repetition of our original idea of growth. In our Sages’ symbolic language, we must prepare ourselves and experience daily the process of erecting a solid, firm spiritual building. In this way, we can accustom ourselves and make part of our souls the foundational ideas necessary to offer a “first fruit offering—minchas Bikkurim”. Further, this is the deeper intent of the Sefer HaChinuch that we cited above, that the days of Sefira are preparation for the experience of newness, of the “mincha chadasha”—the Torah!—that every insight into it is a world by itself! Finally, through this preparation, a person can taste the sweetness of Torah and the pleasure of constant spiritual growth.

The modern world is constant torn between two extremes: on the one hand, the distate for “alte zachen”, old things—is there anything more worthless than yesterday’s newspaper!? And on the other hand, “vos iz neiss”, what’s the news?! A person can be on his deathbed, yet still yearn for the headlines. Especially in our generation, people live for novelty. And so it is in the world of Torah—to learn “Abaye said . . .” twenty times, each time an insight, each time a novelty: literally, each time a new universe.

A number of years ago, I presented these ideas in a shmuess Erev Shavuos, and following the talk, one of the chashuve yungerleit came to me with a wonderous insight. At that

time, I spoke against the plague of newspapers in our community. Specifically, I decried the not uncommon sight of a Jew on his way to shul for shacharis who spies a newspaper on the ground. As he continues to the Beis Knesses, he voraciously reviews the headlines, after which he arrives at his minyan and goes to pray. What a pity!! My interlocutor energetically pointed out, this person woke up with a thirst, a literal thirst which he could have used for new insights into Torah and tefilla, real examples of innovation in spirituality. Instead, his trait of passion for novelty is wasted on the newspaper headlines, for which “there is nothing new under the sun”!!

In Toldos Adam, a work by R’ Zelmele M’Volozhin, he writes that it would be sufficient for him to learn for his entire life, for seventy years, a single Mishna-- since the sweetness and geshmak of Torah is never exhausted. Any vort, any feeling, any new Torah insight constitutes an entire new universe of spirituality. Every new understanding in the ongoing battle a person faces with his own personal character challenges represent a “New Meal Offering”. No description of the Torah is more inclusive, more full of meaning, more readily available to its students than the title “Mincha Chadasha”, the “New Meal Offering”—nothing more is needed!! For such is the essential nature of Torah. When one asks, “What is new in the world?” Your learning from two days ago, from yesterday—this is what is truly new.

One of the Gedolim of Mir, HaGaon R’ Shimon Raphael Weiss zt”l, once related to me an incident with my maternal grandfather, R’ Moshe Londinski zt”l. from Radin. There was a disagreement over a section of tractate Chagiga— whether the passage was said in the name of R’ Chiya, or in the name of R’ Chanina. R’ Moshe settled the argument thus: “Don’t argue with me! I’ve learned this gemora 324 times already!” Yet for someone in our generation—after learning a passage twice, it already has become “old” and no longer a subject of our attention. To R’ Moshe, Torah was a “mincha chadasha”, pregnant with new meaning, and therefore, an exciting topic for 324 times! What is the “teiche”, the translation of the word “Torah”—something always new! When one decides to wake up and go to synagogue to morning prayers, or to strengthen himself in any type of mussar--character development, or engage in in-depth Torah study, each of these activities bring a person into a new universe, while with anything else in this world, “there is nothing new”. Even if one searches under the ground to reach beyond the externalities of life—meetings, public announcements, beautiful colors and the like—he realizes that in truth, Shlomo Hamelech was correct: “there is nothing new under the sun”.

It is impossible to conclude this essay without mentioning what my Rebbe, my Teacher, the Rosh HaYeshiva of Telshe, the Gaon Rabbi Mordecai Gifter zt”l. once told me

when we met decades ago at the Siyum HaShas in New York City. When Rabbi Gifter was learning in the Telshe Yeshiva (then in the town of Telshe, Lithuania) during the holiday of Shavuos, they would learn straight through the first night of the Yom Tov (as we do), but also throughout the first day, and then through the second night as well! By the conclusion of the second day of the Chag, Rabbi Gifter related, he saw that he was exhausted from the non-stop learning, and therefore decided that he and his chavrusa would go for a stroll to relax (a shpatzir, in Yiddish). As they passed the Beis Haknesses of the laymen of the town, one of the Baalei Batim came out and greeted the pair. "Where are you going?" the man asked. "Shpatziren—for a bit of a walk," Rabbi Gifter answered. The simple Jew looked at him, Rabbi Gifter related, as if the young men had fallen on their heads. "On Shavuos?" the Baal Habayis said to the students. "Going for a walk? There's no such thing!" the simple townsman said. He continued to explain to Rabbi Gifter and his chavrusa: "Have you ever seen a drunk for liquor, when offered another shot, push it away and –'No. I've had enough.'? Never!" The Baal Habayis finished his criticism of the Yeshiva men. "The drunk drinks and drinks until he cannot drink any more and collapses from exhaustion." Rabbi Gifter concluded: "In Telshe, they were drunk for learning Torah—learning and more learning, another moment, another moment until exhaustion would overtake them. That was Shavuos in Telshe, Lita! To be a drunk, but not for wine, but for learning Torah."

To me, this is the most important idea to take away from the Yom Tov of Shavuos, the holiday of the "New Meal Offering", the "mincha chadasha"—never ending renewal in Torah with unlimited spiritual pleasure!

The days of Sefiras Haomer are days of preparation to reinforce one's spiritual "building." Through the constant repetition of seven weeks of seven days each, a person bolsters his Torah understanding until he removes from his character any possibility of weakness or sloth, as Rav Dessler, zt"l. taught: "it is the nature of human efforts for improvement to weaken over time." This is the deeper

rationale why one must repeatedly review his character during these days, as we saw concerning the teshuva-process of the zivah. Our counting begins specifically during the holiday of Pesach, as the Sefer HaChinuch explained, that the entire purpose, the essential foundation of the Jewish Nation as revealed in the exodus from slavery in Egypt was to receive the Torah from the Almighty at Sinai and to fulfill its precepts. This Torah is a "mincha chadasha", a "new offering", as it offers a promise of continual spiritual progress where, as Rav Dessler explained, "every higher level of spirituality is an absolutely new level, a literal new universe in relation to the previous level of understanding. "

We must remember the Rav's insight: "This (awareness of the newness of every word of Torah) is a profound revelation, warning us and clarifying for us the undeniable truth of our Faith and the sweetness of our Divine Service—in the spiritual world, with every morsel of growth a person finds himself in an entirely new world!" In contradistinction, with everything in this physical world, Shlomo Hamelech adjures us to remember: "there is nothing new under the sun". Finally, we must use the innate passion for innovation, for newness, which lies deep within each and every Jew to perceive the character of the Torah as a "mincha chadasha", a "new offering", an ever-flowing font of unimagined insight—until we can attain the status of being "like a drunk—for learning!"



[Written and translated according to understanding of writers]

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