

Pesach: Four Omer Questions

- Nisson Shulman. Four Omer questions: Why is this mitzvah different from all others? Pesach mitzvot erev Pesach or on Pesach, this one on the second day. Why? All other holiday mitzvot by date, this one Mimochorat HaShabbat. Why? The only mitzvah measuring time where we have to count aloud and make a bracha each day. Why? All other offerings include meat and wine, this one is barley, lowest and meanest of food. Why? Answer is in the prayer we say when we count the Omer.

PASSOVER,SECOND DAY

(Can be adapted to be used as a sermon, lecture or shiur)

Last night at the Seder we asked four questions. I have four new questions for today. For as you know, according to the Torah command, today would be the first day of Hol Hamoed. So it is in Israel. For Diaspora communities, the Rabbis decreed an extra day of Yom Tov. So we have two Seders and two days of Yom Tov.

But whether one Seder as in Israel or two as in Diaspora, all over the world Jews last night began counting the omer. And my four questions have to do with this new mitzvah we encounter on the second day of Passover, corresponding to the Temple service of the barley offering.

MA NISHTANA HAMITZVAH HAZOT MIKOL HAMITZVOT?

"Why is this Mitzvah different from all other Mitzvot?"

The first question is: All other Passover mitzvot must be performed either on erev Pesach, just before the holiday, such as eliminating hametz and in Temple times slaughtering the Pascal lamb -- or on the first day, such as the Seder's mitzvot of pesach, matzah, maror, the four cups of wine, the telling of the story of the Exodus – sippur yetziyat Mitzrayim, and the Hallel. But this omer mitzvah is on the second day. Why?

The second question... All other holiday mitzvot are commanded by date: the Passover is on the 15th day of the first month and the offering was to be slaughtered on the day before, the fourteenth day. When the Torah commands us to count the omer, however, it used the words "mimaharat haShabbat; from the day following the Sabbath. Now according to our tradition, the term Sabbath can also apply to a holiday, so we are told the Torah means the day following the Yom Tov, which is the eve of the 16th of Nisan. Why didn't the Torah say so? Why didn't it command, unequivocally, that we count the omer from the sixteenth day of Nisan? In fact, early splinter groups that broke away from Judaism by repudiating the oral tradition make the mistake of counting from the first Sunday after the holiday of Pesach began, because of these confusing words, mimaharat haShabbat. Why didn't the Torah give the precise date and be done with it? That would surely have avoided all the confusion!

The third question... There are other mitzvot, which measure time. But in none of them must we

actually count off the days, aloud. We don't count off each of the aseret yemey teshuva, the Ten Days of Penitence. A person who is in a state of ritual impurity does not have to count aloud, nor certainly make a beracha each day, as he or she waits the seven days before going to the Mikveh. Why are the 49 days of the omer counted aloud? Why is each one of them with a separate beracha?

The fourth question... The Shavuot offering is bread, shtey halechem, and the first fruits, the bikurim. All holiday offerings include meat, and libation of wine. They are considered the finest of human produce. They are supposed to be the kind of produce fit for a king. The omer offering, however, consisting of barley, had always been considered the lowest and meanest kind of food. In fact, throughout history it has always been the staple of animal fodder. Ma nishtana?

We can find the answer by examining the prayer we are required to recite after each night's omer counting:

Ribono Shel Olam, ata tzivisanu al yedey Moshe avdecha lispor sefirat haomer kedey letaharenu miklipaseynu umitumoseynu, kemo shekasavta beTorasecha, shebizchus sefiras haomer yitaken ma shepaganti... Vaetaher vaetkadesh bikdusha shel maala.

"O Lord, You have commanded us to count the omer in order to purify us from defilement and sin: may the merit of this counting rectify that which I have spoiled; may I again attain purity and holiness of the highest state of heavenly sanctity."

Apparently, the prayer refers to a very great sanctity we once had, and lost, and that we are trying to re-attain. To what does it refer?

Consider our forefathers in Egypt. Our tradition tells us they were soiled with Egypt's idolatrous culture. They were sunk into "49 gates of impurity". Were we, says the Midrash, to have become just little worse; one more gate, from 49 to 50; we would have become totally indistinguishable from the Egyptians, and would never have been redeemed!

So bad were we, that Moses at first refused to accept his mission, saying beeze zechus, "What merit have they that would make them worthy of freedom?" So doubtful was he of his ability to influence the people of Israel, that he continually complained, "But they won't believe me!"

Surely they would have refused to follow into a wild, barren land, without food or water, a nation of more than two million wandering, lost in a terrible desert! Surely they would rather have kissed the rod that beat them!

How characteristic their complaint to Moses in Egypt, "You have made us stink before Pharaoh!" "Who asked you to come here are rock the boat?" Velo shamu el Moshe mikotzer roach umeavoda kasha.

What changed them? What suddenly made them ready to follow Moses, with perfect faith? Zacharti lach hesed neurayich, ahavat kelulotayich, lechtech aharay bamidbar, beeretz lo zerua... to follow into a wild and trackless land, with total dependence on God's providence?

Surely not Moses. The Torah attests to that. In Egypt, and later, he had his hands full with their complaints. Nor was it the first 9 plagues God had so far brought on the Egyptians. For we know miracles don't cause faith. Sooner or later the beholder begins to doubt. "Perhaps it was some illusion, and who said it was God's miracle? Maybe it was a manifestation of nature! And maybe Moses was just a little more clever and practiced and powerful a magician than were the soothsayers and magicians of Pharaoh". No, the plagues wouldn't change them. Not those nine plagues.

What was it then? It was, of course, the tenth plague. For our tradition teaches that on that night God Himself descended; Veavarti beeretz mitzrayim balayla haze,.... "I myself", said God; "I and not an angel, I and not a seraph, I and not any messenger, I the Lord" have descended this night.

Why had the other plague miracles been done by God's messenger, but only this one by God Himself?

God's descent was not for the sake of smiting the Egyptians. For that, His messenger would have been enough. It was for the sake of changing the hearts and minds and the very nature of the Jewish people; raising them from all their impurity; revolutionizing their personalities.

So that each Jew who observed that first Seder on that night of makas bechoros actually felt God's presence; Like the greatest of prophets, he stood before the Almighty Himself. And who could stand before the Almighty and not be ready for any sacrifice – even to be ready to follow Him into the wilderness itself?

Were we to remain in that exalted state, we would have immediately been worthy, and ready to stand at Sinai to receive the Torah. But it was not to be.

This high state was brought about by God's descent to man. We couldn't be worthy of standing at Sinai until we were ready to at least attempt to climb up to reach the Lord Himself, kiveyachol, by ourselves.

For after such an encounter as we had during that tenth plague, when God leaves us all alone on this earth, bereft of His presence, there is a letdown. We all know that after any emotional high, there tends to be a letdown. Surely on that next day after the tenth plague, the same must have happened. That first Yom Tov was like the Sabbath of Sabbaths, when all are in the presence of God. But the day after, the day after that Sabbath, -- was a mundane ordinary day, of heat and marching and eating unleavened provisions we had taken along, soon to be totally consumed, and then where would the next meal come from?

The day after was a day of complaining, of lechem kelokel, and the next and the next, so that with the first crisis – the Egyptian pursuit - we were ready to cry out to Moses, "Why didn't you leave us in Egypt, instead of taking us out to die in the desert?"

That is the meaning of lemacharas hashabas. It is a natural, normal reaction. Don't we experience it every Saturday night when we feel the sadness of the parting from the neshama yesera, the

spirit of Sabbath holiness, a letdown we symbolically try to revive, somehow, with the aroma of the havdala spices?

Yes, we're back to the mundane again, but not to where we started from. He who keeps a Sabbath isn't really the same person afterwards as he was before. He's got to be better. He's got to remember something of the spiritual experience. We say Sabbath gives him strength to meet the week, the spiritual power to face it. And he counts first day of the Sabbath week, second and third, striving to get back to his exalted state.

So too, after Egypt, once having reached that great height of the spirit, we remembered something and yearned to return to it.

Sefira commands us to try; not to surrender to the ordinary. It commands us to try to recapture the exalted moment, to climb back to God, and not to waste an instant. Count seven times seven, 49 days, seven perfect weeks, sheva shavuot temimot.

To what did we return in our letdown? The 49 degrees of impurity we remembered from Egypt? Slough them off! One by one, day by day for 49 days, and rise back up to where you ought to be! You spoiled the vision? Soiled your soul? Rectify it with counting, and make every day count. Each is a new stage and deserves its own beracha. And at the end of the time you'll have recaptured the vision and gained a perfect soul, and you will stand at Sinai and be ready to say, naase venishma, we will obey, and we will learn.

We start with an offering of barley; an awareness of the animal side of our nature which has now re-emerged. And we work up to an offering of two breads on Shavuot, an awareness that in spirit we can be even at God's table! For we have climbed back to God's presence!

That's the idea of teshuva, "return". For shav means to return. You can't return unless you were there once before. The shav wants to climb back to God's presence, as we did after the Exodus, remembering that first Seder when we beheld the grandeur of the presence of the Lord God Himself!

The Seder can do for each Jew, what God's revelation that night did in Egypt.

How many Jews do you know, alone and lost in a sea of forgetfulness, working like machines, unceasing, unthinking, or taking pleasure at the fleshpots of the great cities in which we live and are often lost – who pause for a Seder – which can unleash the floodgates of memory, and which can lead them home again. For the Seder, to the Jew today, can be what that Seder was to our fathers in Egypt; the revelation that God's spirit can be present in our midst, even in our own hearts.

The story of God's revelation is repeated and relived bechal dor vador, in every generation. And each Jew must think of himself keilu hu yatza miMitzrayim, as if he himself is amongst those who went out of Egypt, who had seen that great vision, and lost it, but retains enough of a remembrance of it to seek to climb back up to it once again.

Limnot yameynu ken hoda, count the days. Make each day count. That's the secret of wisdom. If you are wise, lose not a single day from now on, until on Shavuot, we stand at Sinai ready once again to declare, naase venishma. And once again we are in God's presence as He declares, "I am the Lord your God, the very same -- asher hotzesicha meeretz Mitzrayim, "Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God, AMEN VEAMEN.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)