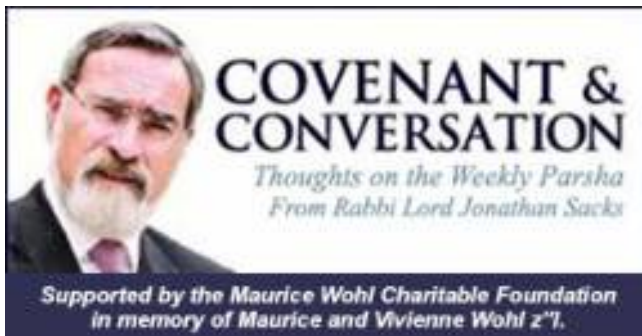


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## Radical Uncertainty

There is something very strange about the festival of Succot, of which our parsha is the primary source. On the one hand, it is the festival supremely associated with joy. It is the only festival in our parsha that mentions rejoicing: “And you shall *rejoice* before the Lord your God seven days” (Lev. 23: 40). In the Torah as a whole, joy is mentioned *not at all* in relation to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur or Pesach, *once* in connection with Shavuot and *three times* in connection with Succot. Hence its name: *zeman simchatenu*, the festival of our joy.

Yet what it recalls is one of the more negative elements of the wilderness years: “You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that future generations may know that I made the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the Lord your God.” (Lev. 23:42-43)

For forty years, the Israelites lived without permanent homes, often on the move. They were in the wilderness, in no man’s land, where it is hard to know what to expect and what dangers lie in wait along the way. To be sure, the people lived under Divine protection. But they could never be sure in advance whether it would be forthcoming and what form this protection might take. It was a prolonged period of insecurity.

How then are we to understand the fact that Succot of all festivals is called *zeman simchatenu*, the festival of our joy? It would have made sense to call Pesach – freedom’s birthday – the festival of joy. It would have made sense to call Shavuot – the day of revelation at Sinai – the festival of joy. But why give that title to a festival that commemorates forty years of exposure to the heat, cold, wind and rain. Remembering that, why should we feel joy?

Besides which, what was the miracle? Pesach and Shavuot recall miracles. But travelling through the wilderness with only temporary homes was neither miraculous nor unique. That is what people who travel through the wilderness do. They must. They are on a journey. They can only have a temporary dwelling. In this respect there was nothing special about the Israelites’ experience.

It was this consideration that led Rabbi Eliezer<sup>1</sup> to suggest that the succah represents the clouds of glory, *ananei kavod*, that accompanied the Israelites during those years, sheltering them from heat and cold, protecting them from their enemies, and guiding them on the way. This is a beautiful and imaginative solution to the problem. It identifies a miracle and explains why a festival should be dedicated to remembering it. That is why Rashi and Ramban take it as the plain sense of the verse.

But it is difficult, nonetheless. A succah looks nothing like the clouds of glory. It would be hard to imagine anything *less* like the clouds of glory. The connection between a succah and clouds of glory comes not from the Torah but from the book of Isaiah, referring not to the past but to the future:

Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a *cloud* of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory will be a canopy. It will be a *succah* for shade from heat by day, and a shelter and hiding place from the storm and rain. (Is. 4:5-6)

Rabbi Akiva dissents from Rabbi Eliezer's view and says that a succah is what it says it is: a hut, a booth, a temporary dwelling.<sup>2</sup> What, according to Rabbi Akiva, was the miracle? There is no way of knowing the answer. But we can guess.

If a succah represents the clouds of glory – the view of Rabbi Eliezer – then it celebrates God's miracle. If it represents nothing other than a

succah itself – Rabbi Akiva's view – then it celebrates the *human* miracle of which Jeremiah spoke when he said: "Thus said the Lord, "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved Me and followed Me in the wilderness, through a land not sown" (Jer. 2:2).

The Israelites may have complained and rebelled. But they followed God. They kept going. Like Abraham and Sarah, they were prepared to journey into the unknown.

If we follow Rabbi Akiva, we can infer a deep truth about faith itself. *Faith is not certainty. Faith is the courage to live with uncertainty.* Almost every phase of the exodus was fraught with difficulties, real or imagined. That is what makes the Torah so powerful. It does not pretend that life is any easier than it is. The road is not straight and the journey is long. Unexpected things happen. Crises suddenly appear. It becomes important to embed in a people's memory the knowledge that we can handle the unknown. God is with us, giving us the courage we need.

Each Succot it is as if God were reminding us: don't think you need solid walls to make you feel safe. I led your ancestors through the desert so that they would never forget the journey they had to make and the obstacles they had to overcome to get to this land. He said, "I made the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt." (Lev. 23:43) In those booths, fragile and open to the elements, the Israelites learnt the courage to live with uncertainty.

Other nations told stories that celebrated their strength. They built palaces and castles as expressions of invincibility. The Jewish people

was different. They carried with them a story about the uncertainties and hazards of history. They spoke of their ancestors' journey through the wilderness without homes, houses, protection against the elements. It is a story of spiritual strength, not military strength.

Succot is a testament to the Jewish people's survival. Even if it loses its land and is cast again into the wilderness, it will lose neither heart nor hope. It will remember that it spent its early years as a nation living in a succah, a temporary dwelling exposed to the elements. It will know that in the wilderness, no encampment is permanent. It will keep travelling until once again it reaches the promised land: Israel, home.

It is no accident that the Jewish people is the only one to have survived 2,000 years of exile and dispersion, its identity intact and energy unabated. It is the only people who can live in a shack with leaves as a roof and yet feel surrounded by clouds of glory. It is the only people who can live in a temporary dwelling and yet rejoice.

Economist John Kay and former Governor of the Bank of England Mervyn King have just published a book, *Radical Uncertainty*.<sup>3</sup> In it they make the distinction between *risk*, which is calculable, and *uncertainty*, which is not. They argue that people have relied too much on calculations of probability while neglecting the fact that danger may appear from a completely unexpected source. The sudden appearance of the Coronavirus just as their book appeared proved their point. People knew there was a possibility of a pandemic. But no one knew what it would be

like, where it would come from, how rapidly it would spread, and what toll it would take.

More important than the calculation of probabilities, they say, is *understanding the situation*, answering the question, "What is going on?"<sup>4</sup> This, they say, is never answered by statistics or predictions but rather by narrative, by telling a story.

*That is exactly what Succot is about.* It is a story about uncertainty. It tells us that we can know everything else, but we will never know what tomorrow will bring. Time is a journey across a wilderness.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we pray to be written into the Book of Life. On Succot we rejoice because we believe we have received a positive answer to our prayer. But as we turn to face the coming year, we acknowledge at the outset that life is fragile, vulnerable in a dozen different ways. We do not know what our health will be, what our career or livelihood will be, or what will happen to society and to the world. We cannot escape exposure to risk. That is what life is.

The succah symbolises living with unpredictability. Succot is the festival of radical uncertainty. But it places it within the framework of a narrative, exactly as Kay and King suggest. It tells us that though we journey through a wilderness, we as a people will reach our destination. If we see life through the eyes of faith, we will know we are surrounded by clouds of glory. Amid uncertainty we will find ourselves able to rejoice. We need no castles for protection or palaces for glory. A humble succah will do, for

when we sit within it, we sit beneath what the Zohar calls “the shade of faith.”

I believe that the experience of leaving the protection of a house and entering the exposure of the succah is a way of taming our fear of the unknown. It says: We have been here before. We are all travellers on a journey. The Divine Presence is with us. We need not be afraid. That is a source of the resilience we need in our interconnected, hazardous, radically uncertain world.

### Shabbat Shalom

1. Succah 11b.
2. Succah 11b.
3. John Kay and Mervyn King, *Radical Uncertainty*, Bridge Street Press, 2020.
4. The authors derive this idea from Richard Rumelt, *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy*, Crown, 2011.



## Sanctify Life

Sometimes life is simple; sometimes it is terribly complex. Simplicity is when the choices presented are clear; good and bad are easy to identify, and good is an easily accessible choice. Sometimes, though, we are forced to choose between two goods, or alternatively, to choose the lesser of two evils. It is in these situations that

ethics come into play. Sometimes our considerations will focus on short term success; other times, long term, macro considerations prevail. Sometimes our choices are completely logical, and sometimes what drives us is something beyond logic.

The Torah values life in many ways, and is even described as a book of life:

Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold on her; and happy is everyone who holds her fast. (Proverbs 3:17-18)

Additionally, the Torah instructs us to use the laws it lays down in order to live:

And guard my statutes, and my laws which a person should perform and **live** with them: I am God. (Vayikra 18:5).

Before you I have placed life and death, the blessing and the curse. You must choose **life**, so that you and your descendants will survive. (D'varim 30:19)

Sometimes, though, life is complex. The value of human life and the Torah principle of choosing life may at times lead us to conclude that we should avoid any conflict, regardless of the circumstances, the threat, the ideal or cause. An extreme choice of life would render an army unnecessary. The only problem with this approach, of course, is the attitude of our neighbors. We would be gambling our lives and the wellbeing of our children on the currency of

the goodwill of others. Choosing pacifism because of our love of life may well result in the opposite of life.

Mahatma Gandhi, who not only preached pacifism but personified it, preached to the Jews in 1938, that for the sake of avoiding conflict we should embrace suffering and death:

If one Jew or all the Jews were to accept the prescription here offered, he or they cannot be worse off than now. And suffering voluntarily undergone will bring them an inner strength and joy which no number of resolutions of sympathy passed in the world outside Germany can. Indeed, even if Britain, France and America were to declare hostilities against Germany, they can bring no inner joy, no inner strength. The calculated violence of Hitler may even result in a general massacre of the Jews by way of his first answer to the declaration of such hostilities. But if the Jewish mind could be prepared for voluntary suffering, even the massacre I have imagined could be turned into a day of thanksgiving and joy.<sup>1</sup>

In the face of this type of pacifism, we choose life - even if the path to life is war - and, paradoxically, unavoidably, death.

In this week's parasha we find the verses that have guided Jewish thought and action for millennia:

Be careful regarding My commandments and keep them; I am God. Do not desecrate My holy name. Sanctify me among the Children of

Israel. I am God who sanctifies you (Vayikra 22:31-32)

On the one hand, the Talmudic tradition (Brachot 21b) derives from these verses the value of communal prayer: We pray together and thereby sanctify God as a community. The image of a nation united in prayer is idyllic and elevated. On the other hand, the Talmud understands that sanctifying God's Name is often far more demanding. There are times when we must draw a line in the sand and even sacrifice our lives to sanctify the name of God (Sanhedrin 74a). In such cases, the choice of martyrdom or war is a short-term tactic in the pursuit of the long term strategy.

Throughout our history, there have been countless Jews from all walks of life - rich and poor, young and old, women and men - who chose death or a path that led to death, in the shadow of the cross, crescent, or swastika. In the modern world, the State of Israel embodies and symbolizes the Jewish People, and today's anti-Semitism hides behind increasingly politically correct anti-Israel rhetoric. Here in Israel, though, this new-old anti-Jewish hatred is not limited to words. Every day, we are threatened by knives, guns, tunnels, bombs and rockets. In the pursuit of peace, we have lost many brave people, young and old. They, too, are holy, like the martyrs throughout Jewish history whose lives were lost sanctifying God's name. The victims of violence, the soldiers who have fallen in defense of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel, chose life for us all.

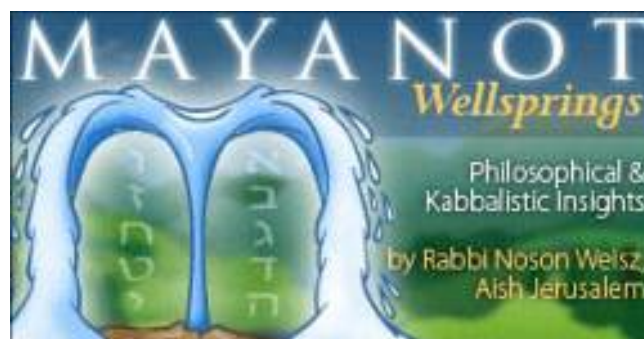
One soldier, an officer named Roi Klein, chose life in a somewhat unconventional manner:



During a particularly difficult battle in southern Lebanon, Major Klein detected a grenade that had been hurled at his Golani troops. He lunged for it, smothering it with his body, and screamed for his soldiers to take cover. And then, like Rabbi Akiva, and like so many martyrs throughout our history, he calmly but with intense conviction said the Shma. Roi Klein did not choose death; he chose life for his soldiers and life for his People. He sanctified God's Name, and became sanctified himself, in the midst of the Jewish people.

As we mark Yom HaZikaron we remember all those who fell. May Roi Klein, and all the soldiers who gave their lives for our freedom, be elevated to the highest places in heaven. May there be no more need for sacrifice like theirs. May we merit sanctifying God in life, in prayer, living in peace. We continue to pray that the nations of the world will, at last, recognize our right to live in peace in our homeland, and welcome us into the neighborhood that has been far too contentious. For our part, we will continue to choose life, and to mourn those who did not live to see the peace we so desperately seek.

1. *The Gandhi Reader: A Sourcebook of His Life and Writings*, p. 318ff.0



## Up For the Count

One of the major topics covered by our Parsha is the description of all the holidays we celebrate throughout the year and the major mitzvot that are associated with them. One of these mitzvot centers around the Omer sacrifice, the offering of a measure of the new and still unripe barley crop on the second day of Passover.

*"You shall count for yourselves – from the morrow of the rest day, from the day when you bring the Omer wave-offering – seven weeks, they shall be complete. Until the morrow of the seventh week you shall count, fifty days; and you shall offer a new meal-offering to God." (Leviticus 23: 15-16)*

These verses command us to count the days of the *Omer*, the 49 days between Passover and Shavuot, the day the Torah was given on Mount Sinai. We are presently in the midst of counting these days; it is appropriate to attempt to delve into their significance.

Nachmanides in his commentary on the Torah (Leviticus 23:36) compares Passover to Succot. He explains that although they are superficially different – Passover is a seven-day holiday

whereas Succot contains eight days – the difference in the duration of the holidays vanishes on deeper analyses. The days of the Omer – the chunk of time that we count between Passover and Shavuot – should be regarded as days of *Chol Hamoed* that join the two holidays together, so that in reality, Shavuot is actually the eighth day of Passover making them both eight day holidays. We shall attempt to explore the connection between Passover and Succot and the significance of eight-day holidays in this essay.

### WHAT'S IN A NAME

Let us begin with names. In the passage referred to, Nachmanides points to a phenomenon that supports his thesis regarding the link between the Shavuot holiday and the eighth day of the Succoth Holiday. The Shavuot holiday is commonly referred to as *Atzeret* in rabbinic literature, and *Atzeret* is the Biblical name of the eighth day of Succot, *Shmini Atzeret*. It would appear that our Rabbis intended to highlight the connection between the holidays by borrowing the Torah name of the eighth day of Succot and applying it to Shavuot.

Now let's delve into meaning. The word *Atzeret* means, "to retain", in the sense of a vessel or container used to retain and preserve something poured into it. Nachmanides hints that the connection between the two holidays is buried in the meaning of the word *Atzeret*. The eighth day of Succot is the receptacle that holds the holiness of the previous seven days, and similarly Shavuot is termed the eighth day of Passover because it is the day that captures the holiness of the Passover

holiday. Let us see if we can unravel some of these ideas.

On the most surface level the stated purpose of the days of the Omer is to establish a connection between two sacrifices:

*"From the day when you bring the Omer of the waving ... From your dwelling places you shall bring bread that shall be waved, two loaves ... they shall be baked leavened."*  
 (Leviticus 23:15-17)

The Omer, brought on the second day of Passover, the first day of the Omer, is a sacrifice that is composed of barley, and is brought to the altar in an unleavened state, while the two loaves that are sacrificed on Shavuot, the 50<sup>th</sup> day of the Omer, are baked leavened, and are made of wheat. Indeed, these two loaves are the only leavened grains that are ever brought to the Altar in the Temple. All other grain offerings are strictly unleavened.

### THE BARLEY SYMBOL

The Maharal comments on the symbolism of these two sacrifices (in his work *Tiferet Israel* Ch. 25):

Barley was a substance fed to animals in ancient times. The *Sotah*, the unfaithful wife, brought an offering of barley and the rabbis comment on the reason; she was guilty of performing an act appropriate to an animal, that is, that she gave in to her purely physical animal urges, therefore she is made to bring a sacrifice of barley, essentially animal fodder. (Talmud

Sotah 15b) The Omer sacrifice symbolizes man on a physical uncultivated level, whereas the two loaves of Shavuot are of leavened wheat, which is people food, as the Torah considers man an eater of wheat bread. "*Bread that sustains the heart of man*" (Psalms 104: 15)

He goes on to explain the symbolism behind these sacrifices. The noun meaning animal in Hebrew is *bahemah*, which is a composite of two words *ba mah*, literally "within what." The Maharal explains that this name encapsulates the essence of being an animal; the spiritual difference between animals and people is the ability to develop potential. Animals are called 'within what' because they do not develop. God instills the entire potential inherent in animals at birth.

### **THE HUMAN POTENTIAL**

To distinguish him from the animals, the generic name of man is *adam*, a noun that means earth or soil in Hebrew. Man is exactly like the earth; it is the earth that sustains all life, but its capacity to actualize this potential to feed the world requires work and effort. Left to itself, the earth just lies there totally inert, and supports nothing. In the same way, man is born with infinite potential, but the development of his human potential requires effort and work. If man is inert, he ends up less than an animal although his potential is infinitely greater.

When the Jewish people left Egypt, they were transported to an enormous spiritual level and experienced an act of Divine revelation. The Midrash tells us that in the context of the miracle

of the splitting of the Sea of Reeds every maidservant enjoyed a vision of God that was more elevated than the vision of the prophet Ezekiel, who saw God sitting on his heavenly throne surrounded by His angels. (See Mechilta, Beshalach, 6.)

The reference to the maidservant is not personal according to the Maharal; it is descriptive of the quality of the spiritual level of the vision of God attained at the pinnacle of the Exodus. The maidservant symbolizes a person entirely lacking in intellectual sophistication, whereas the prophet is the ultimate symbol of the very pinnacle of intellectual development. (See Maimonides, Yesodei HaTorah, 5.)

The implication of describing the immense revelation experienced by Israel at the Exodus in terms of a maidservant was to convey the idea that this revelation was totally inspired by Divine intervention; it owed nothing at all to the development of the spiritual potential that is the mark of human beings. As such, this revelation was a '*bahema*'-type experience. It was thrust into the Jewish consciousness in the same fashion that information is programmed into the minds of animals. The vision that Israel experienced was way beyond their own intellectual reach. The Omer sacrifice, which is brought to symbolize the attachment to the Divinity attained at the culmination of the Exodus is therefore a barley sacrifice because barley is animal food.

In contrast, the revelation that came later, at Mount Sinai, on Shavuot, when the Torah was given and received, is symbolized by the offering of leavened bread made of wheat, human food.



Wheat bread is offered, because this experience was on the intellectual level of prophecy, based on having developed the potential of the human mind to attach itself to the world of the spirit through education and hard work.

### **LEARNING HOW TO LIVE WITH ESKIMOS**

Let us attempt to develop this remarkable idea presented by the Maharal with the aid of a metaphor.

Suppose you are an English speaker and want to go live with a tribe of Eskimos who do not speak a word of English. Not only are you faced with a language barrier; your entire life experience is irrelevant in terms of teaching you how to survive in the frozen habitat of the Eskimo environment. If you were transplanted to Eskimo land as you are you would only be able to survive with massive help. Someone would have to teach you how to dress, how to get around, what to eat etc. Only after a long period of acclimatization as a helpless dependant would you internalize sufficient information to be able to survive on your own without help.

If, on the other hand, there was a school to go to that could teach you the Eskimo language, the conditions of the environment and the survival techniques you will need to manage there, you could amass enough information to be able to begin to live in the far north with the Eskimos without anyone's help.

The distance between our world and the world of the spirit is infinitely greater than the distance between our culture and that of the Eskimo. To connect to such a world using our own resources

without proper preparation is obviously out of the question. The revelations of the Exodus that we commemorate with the Passover holiday obviously had to be Divinely inspired. God held our hand and used His knowledge and power to bring us up to the level of these experiences. On the basis of our own spiritual knowledge and development they were untenable and unsustainable.

To connect to the world of the spirit on your own power requires a lot of schooling and preparation. The days of the Omer symbolize the distance between Passover and Shavuot, between experiencing the Divine on an animalistic, barley level, and experiencing it on a human, leavened wheat bread level.

### **THE 49 DAYS**

The theory of the Maharal also explains why there are 49 days in the Omer.

The Torah informs us that the world was created in seven days. According to the commentators seven days was not a random number. Each of the days stands for one of the Ten Sefirot (or "Ten Manifestations").

To fully explain what the Sefirot are would take volumes and is beyond my capacity anyway, but it is necessary to have the glimmer of an idea of what they are about in order to continue this discussion. Briefly then, God is Infinite. The creation of the world was simply one of His projects as far as we are aware. There is infinitely more to God than the creation of our universe could possibly reveal. The partial glimpse of

character traits of God that we can obtain by studying creation is what we call the Ten Sefirot.

Within the Sefirot themselves there is a division between the bottom seven and the top three. The plan of creation is not directly visible in its outer trappings. We cannot directly see the rules by which it was created or the purpose that God had in mind in creating it. The natural world that we can see with our eyes which was created in seven days reveals God's works but not the deeper ideas and the planning that went into its creation. The invisible intellectual component of the universe is represented by the top three Sefirot, while God's works are represented by the bottom seven; the seven days in which God created the world are the outer manifestation of the bottom seven Sefirot.

People have distinct character traits that nevertheless blend smoothly together so that we encounter integrated human beings instead of organisms with a certain number of distinct traits. In the same way each day of creation blends with every other day to form the seamless flow of time. To accomplish this each day must contain within it a part of all the others; that is how we end up with a unit of seven times seven or 49. The unit of 49 always symbolizes the limit of the reach of natural time and the limits of nature in general.

### **FOREVER**

Take for example the unit of 49 years of the Jubilee era, which exactly parallel the 49 days of the Omer. The Torah refers to the 50 years of the Jubilee period as "forever." Thus the maximum term of service of a Jewish slave, who elects to serve his master "forever" (Exodus 21:6) actually

ends in the Jubilee year, when he goes free. This is also the maximum period of all transactions involving the sale of one's inheritance in the land of Israel. The sale until the Jubilee year is a sale until the end of natural time.

When you get beyond seven times seven, you reach the number 50. The number 50 is beyond the realm of multiples of seven and belongs to the series of eights, and represents the part of the universe that lies beyond what is directly visible in the natural world. As noted above, God created the world in seven days representative of the bottom seven of the Ten Sefirot. The eighth (counting from the bottom up) of the Ten Sefirot is known as *binah*, signifying "understanding". As we have explained the world of nature as God created it contains all the forces of life, but God's plan – His purpose, the blueprint and wisdom He consulted and employed in its creation – is absent from it. This intellectual dimension of creation is represented by the highest of the Ten Sefirot, and the first one of these that you encounter counting from the bottom is Sefira number eight, *binah*.

The Torah originates in this sphere. The Zohar tells us that "God looked in the Torah" and created the universe (Zohar, Truma,161b). The receiving of the Torah necessitated contact with a sphere of reality that is beyond the ordinary boundaries of creation. Man had to make contact with the level of reality symbolized by 50, the level of the plan of creation, the level that reveals God's wisdom and understanding.

Now that we have the Torah, we can attend the school of Eskimo culture of our parable; we can learn about the world of the fiftieth level while

remaining within the 49 levels of ordinary reality. The Torah codifies the information that belongs to the three highest spheres; immersing ourselves in Torah supplies us with the ability to establish and maintain contact with the world of the purely Divine while standing on our own intellectual feet, without the need for extraordinary Divine assistance. Without Torah study we can only contact the eighth level of reality miraculously, held aloft by God's supporting hand.

The 49 days between Passover and Shavuot, which are the 49 days of counting the Omer symbolize the painful climb out of the natural world of the seven days of creation to the spiritual peak of Mount Sinai, to the level of the eighth day, *binah*.

### **RETRACING THE ROUTE**

At the parting of the sea, God raised us to this level of *bina* for a brief span of time by injecting us with spiritual power. That explains why this experience is described as belonging to an Israel comparable to a maidservant and that is why the spiritual bond that commemorates the experience involves the sacrifice of barley, an animal food. During the days of the Omer God slowly fed us information.

We got a taste of the commandments at Marah, we started eating the manna, drinking from Miriam's well, and began the process of climbing out of ordinary existence on our own intellectual steam. Finally, we were able to reach the pinnacle of *binah* and function sufficiently on that level to have our face-to-face meeting with God and receive the Torah.

Not only does the Torah consist of information addressed to the intellect, the passing of the Torah from God to Israel necessitated the establishment of a Covenantal relationship. It is impossible to enter into a Covenant with a party who cannot stand on his own feet. Revelation on the spiritual level of a maidservant does not enable the giving and receiving of Torah.

This point is really the heart of this essay. It is impossible to appreciate Judaism without understanding the symbolism of the Omer. Judaism positively distrusts all sorts of ecstatic religious experience. Torah observance is based on an intellectual approach to the world.

There is no special way to live a Torah life. You have to live it the same way as you live a secular life. Just as secular life is inundated with emotional experiences but rests on a bedrock of intellectual understanding so must Torah life have a firm intellectual foundation. If one does not have sufficient Torah knowledge to sustain his level of religious feeling, the feeling itself is either illusory or unsustainable. The Torah categorized the very intense and very genuine spiritual connection established with God at the Splitting of the Sea as an 'animal' experience only.

As there was no other way to establish contact, God in His infinite goodness provided us with such an experience, but only to get us started. We needed the experience of the Exodus to blast us out of the physical world. Having been blasted into orbit, we were then expected to strive to climb to the level of such an experience through our own effort and work.

## **NECESSITY OF TORAH**

Having received the Torah, it is our duty to establish the experience of Sinai as a permanent part of our lives through the study of Torah. It is our responsibility to establish Eskimo schools and teach our children and ourselves the language and the environment of *binah* so that we can stand upright on our own feet in the manner of human beings and face God.

If we look at life in spiritual terms, we are led to the realization that our entire secular existence in this physical world takes place on the spiritual level of animate creatures. We wander about without any clear idea of why we are here, who if anyone, placed us here and for what purpose. We cannot exploit the human spiritual potential that is implanted within us without contacting the level of *binah*, and it is impossible to reach this level except through the gateway provided by the Torah. Only through the intellectual foundations laid down by Torah study can our minds obtain a glimpse of the portion of the universe that is above the levels of ordinary reality.

No amount of intellectual endeavor we invest into studying our world can enable us to climb to the level of *binah*. God did not program the higher levels of the Sefirot into the universe that he created in seven days. Applying the most brilliant of human minds to the study of the natural universe will never lead to an understanding of the eighth level. While it is clear that the universe must have a plan, the plan is simply not here to be found. This applies no less to emotional experience. Unless God lifts us above ourselves, we can never experience the ecstasy of direct

contact with Him without Torah study. Our world is the world of the bottom seven Sefirot and such feelings are simply not a part of it.

## **TWO EDITIONS OF CREATION**

Now let us return to the connection between the eighth day of Passover and the eighth day of Succot. Creation really went through two editions, and Passover and Succot are the holidays that respectively celebrate the creation of each of its editions.

Rabenu Bechaye, a student of Nachmanides, and one of the famous medieval commentators on the Torah in his own right, explains extensively in our Parsha how the Succot celebration concerns the first edition of creation, God's original creation of the world in seven days. During this festival, we bring 70 sacrifices, representing the 70 nations of the world, and we ritually praise God with the four species, which represent the richness of the plant species that God planted in our world.

As Succot celebrates the creation of nature, its dominant theme is thanksgiving for what God has given us through the world of nature and a hope that he continues His generosity during the coming year. The Succot holiday falls at the very end of the harvest season after we have completed the storage of nature's annual bounty safely in our barns. Its theme of thanksgiving fully matches the mood of the season.

The eighth day of Succot, which is a separate holiday unto itself, celebrates God's unique connection to the Jewish people within the realm of the seven days. The Midrash offers a metaphor to convey the spirit of the holiday.

A parable is told of a human king who commanded his servants to make him a huge party. On the last day he told his best friend, "Make me a little meal so that I should enjoy only your company." (Talmud, Succa,55b)

The point of the creation of the natural world with its seventy nations is captured only in the special connection between God and Israel symbolized by the eighth day. No holiday of thanksgiving for the creation can be complete without also thanking God for the special relationship that made it all possible.

In contrast, consider what the "Sefer Hachinuch" has to say about the Omer:

Through this offering we should come to appreciate the tremendous benevolence with which God treats his creatures in providing them with crops that will supply their livelihood each year. Before we partake of any enjoyment from these crops it is fitting to offer part of them to God in thanksgiving. And to remind ourselves that we should make ourselves worthy of receiving His bounty by the worthiness of our deeds, so that His purpose in creating us should become actualized, because He wants His creatures to prosper and succeed.(Chinuch, Mitzva 302)

Thus, we learn that the Omer is also brought to acknowledge the bounty of creation, but the Omer is brought at the very beginning of the spring – when only the barley crop has sprouted, nothing else – and before any of nature's bounty is available for enjoyment. The Omer celebrates the

idea that Divine intervention in the world of nature has a purposeful intent; God wants us to prosper and succeed; He is anxious to shower His bounty on us but we must make ourselves worthy of receiving it.

### A MEASURE OF MANNA

The word *Omer* crops up in another connection – the *Omer* is a weight; it is the measure of the daily portion of manna that fell from the sky in the wilderness (Exodus 16:16). The purpose of the *Omer* sacrifice is to drive home the message that all the food we eat is really just like the manna, miraculously rationed and provided by God daily, specifically for each individual.

This penetration behind the natural veil of creation is the true revelation of the Exodus. A totally new face of creation from the eighth level up is being revealed. Just as we celebrate the culmination of the first edition of creation on the eighth day of Succot, we celebrate the culmination of the second edition on the eighth day of Passover, Shavuot, the 50<sup>th</sup> day of the Omer, the day on which the Torah was given.

This is the concept of *Atzeret* referred to by Nachmanides. The capture of the bounty of nature requires husbandry; man must toil in the field, and then he must store the harvest in order to benefit from nature's bounty. The bounty of revelation – nature in the second edition revealed by the miracles of the Exodus – can also be captured and stored only through planning and husbandry. To hang on to the revelation requires much intellectual effort and work; we are studying a level of reality that is totally beyond the reach of our ordinary senses.



The message contained in the commandment to count the Omer is that we need to construct a spiritual vessel within our hearts and minds in which to store the great revelations of the Exodus. We can only hang on to holiness through a step-by-step learning process, never through the ecstasy of religious inspiration. To hang on to the Exodus you must literally count the days till you can finally sink your teeth into some Torah.



## Inconsistent Defense

The Midrash tells us that Hashem showed Moshe each generation and its judges, each generation and its kings, each generation and its sages, each generation and its robbers. Hashem also showed Moshe the image of King Shaul and his son Yonasan dying by the sword during a battle with the Philistines.

Moshe asked, “Why should the very first king of the Jewish people die by the sword?”

Hashem replied, “Why complain to me? Shaul massacred Nov, the city of *Kohanim*. Speak to the *Kohanim*!”

This, concludes the Midrash, is the implication of the verse “Speak to the *Kohanim*.”

The commentators are exceedingly puzzled by this Midrash, which seems to run counter to the reasons the Torah gives for Shaul’s premature death. We read in *Sefer Shmuel* that Shaul disobeyed the prophet Shmuel’s command to exterminate the Amalekites, men, women and children. Shaul took mercy on Agag, the Amalekite king, and spared him. The result of this misguided kindness was the career of Agag’s descendant Haman, the implacable enemy of the Jews, centuries later. When Shmuel arrived and saw what Shaul had done, he specifically told him that Hashem would rip his kingdom from him. How then can the Midrash connect Shaul’s death to his massacre of the *Kohanim* of Nov?

The Reisher Rav, in his *Hadrash Veba’iyun*, explains that Shaul’s primary sin was indeed his failure to wipe out Amalek, but he might have been given a less painful form of death. For Shaul really could have argued convincingly in his defense. He could have said, “I didn’t mean to be disobedient. But I guess I have a soft heart. I’m just too compassionate. I couldn’t bring myself to kill Agag.” Such a defense would not have excused him, but it might have mitigated his guilt somewhat.

But the massacre of the *Kohanim* of Nov slammed the door in the face of any such defense. Where was his soft heart when he attacked Nov? Where was his compassion when he exterminated all the *Kohanim*? No, the failure to kill Agag did not stem from uncontrollable compassion. Shaul’s guilt was not mitigated. Why did Shaul die such a violent death? “Speak to the *Kohanim*.”

Many commentators write that exactly this should be our greatest concern when we are brought to judgment before the Heavenly Court after one hundred twenty years. We may have all kinds of arguments in our defense, but who knows if our own actions won't refute them.

Hashem may listen to our arguments and say, "Oh, is that the reason why? You didn't have any money. But for that thing you did have money? You say you didn't have any time. But for that other thing you did have time? You say you were not smart enough. But for that thing you were smart enough?" And that is when all the defenses of the inconsistent people will crumble and fall.

### **Teach the Children**

God told Moshe to "Speak to the Kohanim" and "say to them" to avoid contact with the dead. These two phrases seem redundant. "Speaking to the *Kohanim*" obviously includes "saying to them" whatever needs to be said. What is the purpose of these additional words?

The Talmud infers (*Yevamos* 114a) that it comes "*lehazhir hagedolim al haketanim*, to caution the adults regarding the children." There is a special obligation on adult *Kohanim* to train the young *Kohanim* to maintain the purity of their persons. Accordingly, the verse is stating, "Speak to the *Kohanim*," meaning the adults, that they should "say to them," the minors, that a *Kohein* must avoid contact with the dead.

The only problem with this interpretation is that it doesn't seem to fit into the words. There is no hint in the verse that the *Kohanim* are meant to repeat what they hear to others. The plain meaning of the

words is that the objective pronoun "them" refers back to the object "*Kohanim*."

The Beis Av suggests that the Torah is indeed talking only to the adults, once for themselves and the second time for the benefit of the children.

We all know how to teach children to do *mitzvos*. When a boy is young, we buy him a pair of *tzitzis*. When he gets a little older, we learn Torah with him. We teach our daughters to make blessings, to pray, to appreciate Shabbos. This is all relatively simple. We can condition our children to do the acts, but how can we inspire them? How can we instill in them a true *yiras shamayim*, a true awe of living in the presence of the Almighty so that they should love to do *mitzvos* and find sins abhorrent?

The only way this can be accomplished is if the children see *yiras shamayim* in the parents. Teach them by example. Children must see their parents recoil from food whose kosher status is questionable. They must see their parents suffused with the joy of a *mitzvah*. They must see their parents trembling in awe of the Almighty. Only then will *yiras shamayim* become real to them. They too will be caught up in the mood and the atmosphere of the home, and they too will become accustomed to living in the presence of the Almighty.

Here is just one example of what I consider true *yiras shamayim*. When the Steipler Gaon was a young man, he once went to meet with a young lady who was a prospective match. While they were sitting at the table and talking, he nodded off and fell asleep.

The young lady let him sleep and just sat there waiting patiently. Presently, he awoke and realized where he was and what had happened.

“You must excuse me,” he said.

“Oh, it is nothing,” said the young lady. “Don’t worry about it.”

“No, it is something. I must explain. You see, I was very tired.”

The young lady smiled. “Well, that was obvious.”

He cleared his throat. “Look, you know I had to travel twelve hours by train today to get here.”

“Yes, I know. Twelve hours on a train can make anyone tired.”

“No, it is not so simple. I knew that I could not learn that much traveling on a train, so I stayed up and learned all last night. I expected I would be able to catch a few hours’ sleep on the train and come here reasonably rested. But when I saw the upholstered seats on the train, it seemed to me that the material might have *shaatnez*. I couldn’t very well take a chance, could I? So I remained standing for the whole journey. And of course, I didn’t get any sleep at all. So you must forgive me for falling asleep in your company. Please don’t take offense.”

Incidentally, the young lady married him.

To remain standing for twelve hours on a train — after having stayed up the entire night — because of a suspicion that there might be *shaatnez* in the train’s seats, this is *yiras shamayim*.

Now we can understand the seemingly redundant words of the Torah. First, Hashem told Moshe to

“speak to the *Kohanim*” and inform them of the *mitzvah*. Then He told Moshe to “say it to them” again, to impress on them that it would not be enough simply to obey and fulfill. A higher level of performance was required of them, a type of performance that would carry forward to the next generation when the children see the diligence, inspiration and awe with which the adults embrace the *mitzvah*.

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