

# Parsha Ponders

Sefiras HaOmer | May 5, 2022 | 4 Iyar 5782

*Looking beyond the surface: slow growth to actualize potential<sup>1</sup>*

וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת מיום הביאכם את-עמר התנופה שבע שבתות תמימת תהיינה

You shall count for yourselves, from the day after the Festival<sup>2</sup>, from the day you bring the waved *Omer* offering, they shall be seven complete weeks<sup>3</sup>

We find ourselves in the period of the year known as *Sefiras HaOmer*, literally the Counting of the *Omer*. From the second day of Pesach, we have a *mitzvah* to count up every day, leading to the Festival of Shavuot. Coming off the heels of Pesach, you would think this is a joyous time of year. Indeed, the Ramban likens<sup>4</sup> this period to *Chol HaMoed*, the intermediate Festival days. However, this time period is also known as a time of mourning, as we commemorate the time in which Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students died. Why did they die? Our Sages say<sup>5</sup> it was because they didn't treat each other with כבוד, usually translated as honor. How could they not honor each other?

The *mitzvah* of *Sefiras HaOmer* is connected to the *korbon Omer*, a barley offering that was brought in the Temple. Our Sages tell us<sup>6</sup> an interesting statement regarding this offering: Don't let the *Omer* offering be light in your eyes, for in its merit the Jewish people inherited the Land of Israel. Why would I treat this *mitzvah* any lighter than any other *mitzvah*, such that I need to be warned against looking at it lightly? What does this *mitzvah* have to do with inheriting the Land of Israel?

Rav Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik used to explain that there are two ways that we connect to Hashem: through the miraculous, and through nature. The Exodus from Egypt was Hashem's power in full display, and that's when Jewish people began their relationship with their Creator. However, it was forty-nine days later that they reached Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. Why did it take so long? It was only a three-day journey from Egypt. Our Sages tell us<sup>7</sup> that the Jews were on the forty-ninth level of impurity. To be worthy to receive the Torah, they had to work on themselves. They had to grow. It took forty-nine days to correct each of the levels of impurity they had imbued from the Egyptian society.

Why couldn't they miraculously jump to a full state of purity? We see from here that personal growth is part of the natural system, not the miraculous system. Another way we connect to Hashem is through personal growth, but it isn't instantaneous. It takes work, at a slow and steady pace. Personal growth that is too hasty never lasts, as real change is naturally a slow process.

What does כבוד really mean? Its root is כבד, which means heavy. In English, it would be better to say it's giving gravitas to something, giving it the importance and weight it deserves. We could say that although the students of Rabbi Akiva treated each other with respect, they only looked at each other at surface level. They didn't see their colleagues' infinite potential for growth. They were thus punished during the period of *Sefiras HaOmer*. The *Omer* offering, which again is connected to the *mitzvah* of counting the *Omer*, carries with it the same message. What is barley? It's animal food, the lowest of the grains<sup>8</sup>. As

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a *schmooze* heard from [Rav Shaya Karlinsky](#), Rosh Yeshivas Darche Noam

<sup>2</sup> [Targum Onkelos ad. loc.](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Leviticus 23:15](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Ramban to Leviticus 23:36](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Yevamos 62b](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Vayikra Rabbah 28:6](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Zohar Chadash parshas Yisro](#)

<sup>8</sup> See [Sotah 14a](#), [Yerushalmi Sotah 2:1](#), [Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 2:5](#), [Midrash Shmuel 20:1](#)

such, a person could easily look at barley and think it has no spiritual potential. We are commanded to bring an offering of barley to show us that we should look deeper than the surface.

After completing the forty-nine day journey of growth, we come to the Festival of Shavuos. What offering is brought on that day? An offering made of wheat, the most sublime of grains, the epitome of human food. We started off bringing animal food, and after all that growth, bring human food. The *Omer* offering, as well as its connected *mitzvah of Sefiras HaOmer*, teach us that slow and steady growth, a little bit every day, is the natural way to unlock and actualize our infinite potential. Hashem gave us tremendous abilities, but we have to look beyond the surface to see what's really there.

Perhaps this is our Sage's intent when they say that we inherited the land of Israel due to the *Omer* offering. The two share the same message. A person could easily look at the land of Israel and think it's like any other land. They'll think they're in a country, no different than any other country. However, this is only looking at the surface. Deep down, the land of Israel has infinite spiritual potential for growth<sup>9</sup>. Only someone who inculcated the message of the *Omer* will notice and be able to appreciate exactly what the land of Israel has to offer.

May we use this time that we are now in to actualize our potential, and make the most of this opportunity for slow and steady growth.

Good Shabbos

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<sup>9</sup> See [Bava Basra 158b](#), אוירה של ארץ ישראל מחכים