

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Emor

The Omer: A Word that Speaks Volumes

One of the central sections in our parsha is chapter 23, which deals with the festivals. In that section, the Torah describes the *omer* offering which is offered on the second day of Pesach. Regarding that offering, we find the following in the midrash:¹

Let the mitzvah of Omer never be a light matter in your eyes, for it was through the mitzvah of Omer that Avraham merited to inherit the Land of Canaan.

This comment is most intriguing. In what way does the *korban Omer* serve as the key to Avraham's (and our) inheriting the Land?

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The name of the offering – “the *Omer*” – itself requires contemplation. What does it mean? We may be interested, and also somewhat disconcerted, to discover that to a certain degree it doesn't actually “mean” anything.

The term “*omer*” is a measurement of volume and, in our case, refers to the amount of barley flour in the *korban*. This itself is rather perplexing. Generally speaking, the name of a *korban* says something about the background or purpose of the *korban* – e.g. a “*chatas*” comes to atone for a sin (“*chet*”), while a “*shelamim*” comes to increase peace (“*shalom*”) in the world. Is there nothing more descriptive to say about the *omer* offering than how much flour it contains?

The question assumes greater significance when we remember that the term “*omer*” also assumes a central role within the count, for every night we say: “Tonight is such and such amount of days in the *Omer*.” In light of our observation, essentially, we are saying: “Tonight is such and such amount of days in the [count which begins on the day when we bring a *korban* which consists of an] *omer* [of flour]!”

In truth, even the name “*omer*” as a reference to an amount of flour raises a basic question. An *omer* is the volume equivalent to a tenth of an *eipah*. Indeed, in all the sections of the Torah that deal with *korbanos*, it is referred to either as an “*asiris ha'eipah*” (a tenth of an *eipah*), or simply an “*isaron*” (a tenth). With regards to our offering, the Torah requires the exact same volume, yet for some reason gives it a special name — an *omer*. Why?

¹ Vayikra Rabbah 28.

THE ORIGINAL OMER

In fact, there is one other place in the Torah where the term *omer* appears — repeatedly. Chapter 16 of *Chumash Shemos* describes at length the events which surrounded the falling of the manna and mentions, among other things, that the amount which fell each day was “an *omer* for each person”. Indeed, if we look at that chapter in *Shemos*, we will notice something quite perplexing. The concluding verses of the chapter relate that Moshe was commanded to take a flask of manna and place it in the Holy of Holies next to the Ark, and that the Jewish People ate manna over the course of forty years. We could say that these final verses, fittingly, describe the “legacy” of the manna. However, after all this, the very last verse in that chapter reads:

And the omer is a tenth of an eiphah.

One cannot help feeling that this is a very anti-climactic way to conclude a chapter! Is this piece of information, which seems to be entirely technical in nature, to be the enduring message regarding the manna? Would this definition not have been more useful earlier in the chapter when we were first introduced to the term “*omer*”? Why do these become the Torah’s “parting words” regarding that discussion?

Apparently, the Torah wants us to take leave of this discussion in a state of vigilance and expectation; it is placing us, as it were, “on alert.” We are being informed that the term the Torah uses to describe the amount of manna which fell — an *omer* — is actually a departure from the norm. The reason we are being told this is that if we should ever find the Torah again referring to a tenth of an *eiphah* as “an *omer*,” we should realize that it is in order to link it back to the *omer* of manna which fell in the Wilderness.

And indeed, we do find this term again, in reference to the *Omer*-offering in our parsha. Somehow, we are being told that this offering which we are to bring in the Land of Israel is a throwback to the time when the manna fell in the Wilderness.

How?

THE PURPOSE OF THE OMER-OFFERING

Rav Yosef Zvi Salant explains.² As we know, the nature of and atmosphere of life in the Wilderness was markedly different than how it would be once they crossed the Jordan River. Life in the Wilderness was entirely focused around spiritual pursuits, with all our physical needs being taken care of in the form of manna from Heaven, water from Miriam’s Well, and the protection of the Clouds of Glory. All of this would change once we entered the Land of Israel. Is that transition a positive one? After all, isn’t a spiritual existence better than a physical one? Since Hashem’s plan was to bring us into the Land, the answer clearly is “yes”, with the reason being that to live a physical existence while imbuing it and elevating it with spiritual values is in fact a greater achievement.

This is a very exalted and lofty goal, indeed, and like many exalted and lofty goals, it is much easier said than done. It is very easy to enter the physical arena and simply get caught up in it, with any spiritual ideas and perspectives becoming progressively sidelined and eclipsed by the ongoing involvements that are part and parcel of physical life. Elevating ideas may simply evaporate and disappear over the course of time, leaving physical life with all its mundaneness — and perhaps much of its baseness.

What measures can be taken to help ensure that the Torah’s ideas and ideals permeate and elevate life in the Land of Israel?

² Be’er Yosef, Parshas Emor.

Clearly, this concern was part of what lay behind our very stay in the Wilderness prior to our entering the Land. This was a formative time, during which we were able to come face-to-face with many essential truths, such as where our sustenance comes from, and instill them in our national consciousness. Finding our food on the ground each morning, having miraculously dropped from the sky the previous evening, left us in no doubt as to its Source. This recognition was reinforced and further embedded within us over the course of those formative forty years.

However, we must persist and ask: Once we move from the Wilderness to the Land of Israel and our food begins once more to come out of the ground, is there any way to help ensure that we do not forget the lessons we learned so well when it fell from the heavens? How can we keep the perspective imbued by “the manna to which we had been accustomed?”

This brings us to the *Omer*-offering.

“THE FIRST OF YOUR REAPING”

The barley from which the *Omer*-offering is made comes from the first reaping of the year’s produce.³ This is of utmost significance. After all the months invested in the year’s crop, from the plowing and sowing which take place the preceding fall and through all that has happened since, the time when one finally comes to reap the produce is a special one indeed, and one’s actions at that time are defining. By taking the first reaping and bringing it as a *korban*, we are thereby acknowledging Hashem as the Source of the harvest yield — no less than He was the Source of the manna that fell from Heaven in the Wilderness. This statement of recognition which accompanies the first reaping should serve to set the tone for our perspective on this idea throughout the course of the year. In this way, the *Omer*-offering indeed preserves and perpetuates the lesson first taught to us by the *omer* of manna in the Wilderness, and hence its name is most aptly — “The *Korban Ha’Omer*.”

This understanding of the purpose of this offering will give us deeper insight as to the significance of its timing — the morrow of the first day of Pesach. Pesach is a time when Hashem’s involvement in and control of the world was stunningly revealed and manifest for all to see. By taking that day as the “launch” for the *Omer*-offering, which we bring on its morrow, we are demonstrating our awareness that *the very same involvement* which orchestrated our miraculous exodus from Egypt is in play constantly in bringing blessing to our livelihood and well-being in the Land of Israel.⁴

THE DAY THE TWO OMERS MET

In light of our discussion, it is fascinating to consider the Navi’s description of the very first “morrow of the Pesach” in the Land of Israel, as described in Sefer Yehoshua:

*They ate from the [new] grain of the land on the morrow of the Pesach...The manna ceased on that morrow when they ate from the grain of the land.*⁵

These verses are informing us that the Jewish People continued to eat manna after they entered the land, right up to the “morrow of the Pesach” when the *Omer* is offered, at which point the manna ceased. The full significance of this confluence of events is that this transitional day served as the point where the *omer* of manna was “converted” and sublimated into the *Omer*-offering which would henceforth perpetuate its message.

3 Verse 10.

4 Rabbeinu Yitzchak Arama, *Akeidas Yitzchak*, chap. 67.

5 5:11–12.

Evidence of the crucial role this recognition plays may be seen in the fact that the Torah actually forbids us to consume any of the new crop prior to the *Omer* being offered, a prohibition known as “*chadash*.”⁶ As if to say, until we demonstrate our awareness of where the year’s crop comes from, we are not entitled to partake of it!

Bearing all of this in mind, we can well appreciate the statement of the midrash, quoted in the beginning of this chapter, that it is in the merit of the mitzvah of *Omer* that we inherited the Land. The message of this offering is critical in making physical life in the Land of Israel a positive and purposeful experience — a “step-up” from life in the Wilderness.

DAYS AND WEEKS

The awareness represented by the *korban Omer* continues to express itself in the mitzvah that is initiated by that *korban* — the counting of the *Omer*. In the days and weeks that link Pesach to Shavuot, we affirm our mindfulness of the *Omer*’s lesson, stating that we are such and such number of days “in the *Omer*.”

Moreover, this will help us understand something rather unusual about the count itself. As we know, it is a mitzvah to count both the days and the weeks of the *Omer*. What is the meaning of this dual method of counting? Surely anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of arithmetic will know that “ten days” are also “one week and three days” and so on! Why do we express the number of days in that way as well?

The answer to this question, too, lies in the miracle of the manna, for that miracle also expressed itself in these two ways:

- ▷ A daily miracle, where the manna fell from the heavens each morning.
- ▷ A weekly miracle, where a double portion of manna fell every Friday, while on Shabbos none fell at all.

This “miracle within a miracle” further impressed upon us Hashem’s ongoing supervision in providing for our needs. Therefore, the count which perpetuates the awareness of that miracle also assumes the dual form of a both a daily and a weekly count!

A “DOUBLE PORTION” IN THE OMER-OFFERING

This idea can further help us understand an anomaly within the *Omer*-offering itself. The Torah commands that the *Omer* be accompanied by a sheep brought as a burnt-offering, which should itself shall be accompanied by a flour-offering consisting of two tenths of an *eiphah*.⁷ This is most unusual, for a *minchah*-offering which accompanies a sheep is always one tenth of an *eiphah*! Why, here, is it two?

The *Be’er Yosef* explains that since the *Omer*-offering corresponds to the miracle of the manna, the “double portion” of two tenths in this *minchah*-offering reflect the weekly miracle of the double portion of manna! Together with the one tenth brought as the *Omer*-offering itself, these two offerings represent both expressions of the miracle of the manna.

Wow!

6 Verse 14.

7 Verses 12-13.

CONCLUSION: READY TO RECEIVE

In addition to representing the key to successful living in the Land of Israel, the *Omer* count serves every year to link Pesach and Shavuos – and for the same reason. A person’s ability to receive the Torah will be directly affected by his perspective as to who is ultimately in control of his livelihood. As long as a person feels that his success rests solely with him, the best of his efforts and concern will be demanded by that realm, leaving little or none left for involvement in Torah study. Once a person realizes, however, that his livelihood is guided by Hashem, he will be free to engage in pursuing a livelihood diligently and responsibly on the one hand, and engaging meaningfully in Torah study on the other. This is what the Sages mean when they say: “The Torah could only be given to those who ate the manna.”⁸ This means that the Torah could only be entrusted to those who would devote to it the time and energy it justly requires, fully aware that their physical sustenance is provided for by Hashem. Thus, through counting the Omer each year and re-absorbing the message of the manna, we make ourselves ready to receive the Torah on Shavuos.

8 *Mechilta, parashas Beshalach.*