

## PARASHAT EMOR

### "From the Day Following Shabbat" (Vayikra 23:9-22)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

#### I. THE PROBLEM

"When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first sheaf of your harvest to the kohen. He shall elevate the sheaf before God by your will; the kohen shall elevate it on the day following the Shabbat... And from the day following the Shabbat, from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering, you shall count seven weeks. You must count until the day following the seventh week - fifty days, and then you shall bring an offering of new grain to God."

The day the Torah refers to as "the day following Shabbat" determines the scheduling of an entire array of mitzvot in the Jewish calendar. On that day itself, the "omer" grain offering is waved, accompanied by its sacrifice. This ends the period in which the new year's grain crop is prohibited, marks the beginning of the counting of the omer, and determines the date of the festival of Shavuot, which is observed on the fiftieth day thereafter.

As we know, Chazal (Menachot 65b) held a tradition that this ambiguous term refers to the sixteenth of Nissan, the "day following" the first day of Pesach, a tradition that formed the basis of a fundamental dispute between the rabbis and the heretical group of Boethusians towards the end of the Second Temple era. The latter group insisted that "Shabbat" in the verse be understood literally, as the seventh day of the week. They therefore claimed that the day to which the verse refers is the first Sunday after the first day of Pesach. As such, they always celebrated Shavuot, which occurs fifty

days after this day, on Sunday. The Karaites likewise adopted this view, which they maintain to this very day.

## II. VARIOUS UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE PESHAT

In light of the many far-fetched attempts to find a basis for interpreting "Shabbat" in this verse as "Yom Tov," we pose the following question: When Chazal established that "the day following the Shabbat" should be understood as the sixteenth of Nissan, what did they mean? Did they intend that the word "Shabbat" in this verse be given an unusual translation - the first day of Yom Tov, as opposed to what we generally call "Shabbat"? Or perhaps they meant that although the word "Shabbat" in the verse means what it says, nevertheless we must follow the halakha as established by the Oral Law, which mandates bringing the omer offering on the sixteenth of Nissan (regardless of which day of the week it is)?

Interestingly, the literature of commentaries differs drastically from the Gemara's treatment of this verse. While the later commentators seek to demonstrate that even on the straightforward level of interpretation "Shabbat" is to be understood as "Yom Tov," Chazal never pose such a claim. Surprisingly, not one of the eight proofs cited in the relevant passage in Masekhet Menachot addresses the issue of how we ought to interpret the word "Shabbat." What's more, the very first proof against the Boethusians, that of Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakai, accepts the definition of "Shabbat" in the verse as literally, "Shabbat." He merely posits that a later clause in the verse, "You shall count fifty days," must refer to a situation where the counting began on a day other than Sunday, thus informing us that sometimes the counting will begin on a Sunday (if Pesach falls on Shabbat) and sometimes it will begin on another day (if Pesach falls on any other day of the week).

It seems, then, that Chazal never felt the need to find a basis within the text to change the literal meaning of the word "Shabbat." This is one striking example of many when the Oral Law reverses the law that emerges from the straightforward meaning of the text, a phenomenon noted by the Vilna Gaon in his commentary to the beginning of Parashat Mishpatim (Aderet Eliyahu). He likens the simple meaning of the text to a stamp, which when pressed against some material produces an opposite image. The

Gaon concludes, "One must therefore know the straightforward meaning of the text, in order that he know the stamp." Only by properly understanding the original "image on the stamp" can one understand its reflection on the halakhic level.

Unique among the post-Chazal approaches to this verse is that of Rav Yehuda Halevi (Rihal) in his *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* (3:41). He concedes that "Shabbat" means "Shabbat," and the day spoken of in the verse is thus Sunday. However, the Torah merely presents this day as an example by which to demonstrate how to calculate the fifty-day period between the "omer" offering and the festival of Shavuot. Should the first day, upon which the "omer" offering is brought, occur on Sunday, then the fiftieth day, Shavuot ("the day following the seventh Shabbat"), will also occur on Sunday. The Torah presents this example so as to clarify how the counting must be conducted and the date of Shavuot determined, in order to avoid possible confusion. However, the Torah does not establish a specific date for the offering of the "omer." The only requirement is that it coincide with the beginning of the barley harvest. Then, seven weeks later, when the wheat harvest begins, we observe Shavuot.

All this is according to the simple meaning of the verse. However, the Halakha established a fixed day for the offering of the omer, namely, the second day of Pesach. This does not contradict the peshat, but neither is it necessitated by the peshat.

Rihal's thesis that the peshat of the Torah does not establish a fixed date for the bringing of the omer, but merely requires its coinciding with the beginning of the barley harvest, allows him to pose a convincing challenge to the approach of the Boethusians. Given that the fifty-day period comes to mark the passage of time from the beginning of the barley harvest to the onset of the wheat harvest, why would the day of the week bear any significance? Why would the Torah link these commemorations to one day of the week over any other? Rather, the Torah mandates the offering of the "omer" at the beginning of the wheat harvest, a day determined by the people themselves, after which point fifty days are counted, culminating with the celebration of Shavuot.

Although Rihal's approach adequately explains the term "the day following Shabbat" in the context of the counting of the omer, it does not explain its usage in the earlier

verse: "...you shall bring the first sheaf of your harvest to the kohen. He shall elevate the sheaf before God... the kohen shall elevate it on the day following Shabbat" (23:10-11). Here, there exists no potential ambiguity that necessitates an example; no confusion would have arisen if the Torah had written, "on the sixteenth day of Nissan." Nor can we say that the Torah utilizes this expression as a result of the forthcoming example, since to the contrary, the later verse is predicated on the chance instance of the sixteenth day falling on Sunday. Additionally, this verse clearly states imperatively and unconditionally that the kohen must conduct the "omer" ritual on "the day following Shabbat;" no possible flexibility is implied.

### III. A NEW SUGGESTION

The solution to this quandary may lie in one word in the aforementioned verse that hasn't earned sufficient attention in the commentaries: "He shall elevate the sheaf before God 'li-retzonkhem,' the kohen shall elevate it on the day following the Shabbat." This term, "li-retzonkhem," literally, "for your will," appears with reference to an individual offering a sacrifice four other times in Sefer Vayikra (1:3, 19:5, 22:19, 22:29). In all five instances, Targum Onkelos translates the term as "le-ra'ava lei" or "le-ra'ava lekhn," meaning that God will accept the individual's offering willingly. Several commentators have followed Onkelos' approach.

The Sifra and Talmud, however, explain the "will" in the verse as referring not to God's will, but to that of the individual. They explain that this expression teaches several halakhot regarding the intent of the person offering the sacrifice, all of which are indispensable for the korban's acceptance. Several commentators adopt this approach as well. Given the fact that this term modifies the individual (e.g. "li-retzonkhem" - for YOUR will, referring to the one bringing the sacrifice), this second interpretation better accommodates the simple reading of the text. Additionally, the Torah employs different expressions in reference to God's willing response to sacrifices (see Vayikra 22:21 and 1:4).

The usage of this expression in our verse, however, differs significantly from the other four instances. While the other four appearances involve individual, voluntary sacrifices, our context deals with a MANDATORY offering brought by the NATION as a whole. How can the Torah require that a mandatory korban be brought "by the will" of the entire nation? The Sifra explains this term as indicating that the

community at large is not to be coerced with regard to the "omer" sacrifice. The obvious question, however, is, to what kind of coercion does this refer? Only the representatives of the High Court were actively involved in this mitzva - whom would they have to coerce? Additionally, why would this sacrifice be singled out for such a halakha, more than any other obligatory or national offering?

According to Rihal's general approach, the explanation of the verse is clear. "By your will" refers to the one detail of this sacrifice that indeed depends upon the decision of the nation - its date. The nation determines when the barley harvest begins, and thus, by extension, when to bring the "omer" sacrifice. This interpretation yields the following reading of the verse: "He shall elevate the sheaf before God by your will," meaning, whenever you decide, so long as "the kohen shall elevate it on the day following the Shabbat." Which Shabbat it is that will precede the day of the "omer" depends entirely upon the will and decision of the people.

This reading of the verse may help us understand halakha's disregard of the requirement that the "omer" be brought "on the day following Shabbat." The condition that we bring the "omer" on Sunday applies only when the date depends upon the subjective determination of the people. However, once a permanent date for the korban was established (on the sixteenth of Nissan), the flexibility afforded by the term "by your will" no longer exists. Therefore, there was no longer any need for the restriction of "the day following Shabbat."

(A precedent for such a phenomenon, where the Torah establishes certain requirements only under certain conditions, may be the construction of the menorah. The requirement to include decorative balls and flowers in the menorah applies only to a golden menorah. The menorah may be fashioned from other metals, as well, in which case these ornaments are not required. See Menachot 28a.)

Alternatively, the Torah's requirement that the "omer" be offered on "the day following Shabbat" may mandate that the offering be brought on the day following a day when no work is performed. In other words, the interpretation of "Shabbat" is open-ended: it can mean either the seventh day of the week, or a day upon which we desist from work. Thus, "the day after Shabbat" is either Sunday or the day following

a Yom Tov. When the day of the "omer" is subject to flexibility, then the most reasonable day of cessation of work to determine the day of the "omer" is Shabbat, the most frequent day of rest. With the establishment of a permanent date for the "omer," the halakha determined that the day of rest to precede this day would be the first day of Pesach.

If so, then the conventional understanding that Chazal actually interpret the word "Shabbat" as "Yom Tov," is, in a certain sense, correct. The Torah here refers to a day upon which no work is performed, be it Shabbat or Yom Tov. In actuality, however, when the day of the "omer" depended upon the people's decision, it occurred on Sunday, whereas once a fixed date was established, it is brought on the day following Yom Tov.

(Translated by David Silverberg)

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