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Parashat Hashavua
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PARASHAT BAMIDBAR

The Omer, the Counting of the Omer, and the Festival of Shavuot

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The Counting of the *Omer*

The commandment of counting the *omer*, which we observe during this period of the year, is a peculiar one, and puzzling in its triviality. The required action consists of a technical, apparently meaningless utterance of the ordinal number of the day. Why does the Torah require such a technical act, and what significance can we attach to it?

We are all familiar with the usual explanation: the counting expresses our eager anticipation of the climactic conclusion of the process of leaving Egypt, to be experienced at Mount Sinai. The source of this explanation is to be found in Rambam's *Moreh Nevukhim* (III, 43):

"Shavuot is the day of the giving of the Torah. To give honor to that day, we count the days from the first festival [Pesach] until it, like one who is awaited by the most faithful of his loved ones, who counts the days and even the hours. And this is the reason for counting the *omer* from the day of our departure from Egypt until the day of the giving of the Torah – which was the intention and the purpose of the Exodus, as it is written, 'And I shall bring you to Me.'"

The Sefer Ha-chinukh likewise picks up on Rambam's theme:

"A fundamental reason for this commandment, on the literal level, is that the whole essence of Israel is the Torah, and it was for the sake of the Torah that the heavens and the earth were created, as it is written, 'Have I not created day and night...!' And this was the point and the reason for being redeemed and leaving Egypt – in order that they would receive the Torah at Sinai and fulfill it, as God said to Moshe: 'This will be for you the sign that I have sent you: when you take the nation from Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain.' What this verse means is: Your taking them out of Egypt will be for you a sign that you should serve God at this mountain – i.e., that you will receive the Torah, which is the great essence for the sake of which they are being redeemed, and it is the purpose of the good for them. And it is a great principle for them – beyond the freedom from slavery, and therefore God gives Moshe the departure from slavery as a sign for receiving the Torah, since that which is of secondary importance always serves as a sign for that

which is of greater importance. And for this reason, since this is the entire essence of Israel and for its sake they were redeemed and rose to all the greatness that they did, we are commanded to count from the day after the festival of Pesach until the day of the giving of the Torah, so as to demonstrate within ourselves the great desire for the day so lofty and so longed-for, as a slave seeks cover, always counting to see when the longed-for time will come and he will go free. For counting shows a person that all of his desire and aspiration is to reach that time." (commandment 306)

The same fundamental rationale underlies both the Rambam and the Sefer Ha-chinukh: counting expresses anticipation and eagerness for the climax and completion of the process of the Exodus, which will take place at Mount Sinai. The two explanations differ only in the nature of the process and its completion. Rambam speaks about the Exodus from Egypt towards an encounter and forging of a connection between *Am Yisrael* and God, while the Sefer Ha-chinukh emphasizes the acceptance of the Torah as the purpose of the Exodus.

However, even a cursory glance at the actual commandment in the Torah reveals that this whole explanation fails to match the language of the verses and their context. Let us review the language of the Torah concerning the *omer*, the counting of the *omer*, and the festival of Shavuot (*Vayikra* 23:9-21):

God spoke to Moshe, saying, Speak to Bnei Yisrael and say to them: When you come to the land which I give to you, and you **reap its harvest**, Then you shall bring an *omer* of the **first of your harvest** to the kohen, And he shall save the *omer* before God, to be accepted for you. On the day after the Shabbat the kohen shall wave it. And you shall offer, on the day of your waving of the *omer*, an unblemished lamb in its first year as a burnt sacrifice to God. And its meal offering shall be two tenth measures of fine flour... And you shall eat no bread or parched corn nor green ears, until that very day, until you have brought the offering to your God; it is an eternal statute throughout your generations, in all your dwellings. And you shall count for yourselves, from the day after the Shabbat, **from the day when you bring the *omer* for the wave offering**; seven complete weeks shall there be. Until the day after the seventh Shabbat, you shall count fifty days, And you shall offer a new meal offering to God. From your dwelling places you shall bring two loaves for waving, of two tenth measures. They shall be of fine flour, they shall be baked with leaven; they are **first fruits to God**. And you shall offer with the bread seven unblemished lambs of the first year, and one young ox and two rams shall be a burnt offering to God, with their meal offering and their drink offering, an offering made by fire, of sweet savor to God. And you shall sacrifice one kid goat as a sin offering. And two lambs of the first year for a sacrifice of peace-offering... And you shall proclaim on that very day; it shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall not perform any servile work. It is an eternal statute throughout your dwelling places, throughout your generations. (*Vayikra* 23:9-21)

It is quite clear that the counting of the *omer* is anchored in the agricultural aspect of the festivals, rather than the historical aspect. The Torah stipulates that when we begin harvesting in the land, an *omer* of the first of the harvest must be

brought as a wave offering; from that point seven weeks must be counted, and at the end of the counting two loaves must be brought as an offering of first fruits. This day (Shavuot) must be proclaimed as a holy convocation.

The counting of the *omer* is also mentioned in *Sefer Devarim* (16:9-10), and there too the beginning of the counting is "when the scythe first meets the standing grain" – i.e., from the beginning of the harvest.

The counting serves as a bridge between the harvest season (barley harvest) and the time that is right for bringing a first-fruit offering of bread – by which time wheat is already being harvested and consumed. The Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah are not even hinted at here. And so we come back to our question: what is the meaning and significance of this counting? What explanation can be given for the counting within the agricultural context?

Communal Sacrifices of Peace Offerings

Before seeking an agricultural explanation for the counting of the *omer*, let us note another difficulty which is similar in certain respects.

Along with the two loaves, on Shavuot we offer a number of other sacrifices, among them two lambs as a peace offering. These lambs are the sole instance of a communal peace offering. This uniqueness demands some explanation: what is it about Shavuot, among all the festivals, that gives it the unique distinction of a communal peace offering?

While halakha includes no other instance of a communal peace offering, the Torah does describe two occasions when such sacrifices were offered.

The first was at Mount Sinai. After Moshe descends from the mountain, having received the Ten Commandments and the judgments, and having conveyed God's words to the nation and written them down, he send the "young men" of Bnei Yisrael to sacrifice burnt offerings and peace offerings (*Shemot* 24:5). These are sacrificed, obviously, on behalf of the entire nation, and not as individual sacrifices by these youth. Thus, they were communal peace offerings.

The second occasion was on the eighth day of the inauguration of the *Mishkan*. There we read:

"And you shall speak to Bnei Yisrael, saying: Take... and an ox and a ram as peace offerings, to sacrifice before God... for on this day God will appear to you... And Moshe said: This is what God has commanded that you do, such that God's glory will be revealed to you." (*Vayikra* 9:3-6)

What is common to these two occasions is clear: in both cases, the communal peace offerings were sacrificed in the context of a public revelation of God's glory. Hence we might posit that the communal peace offering on Shavuot commemorates the festival as the day of the revelation of the Divine Presence, the revelation at Mount Sinai. However, we find ourselves once again facing the same problem. The entire commandment is couched in agricultural terms, with the communal peace

offering itself apparently an accompaniment to the two loaves, the "first fruit loaves," the first of the wheat harvest. Hence, we cannot explain the communal peace offering of Shavuot against the background of the revelation at Sinai.

How, then, do we explain the communal peace offering on Shavuot?

The Omer Sacrifice

Let us consider the *omer* itself.

Halakha stipulates that the *omer* is offered upon the altar, like the other meal offerings (*Menachot* 66a-67b). However, in our *parasha* the kohen merely waves the *omer*: "And he shall wave the *omer* before God...." Along with the waving of the *omer*, additional sacrifices are brought: "And you shall offer, on the day of your waving of the *omer*, an unblemished lamb... and its meal offering...." According to the verses here, the *omer* itself is not offered upon the altar. The Oral Law renders the *omer* subject to the laws of the "meal offering of the first fruits" (*Vayikra* 2:14-15) which is brought "in spring" (*Menachot* 68b; *Torat Kohanim parsheta* 13, 2-4), and thus the full *halakhic* description of the *omer* sacrifice is rounded out.

For the purposes of our discussion, we will obviously need to isolate the two issues – the discussion of the *omer* in *Parashat Emor*, and the meal offering of the first fruits as set forth in *Parashat Vayikra*. Each must be significant in its own right, and therefore we must examine each independently in order to understand its significance. Thereafter we can try to understand why halakha combines these two separate issues in a single practical act of bringing the *omer* sacrifice. In the context of the *omer* as a wave offering, we will also achieve a better understanding of the significance of counting the *omer* and of the two loaves.

Omer as a Wave Offering

In *Parashat Emor*, all that is done with the *omer* of the first of the harvest is an act of waving. What is the meaning of this act?

In order to understand the waving of the *omer*, we must first consider the significance of waving in general in the Torah. We shall not review here all the places in the Torah where waving is mentioned. However, an examination of those sources shows that waving involves something that cannot be an offering on the altar, but which we understand to be worthy of being offered. Since the sacrifice should, in principle, be offered upon the altar, but in practice it cannot be offered, therefore it is waved before God in an initial movement of sacrifice, thereby symbolizing its sacrifice. In some cases requiring waving, the sacrifice that cannot actually be offered is waved together with other things that are actually offered, so as to express the idea that it should all properly have been offered upon the altar.

The following are some examples of this phenomenon:

The breast of the peace offering represents the owner's share of the offering to God (*Vayikra* 7:29-30), but in practice it is given to the kohen (31); for this reason it is waved together with the *imurim* (the parts of the carcass that are placed upon the

altar). The same explanation applies to the heave shoulder of the peace offering (*Vayikra* 10:14-15). The idea is spelled out almost explicitly in *Vayikra* 10:15 – "They shall bring the heave shoulder and the breast for waving along with the offering made by fire of the fat, to wave it as a wave offering before God, and it shall be for you and for your sons with you, as a portion forever, as God has commanded."

As part of the purification for a *metzora*, the afflicted person brings, along with his offerings, a *log* of oil, which should, in principle, be offered together with his guilt offering (*Vayikra* 14:10-12): "And on the eighth day he shall take two unblemished lambs and one unblemished ewe in its first year... and one *log* of oil... and the kohen shall take the one lamb and offer it as a guilt offering, and the *log* of oil..." But oil is not offered in its own right upon the altar; it serves here for the continuation of the purification process, to be applied to the *metzora* himself. Hence, it is not actually offered, but rather "he shall wave them as a wave offering before God."

An example that is related to our discussion concerns the two loaves offered on Shavuot. These two loaves are waved together with the lambs of the festival (which are actually offered upon the altar), apparently because, in principle, they are a "new meal offering to God" (*Vayikra* 23:16). However, leaven is not offered upon the altar (*Vayikra* 2:11 – "Any meal offering that you offer to God shall not be prepared with leaven").^{1[1]}

Returning to our discussion – the *omer*, in our *parasha*, is waved but not offered. If our explanation for waving is correct, then we must conclude that the *omer*, on some level, should be offered but in practice it is not.

In 23:14, the *omer* is referred to (along with the sacrifices that are brought with it) as "a sacrifice to your God." The *omer*, then, is truly a sacrifice, at least in principle. So why is it not actually offered? Why does the Torah suffice with waving it before God?

From other sources we saw that the act of waving substitutes for actual offering where there is some technical obstacle to offering on the altar: the prohibition of offering leaven, the desire to give the portion to the kohen, etc. But such considerations are not relevant here. Indeed, halakha sets down that in fact the *omer* is offered, such that there is clearly no technical problem. Once again, then, our question: why does the Torah, in *Parashat Emor*, command merely that the *omer* be waved, rather than offered up?

Faith and Blessing

It seems that the reason for the *omer* not being offered is that the harvest is not yet complete. The wheat harvest will come only in another seven weeks' time, and seemingly even the barley is not entirely ripe (we shall not analyze in detail here the meaning of the phrase "in spring"). The *omer* and the two loaves are the two ends of the same process – the harvest – and the *omer* is not sacrificed because the process is

^{1[1]} For another prime example, see *Bamidbar* 8:5-22.

not yet complete. Only at the end of the process will the "first fruit loaves" be brought (and these will not be offered because of the technical prohibition of leaven).

It seems that the two extremities of the process may be viewed in this light. The waving of the *omer* expresses our acknowledgment that the harvest is a gift of God. But the harvest has not yet been given to man, and therefore thanks and praise are not yet offered. We express our recognition of the fact that the harvest that is destined to be reaped is from God.

The two loaves, in contrast, come at the end of the process, when a person already sees God's blessing of the fields with his own eyes. Then he is able to come and praise and thank God for feeding and sustaining him.

This two-step acknowledgement of God resembles the blessings recited before and after eating. We cannot thank and praise God before eating, since we have not yet experienced the sustenance and pleasure that we wish to acknowledge. At the same time, we cannot enjoy the pleasures of this world without blessing God. Therefore we first recite a brief blessing of acknowledgment, thereby consciously distancing ourselves from any hint of appropriating what God has created and given. After we have eaten, we praise and thank God Who nourishes us in practice.

Since the process here is a lengthy one which is expressed more fully at the end, we start it by expressing an elementary recognition of the fact that the offering of the harvest should properly be sacrificed to God, but it is not sacrificed in practice. The actual sacrifice is left to the time when God's blessing is clearly revealed to us; then we can give wholehearted praise and thanks.

Now the significance of the counting becomes clearer. The counting takes place throughout the period of the harvest, representing an existential continuation of the *omer* itself, from which we count. We continue to express our faith and recognition that the harvest comes from God. This ongoing process of faith in God's blessing in the harvest is what ultimately leads to God blessing the harvest, and we arrive at the stage where we may give praise and thanks for it.^{2[2]} The seemingly technical act of counting is an awesome expression of our ability to give acknowledgment and have faith even when we are not yet able to actually see the blessing.

Now we are also able to explain the communal peace offering of Shavuot. Following this period of seven weeks, during which time a Jew has been hoping to see God's blessing in the field, he finally merits to see the blessing. God's Presence in the world is revealed here through the blessing of the land, through the fulfillment of man's most basic needs. And just as in the wake of such powerful revelations of God's Presence as Sinai and the eighth day of the inauguration of the *Mishkan*, a closeness with God was created such that *Am Yisrael* was able to sit with God and eat together, as it were, at the same table, so too on the more earthly level of the revelation of God's hand in sustaining *Am Yisrael* in their land.

Agriculture and History

^{2[2]} cf. Seforno on verse 10.

Let us now return to Rambam's explanation for the counting of the *omer*. We recall that Rambam describes the process of counting as an expression of longing for and anticipation of an encounter with God – "And I shall bring you to Me." Let us examine a different law (Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, 8:1-2) where Rambam describes the relationship between the Exodus and the revelation at Sinai:

"The revelation at Sinai itself was proof of his prophecy, that it was true and faultless, as it is written: 'Behold, I come to you in the thickness of the cloud in order that the nation will listen when I speak with you, and will believe in you, too, forever.' We deduce from this that until then they did not believe in him with a faith that would last forever; rather, their faith was one accompanied by thoughts and doubts... And for this reason God said to him, at the beginning of his prophecy, when He gave him the signs to perform in Egypt, that 'they will listen to you.' Moshe Rabbeinu knew that a person who believes on the basis of signs has some fault in his heart, and he thinks and doubts. Therefore he was discouraged from going, and said, 'They will not listen to me' – until God told him that these signs were meant [to have their effect] only until they would leave Egypt. After they left, and would stand at this mountain, any doubt that they may entertain would leave them, 'for I give you here a sign that they may know that I truly sent you, from the beginning, and no doubt would remain in their heart.' And that is the meaning of the verse, 'This will be the sign for you that I have sent you: when you take the nation out of Egypt, they will serve God upon this mountain.'"^{3[3]}

The nation of Israel left Egypt with faith in God and in Moshe, but only when they reached Sinai were they actually able to witness God's revelation. Thus, the historical process of Israel's journey towards the revelation at Sinai parallels, on the existential level, their agricultural experience in the land, anticipating and hoping for tangible justification for their faith in God, when they will be able to see, with their own eyes, His blessing in the fields. In this sense, the counting of the *omer* is indeed similar to the process linking the Exodus from Egypt with the revelation at Sinai, and the communal peace offerings of Shavuot parallel those offered at Sinai.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

^{3[3]} It is interesting to note that the verse upon which Rambam bases his explanation here – "This will be the sign for you..." – is the same one that the Sefer Ha-chinukh adopts, as quoted above, but he explains the verse in an entirely different way.

