

This week's *Parashah* presents the laws of the *Mo'adim* / festivals. The introductory verse (23:2) states: "Speak to *Bnei Yisrael* and say to them, '*Hashem's* appointed festivals that you are to designate as holy convocations -- these are My appointed festivals.'" Immediately after that introduction, the Torah discusses *Shabbat* before moving on to *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur* and *Sukkot*.

R' Yitzchak Kossowsky z"l (1877-1951; rabbi in Johannesburg, South Africa) writes: The *Kedushah* / sanctity of *Shabbat* derives from Creation; it is the day when G-d "rested" after finishing His "work" of the preceding six days. In contrast, the *Kedushah* of the *Mo'adim* seemingly is man-made. Specifically, the *Sanhedrin* determines what day will be *Rosh Chodesh* based on witnesses' observations of the new moon; then the festivals follow on the appropriate day of the month. If the *Sanhedrin* would not declare the new moon, the festivals would never occur. [Before the *Sanhedrin* disbanded approximately 1,700 years ago due to Roman persecution, it created a formula for "scheduling" every future *Rosh Chodesh* and festival.]

R' Kossowsky continues: The *Gemara* derives from verses that, even if the *Sanhedrin* would err in its calculations or in its questioning of the witnesses, the Torah would recognize the day designated by the *Sanhedrin* as *Rosh Chodesh*. How can this be? For instance, if the Torah says that *Yom Kippur* should be observed on the tenth of the month, how can we observe it on a day that, objectively, is not the tenth. (Effectively, we are forcing G-d to judge us on a day that is not really *Yom Kippur*!)

The answer, R' Kossowsky writes, is that the festivals are sanctified by the Jewish People, and the Jewish People have been sanctified by *Hashem*. Thus, the *Kedushah* of the *Mo'adim* is not man-made after all; rather, it is an extension of G-d's sanctification of the Jewish People. As such, says the verse, "These are My appointed festivals." Whatever day the *Sanhedrin* designates as a festival is also G-d's festival. (*Shabbat U'Mo'ed*).

Pirkei Avot

"Who is rich? One who is happy with his portion." (Chapter 4)

Midrash Tanna D'vei Eliyahu (1:7) states: "*Hashem* is rich and happy with his portion."

R' Chaim Dov Stark *shlita* (*Mashgiach Ruchani* of Yeshiva Aderes Ha'Torah in Yerushalayim) writes: It is related that R' Chaim of Volozhin z"l (1749-1821; founder of the first *Yeshiva* as we know them today) asked R' Eliyahu z"l (1720-1797; the *Vilna Gaon*) what it means that *Hashem* is "happy with his portion." After all, *Hashem* has everything! (A person who lacks something can decide to be happy with what he has, but *Hashem* lacks nothing.)

The *Vilna Gaon* answered: *Hashem's* "portion" is the Jewish People, as we read (*Devarim* 32:9), "For *Hashem's* portion is His people." The *Midrash* is teaching that *Hashem* is happy with His portion -- with us -- no matter what our national spiritual state is. Even in the later generations of history, when the spiritual level of the Jewish People is frighteningly lower than it once was, *Hashem* is happy with us, His chosen people.

R' Stark continues: How fortunate we are that we are *Hashem's* portion and that He is happy with us. Even in the dark times that our Sages foretold will precede days of *Mashiach*, the Jewish People continues to shine. This, writes R' Yitzchak Isaac Chaver z"l (1789-1852; rabbi of Suvalk, Lithuania), is what the *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* means when it says that Adam Ha'Rishon's heel shines like the sun. The heel -- the end, the lowest point -- nevertheless shines brilliantly.

Indeed, R' Stark writes, it could be said that the present generation shines brighter than earlier generations. This is because, as R' Yitzchak Luria z"l ("the *Arizal*"; 1534-1572) teaches, *Hashem* measures a person by the challenges he overcomes, not by an objective standard that compares him to earlier generations. (*Ha'keter Ve'ha'kavod* p.7)

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A related thought:

Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of students, and they all died in one period because they did not behave with respect toward one another. It was taught: They all died between Pesach and Shavuot. (Yevamot 62b)

R' David Cohen *shlita* (*Rosh Yeshiva* of the Chevron Yeshiva in Yerushalayim) asks: Oral tradition records that the passing of Rabbi Akiva's students ceased on *Lag Ba'omer*. Yet, the *Gemara* says they died "between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*" rather than "between *Pesach* and *Lag Ba'Omer*." Apparently, there is some connection between the passing of Rabbi Akiva's students and the upcoming holiday of *Shavuot*. What is that connection?

R' Cohen answers: R' Yehuda Loewe *z"l* (*Maharal* of Prague; died 1609) explains (*Netivot Olam: Torah* ch.12) that the period between *Pesach* and *Shavuot* highlights the concept of *Kavod Ha'Torah* / the honor due to the Torah. Specifically, our Sages say that there are 49 levels of "Gates of Understanding" that a person can attain; likewise, there are 49 days of the *Omer*. R' Akiva's students did not show *Kavod Ha'Torah* -- if they had, they would have shown respect to their fellow scholars. Therefore, they died during this period.

R' Cohen elaborates: The *Gemara* (*Berachot* 63b) relates that, when the Sages relocated to the town of Yavneh after the destruction of the Second *Bet Hamikdash*, several of the Sages delivered *Derashot* / sermons. Surely, writes R' Cohen, they devoted their talks at that turning point in Jewish history to topics they saw as fundamental to the Jewish People's future. Notably, the first speaker, Rabbi Yehuda, spoke about *Kavod Ha'Torah*.

What did Rabbi Yehuda say about that subject? The *Gemara* relates that he spoke in praise of those who travel from town to town or country to country in their great thirst for additional Torah knowledge. Also, he spoke in praise of those to whom Torah is "new" every day, as if *Hashem* has just given it. These two ideas are intertwined, R' Cohen notes, for the greater one's thirst for Torah knowledge, the more that knowledge will stay fresh and not become stale. Together, they reflect the honor that the knowledge-seeker gives to the Torah.

In this light, we can understand the connection between *Kavod Ha'Torah* and the *Omer* period. The anonymous 13th century work *Sefer Ha'chinuch* explains that counting the *Omer* reflects our yearning to receive the Torah. As noted above, such yearning is a prime expression of *Kavod Ha'Torah*.

Still, what is the connection between *Kavod Ha'Torah* and honoring one's fellow scholars? R' Cohen explains: The propagation and transmission of Torah knowledge from generation to generation -- especially of the Oral Law, which originally was not recorded in books -- depends on mutual respect between scholars. This, writes R' Cohen, is what the *Gemara* (*Makkot* 22b) alludes to when it criticizes "foolish people who stand up when a Torah scroll is carried nearby, but not when a Torah scholar walks nearby." A Torah scholar who carries the Torah within him is himself a "Torah scroll." Thus, respect for Torah scholars is a necessary complement to -- indeed, equivalent to -- *Kavod Ha'Torah*.

(*Ma'amar David* p.628)

"You shall count for yourselves -- from the morrow of the day of rest, from the day when you bring the *Omer* of the waving -- seven weeks, they shall be complete." (23:15)

Rashi z"l explains: "From the morrow of the day of rest" -- *i.e.*, from the day after the first day of the *Pesach* festival. [Until here from *Rashi*]

R' Yitzchak Arieli *z"l* (1896-1974; co-founder and *Mashgiach Ruchani* of Yeshivat Merkaz Harav; author of *Enayim La'mishpat*) writes: To continue the flow of holiness from the wondrous *Seder* night, we begin counting the *Omer* on the following night, expressing our strong yearning to receive the Torah 49 days later, on *Shavuot*. Notably, counting the *Omer* is not a communal obligation, it is a personal one. This reminds us that the period of *Sefirah* / counting is a time for each and every individual to personally prepare to receive the Torah.

R' Arieli asks: How does one prepare to receive the Torah? *Pirkei Avot* (Ch.6) teaches: "Every day, a *Bat Kol* / Heavenly voice emanates from Mount Sinai, saying, 'Woe to the world due to the Torah's shame'." Our Sages are teaching: Just as the world is created anew every day, as we say in our prayers, so the Torah needs to be accepted anew every day. This is alluded to several times in the Torah; for example, in a number of verses that speak of the Giving of the Torah in present tense. Any day on which we do not re-accept the Torah, we shame the Torah. Opening up one's "ears" to hear this Heavenly message is one way we prepare to receive the Torah.

R' Arieli writes further: Another *Bat Kol* mentioned in the *Gemara* is the one that says: "The entire world is sustained in the merit of My son Chanina [ben Dosa, a Sage of the *Mishnah*], while Chanina is satisfied with a small measure of carob fruit." The purpose of this *Bat Kol* is to teach us to appreciate and respect Torah scholars, in whose merit the world is sustained. This, too, is an essential aspect of preparing to receive the Torah.

R' Arieli adds: We do not count the days remaining until *Shavuot*. Rather, we count the days that have passed, starting with the second day of *Pesach*, the day the *Omer* sacrifice was brought. The *Omer* sacrifice is to be brought from barley, an inferior grain fed to animals. By counting the days since the *Omer*, we are counting the days since we left slavery -- both the slavery in Egypt and our enslavement to animalistic tendencies. At the end of the *Omer*, on *Shavuot*, an offering is to be brought from wheat, the food of mankind, reflecting our new, elevated status. For the same reason, the *Omer* must be counted with one's speech, not merely in one's head -- intelligent speech being what distinguishes man from animals. Until we reach *Shavuot*, however, we count the days that have passed since the *Omer*, because every day on which we move farther from lowliness is a day that we come closer to greatness.

(*Haggadah Shel Pesach Shirat Ha'geulah* p.108-109)