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TOURO TORAH

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Not All *Taharah* is Created Equal

By Chedva Silver

The *mitzvah* given in the *Torah* to count *Sefiras HaOmer* (*Vayikra* 23:15) states that one should count “*sheva shabbasos*,” which means “seven weeks.” Seven weeks of seven days each add up to a total of forty-nine days. Yet, in the next *passuk*, there seems to be a contradiction when it says, “*Tisperu chamishim yom*” - “You should count fifty days.” Is one supposed to count forty-nine days or fifty?

When *Benei Yisrael* came out of *Mitzrayim*, they were at the forty-ninth level of *tumah* (impurity). The Maharal explains why *Hashem* had to take them out when He did. Had they remained longer, they might have sunk down to the fiftieth and final level of *tumah*. In that case, there would have been no turning back. *Benei Yisrael* would have been unable to pull themselves out of that level of depravity. Even though *Hashem* can do anything, the only way for Him to remove them from the fiftieth level of *tumah*, would be to start from scratch. *Benei Yisrael* would no longer have been the people who descended from the *Avos*. The bond with their illustrious forefathers would

have to be severed, and they would have been transformed into a completely new people. In order to remain the children of the *Avos*, *Hashem* had to take them out before they reached that point.

Essentially, the same, or rather the opposite, is true for reaching the highest level of *taharah* (purity). The *Ramban*, in his introduction to his commentary on the *Torah*, writes that no human can reach the highest level of *taharah*. This level is *da'as elyon* and would therefore require an understanding of *Hashem* and His *da'as* that is impossible for a human being to attain. A human can only work on himself to the degree that he can reach the forty-ninth level of *taharah*. This is because forty-nine, seven groups of seven, is the completion of the number seven, the representation of the natural world. All one can do is put in his effort in preparation to receive the most *tahor* (pure) thing of all, the *Torah*, show *Hashem* how hard working he is, and count as far as he is able—until forty-nine. The Shinover Rebbe says that at that point, when *Hashem* sees how far one has brought himself, how much he so desperately

“ *When Hashem sees how far one has brought himself, how much he so desperately wants to reach the peak, He carries the individual all the way to the fiftieth level Himself. ”*

– Chedva Silver

wants to reach the peak, He carries the individual all the way to the fiftieth level Himself so that he is prepared to receive the *Torah* on *Shavuos*.

There is a well-known song that speaks of *taharah*, and appropriately enough, it is Rabbi Akiva who teaches us the lesson.

אמר רבי אקיבא: אשריכם ישראל, לפני מי אתם מטהרים ומי מטהר אתכם, אביכם שבשמים.

Rabbi Akiva says: Praiseworthy are you Israel, before Whom will you be purified and Who purifies you? Your Father in Heaven.

The Chasam Sofer explains this statement as follows. Rabbi Akiva is describing how the process of *taharah* works. The word "*mi*" (who) has a *gematria* of fifty. "*Lifnei mi*," before *Benei Yisrael* reach the fiftieth level of *tumah*, *atem metaherim*, they can purify themselves. But "*umi*," once they are at the brink of the fiftieth level, "*avichem shebashamayim*," it is *Hashem* who has to purify them.

There is an account in the *Gemara (Hagigah 14b)* of four *Torah* sages who entered *pardes*, the deepest levels of the *Torah*. Rabbi Akiva was the only one of the four to come out unharmed. He was the only person ever to reach the fiftieth level of *taharah*. With this in mind, it is appropriate that *Sefiras HaOmer*, the time when one strives to reach the highest level he is capable of, is associated with Rabbi Akiva and his students. Rabbi Akiva was the one to teach this lesson that one can elevate himself from anything, even from the fiftieth level of *tumah*.

No matter where we may stand this *Shavuos*, let us always keep these lessons in mind. Rabbi Akiva's words remind us that it is never too late to change and become our best selves, no matter how far we have fallen. As long as we are trying our very best, *Hashem* sees our efforts. He will carry us through to the finish line, so that we can experience true *taharah* with the receiving of the *Torah*.

Based on a shiur by Rabbi Eytan Feiner.

"It is never too late to change and become our best selves, no matter how far we have fallen."

–Chedva Silver

You Won't Be-Leaf This!

By Chaya Ruchy Katz

Why is the *parashah* before *Shavuos* always *Bamidbar*? Anyone who has friends or family in Israel may have noticed an interesting phenomenon: the *parashah* of the week in *Chutz La'Aretz* is one "behind" the *parashah* in Israel. This happened as a result of the second day of *Pesach* falling out on *Shabbos* this year, which moved the reading of *Parshas Shemini* to the following week - but only in *Chutz La'Aretz*. In Israel, where *Yom Tov* is only one day, *Parshas Shemini* was read on the *Shabbos* right after *Pesach*, thereby putting Israel one week "ahead" of everywhere else. Eventually, the

parshiyos realign. How? Since there is a *minhag* to read *Parshas Bamidbar* on the *Shabbos* before *Shavuos*, those of us living in exile “double up” the week before *Bamidbar*, reading *Behar-Bechukosai* together, so that *Parshas Bamidbar* is read before *Shavuos*. During that *Shabbos* in Israel, only *Bechukosai* will be read. This *minhag* ensures that the gap between Israel and the rest of the world will never become more than a *parashah* or two.

However, the primary reason for the *minhag* is found in the *Gemara*, Tractate *Megillah 31b*. There, the *Gemara* explains that *Parshas Bechukosai* should be read before *Shavuos* because *Shavuos* is a “*Rosh Hashana*” on which *Hashem* determines the success of the year’s fruit harvest. Since *Parshas Bechukosai* also has the *Tokhachah* (rebuke) in it, and Chazal teach that we should read the *tokhachah* before *Rosh Hashanah*, we read *Bechukosai* before *Shavuos* so that “the year’s curses end as the year ends.” *Tosafos* adds that in order not to enter *Shavuos* with the curses on our minds, we separate them by one week when we read *Parshas Bamidbar*.

“ *In order not to enter Shavuos with the curses on our minds, we separate them by one week. ”*

- Chaya Ruchy Katz

There are two classic explanations that are given as to why *Shavuos* is the day when *Hashem* determines the fruit harvest. Rav Tzadok Hakohen from Lublin explains that before Adam sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, he was surrounded by abundant fruit trees that had been planted by *Hashem*. After the sin, he was cursed that he would have to work the ground to earn his food. When the Jewish People received the *Torah*, they temporarily returned to the spiritual level that Adam had before his sin. The proof of this is the fact that they were given food directly from *Hashem* again with the manna. Thus, *Shavuos* is a propitious time to judge the fruit harvest.



The second explanation is found in a *sefer* called *Toras Avos* by Rav Moshe of Kobrin. Rav Moshe points out that the *Torah* in *Devarim 20:19* refers to man as an “*eitz ha’sadeh*” (tree of the field). Man is judged for the fruit harvest on *Shavuos* based on how he accepts the *Torah* on that day. The benefits gleaned from one’s actions are often called the “fruit of one’s labor.” Therefore, it is quite understandable how the success of one’s produce is so closely tied with the quality of one’s behavior.

Perhaps we can now understand why we do not want to enter *Shavuos* with curses on our minds. In doing so, we are asserting an optimistic belief in our fellow Jews that the judgement will be favorable and blessed due to our productive, moral and *Torah*-guided actions. The message we are sending is that one should not waste energy worrying about whether curses will be pronounced. This is comparable to a college student who is fretting about her exam grade a week before she even receives it. It is illogical to do so! If the grade or judgement turns out to be good, then all that sweat will have been in vain. And if it turns out to be bad, the worrying did not help improve the situation at all. Perhaps *Chazal* instituted this *minhag* to instill in us the *middah* of always looking for the positive. Enjoy a bountiful *Yom Tov*!

“ *The message we are sending is that one should not waste energy worrying about whether curses will be pronounced. ”*

- Chaya Ruchy Katz

Torah: A Package Deal

By Sarah Baila Lederman

It is 6 Sivan 2448, and the Jewish people, after traveling in the desert for seven weeks, have arrived at *Har Sinai*. The excitement in the air is palpable as they are finally about to receive the most perfect, precious gift from *Hashem*: the *Torah*. *Hashem* is about to give the Ten Commandments, and so the *passuk* in *Shemos* 20:1 begins: "And *Hashem* spoke all of these words, saying."

The word "all" appears to be unnecessary, for it would seem that the *passuk* could have conveyed the same meaning had it simply said "And *Hashem* spoke these words, saying..." However, we know that the *Torah* is perfect and does not have any extra words. Every word and letter is there to teach us something. In this case, what can we take away from the *Torah's* emphasis that every single word of the Ten Commandments, which can be categorized to include every *mitzvah* in the *Torah*, was given over to us by *Hashem* Himself?

The answer is intrinsically connected to human nature and our struggle against the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). For each one of us, there are certain *mitzvos* that are harder to connect with than others. *Hashem* created us this way. After all, if it was easy for us to keep the entire *Torah*, we would have no room to grow. That would defeat the purpose of our existence as imperfect humans who need to work towards perfecting ourselves.

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch writes concerning this *passuk* that many people want to accept only the parts of the *Torah* that resonate with them and falsely believe that the other parts are unimportant. This line of thinking can lead a person to ignore *mitzvos* that he finds more challenging. Rav Leff has spoken of the inherent dangers associated with such behavior. It is akin to treading on a slippery slope that has deleterious effects including harming one's relationships with others. Behaving in this way leads one to rationalize that others who are keeping *mitzvos* that he doesn't understand or doesn't want to keep must be crazy or fanatical.

Therefore, the *Torah* emphasizes that *Hashem* spoke to us **all** of the commandments. It impresses upon us that all *mitzvos*, including the ones that we don't appreciate as much or find difficult, are crucial. All *mitzvos* help us to fulfill our mission in this world and shape us into the greatest, most G-dly people we can become.

Based on The Collected Writings, Volume I by Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsh.



~Touro Torah~

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