

## **Emor 5780, Rabbi James Proops**

As we reach the middle of the month of Iyar we are now over half way through *Sefirat HaOmer*, the counting of each of the forty-nine days between Pesach and Shavuot, marking the transition between leaving Egypt and receiving the *Torah* at *Har Sinai*. The concept of counting the days between these two events is a unique and unusual *mitzvah*, and certainly begs the question as to what is the rationale behind this curious obligation?

The Sefer HaChinuch writes in *mitzvah* 306, that *Bnei Yisrael* were taken out from Egypt for the sole purpose of receiving the *Torah*. If this is indeed the case, why did Hashem not give them the *Torah* immediately? Why was it necessary to wait a full forty-nine days?

*Bnei Yisrael*, when living in Egypt had been greatly affected and deeply contaminated by the immoral practices of those who had enslaved them. Two hundred and ten years of spiritual pollution had left an indelible stain upon the very being of the Jewish population. Upon leaving Egypt, *Bnei Yisrael* were, so to speak, finally able to breathe 'clean air', free from the overarching influence of idolatry, immorality and persecution. Nevertheless, their spiritual health remained in a critical state of uncertainty, tainted with the contamination of *Mitzrayim*. It would not be until they cleansed themselves and refined their spiritual well-being, that they would be able to merit to receive the holy *Torah*. This thorough and far reaching cleansing process was achieved over the forty-nine days following the exodus from Egypt..

A common consequence of having suffered through a serious illness is that one's immune system has been weakened and they are therefore in danger of being more susceptible to further health issues. Upon recovery therefore, they must secure themselves in a germ-free environment allowing them to stay safe and strengthen their immune system before once again venturing outside. A concerted effort must be made to avoid contact and rebuild.

Similarly if we wish to strengthen and rebuild areas of our character, work on our actions and behaviours or bolster our inner spirituality, a concerted effort must be undertaken. We must not only remove ourselves from the negative influences which contributed to our failings, but we must actively attempt to bolster ourselves in the areas of life in which we need to focus.

It was for this purpose that the Jews were given forty-nine days of preparation. These were days of introspection, of self-refinement. Each week they perfected one of seven

traits, the seven "*sefirot*", that would enable them to reach the requisite level. Each day, they would perfect one aspect of each trait, slowly but surely climbing the ladder of potential. By the fiftieth day, *Shavuot*, they were ready to receive the Torah. Through these 49 days they were able to rid themselves completely of the contamination of Egypt.

It is therefore in this week's *parasha* that we read, "You should count for yourselves" (Vayikra 23:15)", about which is written "for your own purification" (Zohar Vayikra 97b). The counting of the days of the *Omer*, serves the dual purpose of isolating away from the influence of Egypt while at the same time building towards unprecedented growth.

The question is often asked, regarding *Sefirat HaOmer*, 'why do we count up rather than count down?'. When a date is greatly anticipated we count down the remaining days one by one, crossing them off the calendar. Yet, regarding *Sefirat HaOmer* we are instructed to count up towards the fiftieth day. Given our explanation above we can understand that the period of *Sefirat HaOmer* is not merely a time of anticipation, but rather it is a time of preparation. Every day we climb ever higher toward spirituality. Every day we imbue greater levels of purity and sanctity, illustrated by counting up. With every day that passes we are not only closer to receiving the Torah, but another opportunity for growth and improvement is over. Each night when we count the new day, we must ask ourselves if we truly made the most of the day which has passed. In this way the counting itself serves as a crucial tool in the journey of spiritual development.

While we still don't know when the current period of isolation and quarantine will be over, there is certainly a great deal of talk and expectation that the 'beginning of the end' is in sight. With this comes an excitement and anticipation for when 'normal' life can resume as we begin to count down the remaining days and weeks. That also means, however, that all the extra opportunities for *chesed*, for spending time with our immediate family and the extended freedom for self reflection will also soon be over. With every day that passes we are closer to emerging from our isolation but when we do, will we be stronger, more refined and a better person than we were before. It is not too late to change our attitude to emerging from quarantine from that of 'counting down' to one of 'counting up'. While yes there should be a feeling of anticipation, we must ensure that there is also a feeling of preparation.

As we prepare to celebrate *Shavuot* and the receiving of the Torah, we must also prepare for life after isolation. There is no doubt that certain areas of life will be different, such as people will be more cautious of physical contact and greater emphasis will be placed on regular hand washing, sanitizing and cleanliness. However we must also

make the time now to reflect on how we will ensure that the valuable lessons learnt from this time at home will be carried into our post-isolation lives.