

The Omer: Preventing Complacency & Negativity

Bechukotai 5779

I.

In *The Holy Bible: Abridged Beyond the Point of Usefulness*, comedian Zach Weinersmith does exactly what he promises. *Sefer Bereishit* is abridged to “God made everything, but humans keep [messing] it up; some Jews move to Egypt, which seemed like a good idea at the time,” while *Sefer Shemot* is simply “Pharaoh tried to kill the Hebrews, but he blew it, so they left, and then everyone accidentally worshipped a cow.” And while he is reductive to a fault – and that’s his point – we are often guilty of not being much better ourselves.

How many of us simply know *Parashat Vayera* as “the *Akeidah*” or *Parashat Yitro* as “that one with the Ten Commandments?” And, when it comes to *Parashat Bechukotai* that we read this morning, how many of us reduce it to simply “that one with the *tokhacha*, the curses?” It’s something I’m often guilty of, and I’d guess I’m not the only one. But this attitude is the very complaint of Ibn Ezra, the great 12th-century Spanish commentator:

וריקי מוח אמרו, כי הקללות רבות מהברכות, ולא אמרו אמת. רק נאמרו הברכות כלל, ונאמרו בקללות פרטים לירא ולהפחיד השומעים. והמסתכל היטיב יתברר לו דברי:

The empty-headed say that there are more curses than blessings. However, they do not speak the truth. What Scripture does is to speak of the blessings in general terms, while it lists the curses in detail in order to frighten and scare the listeners. What I say will be clear to the one who reads the text carefully. (Ibn Ezra, Lev. 26:13)

Despite the greater number of *berakhot* mentioned in *Bechukotai*, we are drawn to the curses, despite them being fewer in number. And, I think that Ibn Ezra’s frustration hits at a deeper truth: we pay greater attention to the negative things in our life than the positives. It’s not necessarily a problem, in fact it’s very often a good thing. As the evolutionary psychologist Robert Kurzban argues in his 2010 book *Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite* addressing the “hedonic treadmill” – that, following moments of major success or frustration we very quickly return to a base-level of happiness and fulfillment – in other words, we are constantly moving our own goalposts further away:

If you imagine ... two different mind designs – one complacent, in which once a goal is reached people rest on their laurels and whistle a happy tune all day – and one mind design that is never quite satisfied, in which each victory motivates further achievement – it's easy to see that the second one, while being less fun, would do more useful things.

But, while our constant search to be better drives us and society as a whole, it also easily opens a door to disappointment and dissatisfaction. Because, if we're constantly thinking about the person we can be and yet are not, we might fail to feel sufficiently proud about what we have already achieved. To think of a simple example: if your goal is to lose 20lbs over the next six months, and you find yourself 10lbs lighter a few months from now, you can either celebrate what you've achieved or be frustrated by how much you still have to go. Without the latter you won't make the push to lose what you need – and that's not good – but without the former you'll be dissatisfied with something you shouldn't be, and that's a problem.

II.

And I think there is no greater teacher of this lesson than the *omer*, specifically the central question about what we are doing. There is a well-known halakhah that if you forget to count for just one night of the 49 you can no longer make the *berakhah*. What's striking is this is the minority opinion! The vast majority of halakhic authorities disagree with this view! It comes from *Halakhot Gedolot*, a book of Jewish law from the times of the Geonim. As quoted by *Tosafot* (*Men. 66a*):

שׂאם יפסיק יום אחד ולא ספר – שוב אינו סופר משום דביעא תמימות.

If one interrupted one day and did not count, afterwards he does not count, because we require complete weeks.

But, as *Tosafot* declares following this:

ותימה גדולה הוא ולא יתכן.

This is astounding and cannot be correct.

At the heart of this dispute is a debate over whether the *omer* is one giant *mitzvah* – in which, each day, we chip away at it a bit more – and is only fulfilled at its completion, or whether each day is an independent *mitzvah*. *Halakhot Gedolot* thinks the former: if you can't count the complete *omer* the *mitzvah* is over. *Tosafot*, in contrast, sees each day as its own *mitzvah*.

And this is the very question we confront in our lives. Is minimal improvement in and of itself worthwhile, or only when we achieve the final goal? Is each pound lost worthy of celebration, or only when all twenty are gone? If you celebrate every step taken, you might fall short and fail to push yourself; but if you'll only celebrate completion – well, to borrow the phrase of *Tosafot*, *lo yitakhen*, “this cannot be correct.”

III.

And this debate may be preserved in the conflicting formulae offered for reciting the *omer*. Depending on the halakhic position you follow or *siddur* you are using, you'll find one of two formulae for counting the *omer*. It's either *ha-yom yom X* (“today is day X”) *ba-omer* or *ha-yom yom X* (“today is day X”) *la-omer*.

The difference is simply the letter before the word *omer*, but it makes a difference. *Ba-* implies the thing itself, while *la-* implies progression towards something else. If you say *ba-omer* you are acknowledging that the count you are doing fulfils something in its own right; if you say *la-omer* your count only exists to progress to the ultimate stage.

I mentioned one Friday night last year that, for slightly different – but related – reasons than the one I just mentioned, R. Soloveitchik would count the *omer* twice. He would make the *berakhah* and then recite both versions of the formula, one after the other.

While I don't think it is necessary to do this halakhically, I think there is value in this approach as a ward against both negative thinking and complacency. If we are too quick to reduce *Bechukotai* to curses, and too quick to focus on what we have yet to achieve rather than what we have already achieved, then we must remember that our *mitzvah* is *ba-omer*, that it has value in its own right. But lest we think that that frees us from the obligation to move forward, our *mitzvah* is also *la-omer*, must build towards something greater.

הַיּוֹם שְׁנַיִם וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, שָׁהֵם שָׁשָׁה שְׁבֻעוֹת בְּעוֹמֵר.

Today is the 42nd day, which is six weeks – an individual fulfilment of the *omer*.

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But today is also the 42nd day, which is six weeks – building towards the completion of the *omer*.