

Parshat Bamidbar and Shavuot 5782

In his introduction to ספר במדבר, רמב"ן, notes that, after the account of the laws of offerings in ספר ויקרא, the תורה proceeds to report the מצות that are commanded in connection with the משכן, the Tabernacle. He relates how, early in the book, the משכן is to be fenced off, "כאשר הגביל הר סיני בהיות הכבוד שם", followed by a number of other details, such as who can stand near; what is or is not permitted to be seen by the people at large, and the preparations required of those who would come close to the משכן. This also correlates with the situation at הר סיני, where "וְגַם הַכֹּהֲנִים הַגִּשְׁיִם אֶל ה' יִתְקַדְּשׁוּ"; *-Also the kohanim who draw close to HaShem shall make themselves holy/pure.*

The parallel described by the רמב"ן is clear but an obvious question is, why? One suggestion is that the encampment described in פרשת במדבר is, in a sense, a continuation of the event of מתן תורה. However, this encampment was not a formation for physical/aesthetic reasons. I believe that adopting this transcendent and spiritual configuration was to 'hold on to the moment.'

Once this aspect of the encampment is appreciated, it explains the crucial closing מצות of פרשה – the לויים are forbidden to witness the dismantling of the משכן because of the danger that, for the uninitiated or impressionable, seeing the Holy place taken apart would cause them to lose that ethereal, timeless moment.



It would be impossible to dispute that מתן תורה was one of the greatest events in history, so it is a little surprising that, as has often been pointed out before, the precise date of שבועות is not mentioned explicitly in the תורה. We derive the date from פסח and the counting from the bringing of the עמר of barley on 16th Nissan. Rav Shlomo Ephraim of Luntschitz, in his monumental commentary the יקר, כל יקר, offers an interesting explanation. On the phrase 'וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַה' you shall bring a new Mincha offering to HaShem, כל יקר, indicates that this alludes to the day of מתן תורה, because the תורה is required to be new/fresh for a person every day, as if s/he had received the תורה on that very day; not on some particular, remote date in history. (This is similar to רש"י's comment on ביום הזה באו on this day [not on that day] they came to Mount Sinai). כל יקר cites a similar motivation behind the lack of an explicit mention of the designation of השנה as ראש השנה, the day of judgment, in order for one to think than any or every day could be the day of judgement and to adjust his/her conduct accordingly.

יקר goes further in pursuing the analogy. Quoting the גמרא in עירובין (54b) the תורה offers one a fresh flavour every day, as the suckling baby finds with its mother's milk, or the generation discovered, with their heavenly food.

The הלכה focuses on the grain offering of שבועות in respect of its being a מנחה of חדש, of new wheat, because this offering is that which allows the offering of this year's wheat in a sacrificial capacity (as the offering of an Omer of barley on 16th Nissan had permitted the consumption of new grain to individuals in a חולין capacity). To be exact, though, the תורה refers to the bringing of a מנחה חדשה, a new Mincha, as the תורה is construed as a new offering or gift for us each day.



One of the most singular aspects of the שבועות offerings was the bringing of שתי הלחם, two large, leavened loaves, along with a set of animal offerings. These together comprised a peace offering, שלמים, unique to שבועות and distinct even from the מוסף, the additional offering of the חג.

An obvious question is why leavened loaves? In contrast there was intense focus on avoiding even the slightest trace of leaven at פסח, a mere few weeks earlier. We know that on פסח, leaven -שבעיה, שאור, represents the evil inclination, lack of constraint and a bursting forth in an uncontrolled fashion. It is interesting to note that the ability for humanity to be drawn in the wrong direction by the evil inclination is the very argument which, according to the מדרש, was presented by משה, to justify the תורה being given to Man.

The leaven on שבועות is in marked contrast with the constraint and control symbolised by מצה. The מצה explains by reminding us of key developments between פסח and שבועות. The period between them is one of character development and refinement, through which the 48 ways of acquiring the תורה (see פרקי אבות פרק ו') can be rehearsed and assimilated to the personality. And the crowning event is the giving of the תורה itself. In these circumstances, the evil inclination has more than met its match.

There is, though a further level of symbolism in operation here. The שתי הלחם have an equivalence to the weekly show-bread, לחם הפנים (see מנחות 95a). The miraculous freshness of these loaves was a clear expression of the concept of מנחה חדשה, of newness and immediacy.



One of the greatest threats to a happy and fulfilled life is boredom. The tired and jaded king who reflects in קהלת that אין כל חדש תחת השמש does not find joy. In contrast are דוד שש אנכי על אמרתך כמוצא שלל – notably in the present tense – "I rejoice over your words as one who finds great treasure. פרשת במדבר, which is usually read on the preceding שבועות, calls to us to 'hold the moment'. The שתי הלחם point to the centrality of feeling the newness that the תורה of שבועות offers us - every day.