

Parshat Emor 5778

We are now in the period of transition between Pesach and Shavuot known as Sefirat HaOmer. Parashat Emor describes how we move between these two chagim: *'And you shall count from the morning after you bring the Omer offering, seven complete weeks until the morning after the end of the seventh week, which is the fiftieth day, when you will bring a new offering to God'*. In the thrust of these pesukim, the goal of the seven weeks beginning with Pesach is this new offering – mincha chadasha. It marks the climax of 49 days of counting and symbolises the festival of Shavuot. This mincha chadasha is a fascinating anomaly. It is the Shte Halechem, the Two Loaves, which were made from wheat. This makes sense; Shavuot is the festival of the wheat harvest. What is truly remarkable is that the Shte Halechem were made of chametz, and were the only communal offering of the year made of chametz. If Pesach is the rejection of chametz, but the move towards Shavuot sees its reintegration into our lives, until it becomes the centrepiece of Divine service. What does this shift from matza to chametz mean?

Chametz, we are told, represents gaiva – pride, ego, arrogance. It is literally puffed up. It stands for self-aggrandisement and self-inflation. Pesach is the time when we drive it out of our lives and subsist on matza, lechem oni – the bread of humility. We recognize that we owe our deliverance from Egypt entirely to God's kindness, because we were inherently unworthy of redemption. As the angels said to God at the Red Sea, looking at the Jews and the Egyptians: they are both idol worshippers, why are you saving one people and drowning the other? For a week we recognize our total reliance on the kindness of God and rid ourself of chametz, of ego.

There is a story of the Maggid of Mezrich, who was once visited by the Alter Rebbe. The Alter Rebbe knocked on the door and the Maggid asked 'who is it?' The Alter Rebbe replied 'it's me.' In their discussion the Maggid told the Alter Rebbe to go on a journey. The Alter Rebbe left home and arrived at an inn and during the course of his stay a valuable item went missing. The innkeeper assumed that it had been stolen and identified the Alter Rebbe, the new face in town, as the likely culprit. He started beating and accusing

the Alter Rebbe. The Alter Rebbe shouted again and again 'it's not me, it's not me'. He realised why the Maggid had sent him on the journey. The ego of 'it's me' had to be beaten out of him.

But here we have a contradiction. If chametz represents such negativity, the impulse to gaiva which has to be beaten out of us if necessary, how can we return to it after Pesach and how can we place it at the center of our service of God on Shavuot? I think an answer comes from the Rambam's Hilchot Deot, his laws of character development. There he argues that if a person is suffering from a negative character trait he or she needs to go to the other extreme. If they are mean, they have to become excessively generous, if they are angry they have to become exceptionally placid.

Pride is a temptation. Once a year, for one week, we banish the ego which feeds it, completely from our lives, and we carry this out symbolically by removing chametz during Pesach. But after Pesach it is important to reintegrate a healthy sense of self, and attempt to the golden mean between self-abasement and uncontrolled arrogance. Reb Simcha Bunim of Peshischa understood the need for this balance. He carried two pieces of paper at all times. One read 'afar ve'efer' – I am dust and ashes. The other 'lishvili nivra ha'olam' – the world was created for my sake. He understood his lowliness in the context of creation, but also that God cared for him, to such an extent that in a sense he was the centre of the universe.

The message of the transition from matza to chametz between Pesach and Shavuot is that there *is* a time to say 'it's not me' but *there is also* a time to say 'it is me'. I have certain abilities, which no one else has in the same degree or the same combination, and they make me uniquely placed to do good. If the task of Pesach was to remove excessive gaiva, to remove pride and arrogance, the role of Sefirat HaOmer is to take properly controlled gaiva, not ego but audacity, and channel it towards positive outcomes. As we move towards Shavuot and prepare once again to accept the Torah, as we set aside matza and prepare to offer chametz on God's altar, we train ourselves to bring the wholesome element of self-belief and ambition to the service of God and of humanity.