

Parashat Emor contains one of the key sections of the Torah that teaches us about the festivals (ch. 23). In this section, there are three places where it says that these are the festivals “*which you will proclaim*” - אֲשֶׁר-תִּקְרְאוּ אֹתָם. Note that אֹתָם is spelt in the ‘defective spelling’ or ‘כתיב חסר’ without a vav, and so could be read as *you* rather than *them*. This emphasises how the dates of the festivals are dependent on Am Yisrael fixing the months and the leap years of the calendar.

The שר התורה, Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, in his Meshech Chochma, draws on the significance of the human input into the festivals, and thereby explains why the mitzva of Yom Tov is a paradigm for learning the importance of the Oral Torah. If the cycle of the festivals begins with Pesach, and the Sefira period takes us up to Shavuot when Chazal teach us we commemorate Maamad Har Sinai, then it is significant that the aspect of human agency in the festivals and the Oral Torah is most explicit in Shavuot, which for us today is indeed the festival of the giving of the Torah.

The Meshech Chochma distinguishes between two categories of mitzvot - those that connect Yisrael to Hashem (e.g. Tzitzit, Tefillin etc), and those that connect us to each other (e.g. Gemilut Hasadim, Terumot and Maaserot). He sees the same division between Shabbat and Yom Tov. On Shabbat, we retreat inwards with prohibitions on carrying and going beyond Shabbat boundaries, and nor do we cook. The main focus of Shabbat is spirituality, Torah and Hashem, and in this instance the individuals and families of Am Yisrael are serving Hashem as separate units.

Yom Tov is conversely a Mitzva that connects one Jew to another, which is most explicitly demonstrated by the fact that cooking is permissible, even for potential guests who may yet turn up unexpected. The pilgrimages that would occur to the Beit Mikdash were likewise about coming together through national rejoicing.

These qualities of togetherness are not however fully demonstrable in the Yom Tov of Pesach which has some aspects which are more similar to Shabbat. In Pesach Mitzrayim, the Israelites were indeed separate when they sat individually while Hashem “passed over” their houses. They were connected through their individual devotion of taking the Korban Pesach, much like we are connected through our simultaneous but separate observance of Shabbat. The individuals who eat each Korban Pesach have to be pre-assigned from Erev Pesach, similar to how the food of shabbat can only be prepared in advance. This is one of several places where the

Meshech Chochma brings examples that point to a Shabbat-like status of Pesach, thereby making perfect sense of the Torah’s instruction to begin counting the Omer on the day described as ‘ממחרת השבת’ - from the day after the “sabbath”, meaning Pesach.

The process that extended from Yetziat Mitzrayim to Ma’amad har Sinai is exemplified by the transition from the individual family observance of Pesach Mitzrayim to the collective experience of the revelation of the Torah, and the two are connected by Sefirat HaOmer. Whereas other nations receive their coherence from shared culture and cohabitation in a defined physical country, Am Yisrael is formed primarily by the gift of the Torah. The Meshech Chochma is at pains to emphasise that this foremost includes the authority of the Oral Torah and the Chachamim. This centrality of Rabbinic authority in binding Am Yisrael together to serve Hashem is embodied right from the inception of the Torah at Har Sinai, as the number of days that Bnei Yisrael had to separate themselves in purity for the revelation was decided by Moshe Rabbeinu’s interpretation of “וּקְדַשְׁתֶּם הַיּוֹם וּמָחָר”, thus showing human agency in deciding the date of Maamad Har Sinai (Shabbat 87a).

The “לכם” aspect of Yom Tov being focused on the unity and enjoyment of the collective of Am Yisrael is embodied in Shavuot when we commemorate that the Torah was given to us as one with the authority of the Hachamim to guide us. In this spirit of “לכם”, the two loaves brought on Shavuot are made from chametz and may not be brought on the altar, rather are eaten by the Cohanim. It is also appropriate that the Mitzva of leaving food for the poor during harvesting is included in the context of the festival of Shavuot (23:22).

In summary, we see that the “לכם” aspect of the mitzvot of Yom Tov are among the mitzvot that bind Am Yisrael to one another. However, this national unity is dependent on Matan Torah and the authority of the Oral Torah, as symbolised most powerfully by the upcoming Yom Tov of Shavuot.