

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PART OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

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THE UNITY OF SHAVUOT AS THE CULMINATION OF THE SEFIRAT HA'OMER PERIOD

The holiday of Shavuot is the pinnacle of the counting of the Omer. For 49 days, we count up, marking the process that Bnei Yisrael went through, from their exodus from Egypt to the receiving of the Torah. According to the *Sefer HaChinuch*,¹ the counting of the Omer was how Hashem showed us that the primary reason for our freedom from Egypt was to receive the Torah, not only for freedom itself. By creating a sign and a process, we recognize that the two are uniquely connected. The Rambam asserts that the reason that

we count is in anticipation of what is to come,² similar to the way someone might wait for a guest to arrive.

While we observe this mitzvah on a yearly basis to remind ourselves of these messages, there are other laws and customs that have come to be associated with this time as well, namely customs of mourning. *Yevamot* 62b, tells the story of Rabbi Akiva's 12,000 pairs of students who perished due to the fact that they did not treat each other with respect, and the Gemara clarifies that this took place between Pesach and Shavuot. This

loss lead to the institution of certain customs, such as the custom of not getting married or cutting one's hair due to the observance of mourning.³

When reflecting on the confluence of these two periods on the Jewish calendar, we must question whether there is a deeper connection between these periods beyond the calendar dates. Perhaps a single pasuk at the beginning of the story of matan Torah can provide insight into this question.

The opening verses of Sefer Shemot, Perek 19, detail the arrival of Bnei

Yisrael at the location where they received the Torah. The pasuk states:

וַיָּסְעוּ מִרְפַּיִדִים וַיָּבֹאוּ מִדְּבַר סִינִי וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבָּר
וַיַּחֲנוּ שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶד הָהָר.

They journeyed from Rephidim, and they came to the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain.

Examining the multiple verbs in this pasuk, namely *vayisu* (they journeyed), *vayavo'u* (they came), *vayachanu* (they encamped), and *vayichan* (Israel camped), *vayichan* stands out as the only singular verb. Rashi states that the reason this verb is singular is to reflect Bnei Yisrael's communal attitude upon their arrival at Har Sinai. "*K'ish echad b'lev echad*"⁴ — Bnei Yisrael were united as one person, with one heart. As opposed to the encampments in the desert when the nation was enmeshed in arguments,⁵ this arrival was significant due to their collective unity at the time of this encampment. Rav Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz, an early 17th-century commentator from Prague known for his commentary on the Torah *Kli Yakar*, explains that this unity is emphasized in contrast to Bnei Yisrael's journey from Rephidim. Rephidim was the location where Bnei Yisrael wanted water and threatened Moshe Rabbeinu that they would stone him if he did not share water. Moshe renames Rephidim to Masah Umerivah⁶ due to the arguments that took place there. *Kli Yakar* explains that Rephidim has the same letters as the word *pereidim*, separation, and that the message of Bnei Yisrael leaving Rephidim was not only that they left the physical location, but that they left the attitude of separation and arrived at Sinai united as a community.

Professor Nechama Leibowitz⁷ notes that the language used by Rashi in his

understanding of the verb *vayichan* is very similar to the comment made by Rashi in another place in the Torah where a nation is referred to with a singular verb. When the Egyptians are chasing Bnei Yisrael out of Mitzrayim, the pasuk⁸ states *Umitzrayim nosei'a achareihem* — Egypt was chasing after them. Commenting on the use of singular language in the verse, Rashi explains that the reason it is written this way is because Mitzrayim was acting *b'lev echad k'ish echad* — with one heart like one person.

Rav Yitzchok Hutner⁹ notes that while there is a similarity between these two phrases, they are fundamentally different. According to Rav Hutner, the flip of the words of "*ish*" and "*lev*" signifies a significant difference between Bnei Yisrael and Mitzrayim. The Jewish people are fundamentally connected at their core, as part of the larger unit symbolized by the word *ish*. Even at times when they disagree with each other, there is a uniting thread that connects them. Mitzrayim, on the other hand, was only connected at the time of the Exodus from Egypt due to a common goal and pursuit, signified by the word *lev*. Through this common goal, they united to become one in their efforts to pursue Bnei Yisrael. At Har Sinai, Bnei Yisrael were at their highest point of connection, where not only were they connected as a unit, their mindsets and goals were also unified in the common desire to accept the Torah.

What led to this feeling of unity at Har Sinai? *Kli Yakar* explains that when Bnei Yisrael arrived at Har Sinai, they realized that the mountain was the lowest of all of the mountains in the area, and it taught them that *anavah*, humility, is a prerequisite for *kabbalat HaTorah*. Humility allows us to make

space for others, since we do not view ourselves as the primary focus. It was only once they were standing next to the mountain, absorbing its message, did they become one heart — united and respectful of others.

Rav Simcha Bunim Kalish explains that the word *vayichan* does not only mean encamp, but rather comes from the root word "*chen*," meaning grace or favor. Bnei Yisrael found favor in the eyes of each other, and this is what merited them to receive the Torah.

It was only once they were standing next to the mountain, absorbing its message, did they become one heart — united and respectful of others.

Midrash Tanchuma Yashan tells a story that Hashem wanted to give the Torah to Bnei Yisrael immediately after they left Mitzrayim, but they were arguing with each other, saying "*Let us return to Mitzrayim.*" The Midrash explains that Hashem delayed giving the Torah until Bnei Yisrael were united, as "*deracheha darchei noam v'chol netivoteha shalom*" — "*her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.*"¹⁰

Looking at these sources together we might now understand the confluence of Sefirat Ha'Omer and the period of mourning for Rabbi Akiva's students. As we move from Pesach to Shavuot, we are meant to work on ourselves, to improve and to prepare for *kabbalat HaTorah*. Perhaps the story of Rabbi Akiva's students is meant to reinforce to us during this time how critical respect and peace are in the acceptance and learning of Torah. Perhaps it is meant to teach us about the danger of learning Torah without respect and love for each other.

The Ohr Hachaim, Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar from Morocco, explains the description of Bnei Yisrael arriving at Har Sinai was meant to teach us about the three steps that were essential in preparation for receiving the Torah.¹¹ He explains that the third step was the step of unity, of the unifying of the hearts of Bnei Yisrael. Based on an understanding of a pasuk in Yirmiyahu (50:37), *cherev el habadim* — a sword on those alone, *Ohr HaChaim* explains that our learning of Torah should not be done alone or separate; coming together and growing from each other is necessary to receiving the Torah. This message is not limited to the generation in the desert, but rather is a goal for us, Bnei Yisrael, each and every year as we prepare for the holiday of the giving of the Torah.

The Abarbanel in his commentary on the mitzvah of *aliyah l'regel*,¹² visiting the Mikdash at the time of the *shalosh regalim* of Pesach, Shavuot

and Sukkot, explains that one of the reasons for the mitzvah was to create love and connection between Bnei Yisrael. As people came up to the Beit HaMikdash, they would share items with each other and this experience created peace between them. He explains that Yeravam did not permit people from Bnei Yisrael to go to the Mikdash on the holidays when he was trying to create division between Bnei Yisrael and Bnei Yehuda. This was due to the fact that Yeravam did not want to allow Bnei Yisrael the opportunity to create a connection and relationship with Bnei Yehuda, which he knew would happen when they visited together at the Mikdash. Perhaps *aliyah l'regel* is a critical component of Shavuot because it can potentially help Bnei Yisrael reach the mindset and the level of connection that is necessary for accepting the Torah.

In our generation, in which we are not yet *zoche* to be able to perform the mitzvah of *aliyah l'regel*, the experience of coming together in shul as a community is perhaps another avenue we can create a connection with each other. Our *batei knessiot* (shuls) are considered to be *mikdashai me'at*,¹³ mini temples where we can connect with Hashem and each other. The experience of entering our shuls together, in advance and on the holiday of Shavuot, provides us with the incredible opportunity to experience in some way the feeling of *aliyah l'regel*, of developing our connections and love for each other.

As we learn from the students of Rabbi Akiva and the generation in the Midbar, peace and love for each other is fundamental to our engagement with Torah.

May we be *zoche* that as we continue to return to our shuls, our feelings of love for each other will grow and develop, and that through this, we will ultimately be *zoche* to experience the holiday of Shavuot at the Third Beit HaMikdash.

Endnotes

1. Mitzvah 306.
2. *Moreh Nevuchim*, 3:43.
3. *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim*, 493.
4. Rashi on Shemot 19:2.
5. Rashi on Shemot 19:2 — “*aval she'ar kol hachaniyot b'ta'aromet uv'machloket*” — the rest of the encampments involved complaints and fighting.
6. Shemot 17:7.
7. Yitro 5715 — Bechirat Yisrael V'Kabbalat HaTorah.
8. Shemot 14:10.
9. Drashot on Pesach, Maamar 41.
10. Mishlei 3:17.
11. *Ohr HaChaim* on Exodus 19:2.
12. Commentary to Devarim 16:15.
13. *Megillah* 29b.



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