‘‘Emor: Making every day count’’

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

The sidrah *Emor* contains the *Parashat Ha-Moadim*, an overview of all the festivals of the year (Lev. ch.23). Inter alia, it describes the Omer period and the command that we count the forty-nine days from Pesach, when the barley harvest was in-gathered and brought to the Temple as an offering, until Shavuot when the later-ripening wheat harvest and the *bikkurim*, the early fruits, were harvested and also brought ceremoniously to the Temple.

It may be regarded as strange that the Torah prescribed that we count the period *between* the in-gathering of two harvests, rather than the period *leading up to* the first harvest. After all, counting is a way of demonstrating our excitement at, and anticipation of, a unique celebration or event. It would surely have made greater sense for the ancient Israelite farmer to have counted for forty-nine days *before Pesach*, to symbolise his joyful anticipation of the first harvest of the agricultural year, rather than as a lead-in to the second, and its celebration on Shavuot? Surely, the farmer, with a bumper barley harvest already being brought in before his eyes on Pesach, would hardly feel to the same extent that same sense of novelty and gratitude in anticipation of the harvest to come. The Shavuot first fruits were surely no more than the icing on an already-baked cake!

One message to be derived from this arrangement is never to be satisfied with any single achievement in life but to be ever on the look-out for greater challenges and the achievement of higher levels of success. If ever we thought that we had reached the summit of our ability we would have no reason to study further, work as hard, or develop our skills and contribute more.

Life would lose all its purpose, excitement, and scope for greater opportunity and advancement. No Nobel prize winner has been known to give in his notice the day after receiving the award!

So, we do not count the Omer in the run-up to Pesach. We count it *after* that first harvest, to teach us not to rest on our laurels, not to be content with the realisation of just one dream, but to use each success as a spring-board for the launch of the next and more ambitious challenge.

The message of the counting of the Omer is not merely that we should count every day, but, far more importantly, that we should make every day count; that we should dedicate our entire lives to the service of fellow man, to maximising on the talents with which God has endowed us, and to share the blessings we have been granted with those less fortunate than ourselves.

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This message - that there is no such concept as having reached one's destination in life, but rather, *mitzvah goreret mitzvah* (Avot 4:2), that 'one positive achievement opens a door, an opportunity, and a challenge, to undertake many others' - lies, as we have said, at the core of the Counting of the Omer. It also provides the answer to the oft-asked question, given that it is biblically mandated that we count the Omer each day (Lev. 23:15-16), why there is no prescribed *Shehecheyanu* blessing over each day's counting.

An answer, related to the semantics of the blessing, is that it would be inappropriate to the Omer institution to express any *Shehecheyanu* thanksgiving for having succeeded in arriving (*higiyyanu*) at that particular point (***lazman ha-zeh*).** The thanksgiving is only justified when the

longed-for festival is reached, whereas each day's counting merely ticks off one of a succession of stages along the 49-day spiritual journey towards it. In the words of the *Radbaz* (R. David ibn Zimra, 15-16th cent. Talmudist), the counting of the Omer is but a spiritual preparation for the Shavuot experience that is its realisation. Hence, when we finally recite *Shehecheyanu* over the festival, in the Shavuot eve kiddush, that blessing covers not only the festival but also the mitzvah of its attendant Omer count-down.

Rashba (R. Solomon ben Adret (13-14th Spanish authority) offers another explanation why *Shehecheyanu* is omitted. He reminds us that the Omer was instituted as a count-down particularly to the primary mitzvah of the joyful offering of the two loaves on Shavuot, and that we, in our post-Temple times, were prevented from performing that mitzvah joyfully in the Temple on that festival. For that reason, he suggests, it is wholly inappropriate for us to recite *Shehecheyanu* over that count-down. In fact, he states, far from inducing the urge to offer a thanksgiving for having been brought 'to this day,' the Omer generates antithetical pangs of sadness, reminding us of that, and many other Temple rituals, that, since its destruction, we have been prevented from observing.

It will be noted that, just as Shavuot is inextricably linked to Pesach by the counting of the Omer, so does Shemini Atzeret – though an independent festival (*regel bifnei atzmo*) – link directly to, and follow on from, Sukkot (see Lev. 23:36). To describe the final day of Pesach, the Torah also employs the term *Atzeret* (see Deut. 16:8), derived from the verb *a-tz -r*, meaning 'to desist, halt, close up or seal' (see Gen. 20:18), since on that day we 'desist' from eating matzah. This explains why the rabbis gave that same name, *Atzeret* ('closing'), to Shavuot (when we 'desist' from counting the Omer), to underscore its relationship to Pesach.

Another point of contact between the festivals of Shavuot and Shemini Atzeret is that for neither festival did the Torah prescribe any positive ritual mitzvot, as is the case with the celebration of Pesach and Sukkot. They are both, in the literal sense, *Atzeret*, festivals characterised merely by 'the desisting' from work.

When I consider sentiments, such as those of *Rashba*, referred to above, regarding the feelings of sadness that invade our emotions when we think of our exile and the loss of our Bet Ha-Mikdash – to which we may add the liturgical lament, ומפני חטאינו גלינו מארצנו, ('And because of our sins we were exiled from our land') – I cannot help but contrast such profound and passionate religio-Zionistic feelings with the blasé attitude that most contemporary Diaspora Jews exhibit towards Israel as our 'holy land.'

In America, the luke-warm attitude toward Israel, and replacement of religious observance and strong Jewish identity by a vague commitment to the notion of *tikkun olam* ('improving the world') internationalism, is particularly worrying. Whereas once we took pride in the reality of the concept אתה אחד ושמך אחד ומי כעמך ישראל גוי אחד בארץ ('You are One and Your name is one; and who is like Your people, Israel, a united nation on earth'), the loss of that unity and sense of identification is more than lamentable. It endangers future Jewish existence.

But the situation is no better in the UK. Leaving aside this year's unique Covid situation, in any normal year, Yom Ha-Atzma'ut and Yom Yerushalayim services will attract barely an extra worshipper to shul than on any ordinary weekday. Ironically, our shuls are full when it comes to fasting and breast-beating on Yom Kippur. When it comes to celebrating the return of our land and its amazing achievements after a two-thousand-year wait, however, few feel the call to

personal and communal celebration, and to the recitation of our traditional mode of expressing thanksgiving through the singing of Hallel.

The psalm-verse, הנה מה טוב ומה נעים שבת אחים גם יחד (‘How good and pleasant it is when brethren dwell together’: 133:1), is heartily sung by Jews around the world. It is a plea for Jewish unity and amity – the very antithesis of the polarisation that tragically characterises present-day Jewry.

Shabbat shalom
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