



OUR ROLE IN THE PURIM MIRACLE: THEN & NOW

The victorious outcome of the Purim story seems to be hinged on Hashem and His hidden yet miraculous ways. However, beyond the “end of the ninth” fasting and tefillos offered by the desperate Jews of Shushan, we can see, based on the comments of Chazal, a more instrumental role the people played.

The Midrash in *VaYikra Rabba*, (28:6) states,

אמר רבי אבון ורבי נחמיה ורבי יעקב בר אבא
בשם רבי יהודה ברבי סימון רבי יוחנן ורבי
שמעון בן לקיש היא, רבי יוחנן אומר לעולם
אל תהי מצות העמר קלה בעיניך שעל ידי
מצות העמר זכה אברהם לירש את ארץ כנען.
*Rabbi Avon and Rabbi Nechemia
and Rabbi Yaakov bar Abba said in
the name of Rabbi Yehuda ben Rabbi
Simon, Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi
Shimon ben Lakish said, “Let not the
mitzva of omer be light in your eyes, for*

*through it Bnei Yisroel merit to inherit
the Land of Israel.”*



The commentators grapple with the relationship between this particular mitzva and the inheritance of our great land. The halachic rule is that all land-oriented mitzvos are only obligated in “the Land,” in Eretz Yisroel. There is one Torah-mandated exception, and that is the law of omer. [Regarding other exceptions to this rule, see Mishna, *Kiddushin*, 1:10.] Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky in his commentary on the Torah, *Emes Le’Yaakov* (Parshas Emor, 28:10), suggests that this anomaly offers a special merit to its adherence;

observing this mitzva outside of Israel will merit inheriting the Land of Israel.

Rav Kamenetsky’s suggestion requires further elucidation. Why should keeping this mitzva in the Diaspora serve as a merit for the Land of Israel more than any other mitzva kept in the Diaspora? True, it is the sole land-oriented mitzva kept outside “the Land,” but ultimately it becomes just another mitzva applicable to all Diaspora Jews. Why does it offer such a unique merit?

The Midrash continues with another enigmatic statement.

ריש לקיש אמר לעולם אל תהי מצות העומר
קלה בעיניך שעל ידי מצות העומר עשה
הקב“ה שלום בין איש לאשתו.
*Reish Lakish says, let not the mitzva of
omer be light in your eyes for it brings
peace between husband and wife.*

What is the correlation between the korban omer and harmony in a marriage?

Perhaps the answer can be found in the continuing words of the midrash. The midrash recounts the famous incident when Haman was instructed to bring Mordechai the king's horse to parade him through town. As Mordechai saw Haman approaching he feared for his life and immediately began to daven, hoping that Haman would get distracted or bored and leave him alone. The midrash quotes the ensuing conversation between Haman and Mordechai's disciples while Mordechai davened:

אמר להם במה אתם עוסקים אמרו לו במצות העומר שהיו ישראל מקריבין במקדש ביום הזה.

He said to them, In what are you engaged? They replied, On this day, when we had the Temple, we would have offered the Omer sacrifice.

The midrash continues to relate that Haman wanted to understand the nature of this sacrifice that occupied the minds of the Jews even as they dwelled in their Exile. Was it gold? Was it silver? They replied that it was merely barley. The response stunned Haman. Barley was considered inferior among the grains, and he therefore assumed that at least the quantity must be generous. How much is the offering? It must be at least ten measurements. The Jews replied, even ten grains would suffice. Haman was beside himself. Ten pieces of barley grain was as good as it gets? His visceral reaction was so profound that he proclaimed:

קומו דנצחו עשרת מנכון לעשרת אלפים קנטריא דכספא.

Stand up, for your "ten" were victorious over my ten thousand silver talents. [See Megilla 16a for a slightly different version.]

Beautiful, but puzzling. Why were the ten grains of the korban omer credited with foiling Haman's plans? After all, the Jews weren't actually sacrificing the omer! Wouldn't it have been more apropos for Haman to have said that it was the merit of learning about the omer that overpowered him, not the actual sacrifice? What is the message of this midrash?

Let us look at another intriguing discussion of our Chachamim. The Gemara, Megilla (12a) says:

שאלו תלמידיו את רשב"י מפני מה נתחייבו שונאיהן של ישראל שבאותו הדור כליה אמר להם אמרו אתם אמרו לו מפני שנהנו מסעודתו של אותו רשע אם כן שבשושן יהרגו שבכל העולם כולו אל יהרגו.

The students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked him, Why were the enemies of Jewish people, (a euphemism for the Jewish people themselves) in that generation deserving of annihilation? He said to them, answer the question yourselves. They replied, it is because they enjoyed the feast of that wicked one. Rabbi Shimon responded, If so, those in Shushan should have been killed as punishment, but those in the rest of the world, (who did not participate in the feast), should not have been killed.

A fascinating debate. At first glance it seems that this is a classic example of young students who were bright, but not bright enough. Having debated the issue among themselves, they concluded with an interesting and insightful approach, nonetheless rejected by their rebbe. However, we do need to keep in mind that these "young students" were disciples of the great Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and therefore their insight is worthy of our understanding.

The Jewish people of that era were not doing very well spiritually. From the time that Yehoshua led Bnei Yisroel into the Land of Israel, they

had basked in the spiritual glory of Hashem. For hundreds of years they lived, witnessed, and enjoyed the pristine kedusha of the Beis HaMikdash, and it was this generation that brought it to a tragic end. Those who were alive at the time of the feast either witnessed and suffered the fate of the disgrace and destruction of the Beis HaMikdash personally, or heard about it directly from their parents. We can only imagine the despondency and guilt that plagued them. How would they redeem themselves from such devastation? Surely it would take its toll on their spirituality, on their ability to even perceive themselves as being worthy to serve Hashem. Indeed, the Gemara, Megilla (11a), tells us that the Jews of that generation were "poor in their mitzvos."

Close examination of the wording of R. Shimon's disciples reveals that the transgression did not lie solely in their "attendance" of the feast. Arguably one can say they simply didn't have a choice. How do you live in the kingdom's capital and say no to the king's invitation? Their words were precise when they said that Bnei Yisroel "enjoyed" the feast. They didn't just attend, rather they participated, lingered, and relished in the prevailing decadence, all while the king paraded around in the priestly garments of *their* Kohen Gadol and drank from the goblets of *their* Beis HaMikdash.

In short, they began to settle in. The Jews no longer felt that deep-rooted respect of their past. Sensitivity to their history was becoming dulled, and their spiritual poverty reflected a numbness to prospects for the future.

The disciples of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai speculated that a people disconnected from their past, and with no particular interest in their future,

had become a self-destructive people.

Their master did not disagree with their core theory. Rather, he responded, we cannot accuse the rest of the Jews for a transgression that they did not commit. We don't know how the others would have behaved at the king's feast. Maybe they would have appropriately attended and gone home, without the lingering indulgences. Therefore, he concluded, we can't say for sure that this was the cause. Instead we need to find an example that is similar, but more widespread. He suggested *avoda zara*, another form of disconnect from our sacred past and disregard for the future of our religion.

With this understanding, we can return to our original midrash. The *korban omer* is truly an insignificant representation of a *korban*. Quantitatively and qualitatively lacking, it doesn't seem to bring much to the table — *and that is precisely why it is so powerful*.

We needed the warning: "Don't let the mitzva of omer seem insignificant in your eyes." A generous and robust offering grabs our attention and serves the purpose of the moment. Kohanim eat from them, families are fed. But the omer doesn't serve the present moment very well. It could be deemed insignificant in our eyes because it doesn't seem to have a purpose for the present, the here and now. Rav Yaakov explains that the Torah instructs us to take the *korban omer* with us, from Eretz Yisroel into the Diaspora, and if we hold on to it, it will be the mitzva that leads us back home. The purpose of the omer is to minimize the present, and to instead bridge our past to our future.

So too, say our Sages, when discord or disloyalty wedges its way into the unity of a married couple, it is the

insignificant omer that will keep them together. Disregard the challenges of the moment and instead focus on what you once had, and what you can have again.

Haman, in a moment, understood it all. It wasn't the learning of "*Toras omer*" that protected us, that ensured our future. If it was just Torah, then it could have been a *sugya* in *Bava Kamma* as well. Haman understood that the eternal contrast between us and him, between Bnei Yisroel and Amalek, is that while they live for the moment, we build on our past to create a future. Haman offered 10,000 silver coins to the coffers of the king — an eye-catching offer, for sure.

A gift of the moment. Yet it was the humble omer, with its lack of focus on the present, and its continuous bridging of what we once had to what we will have, that will always sustain us against our enemies. Something they can never truly understand.

In our day and age we too need a measure of the omer. We all recognize that the barrage of spiritual challenges that confront this generation is unprecedented. Technology, entitlement, easy access to substances are some of the all-too-familiar pitfalls. However, recently I have recognized a new phenomenon that I believe is at the root of these challenges.

Once upon a time, when a kid wanted to "explore," read, go off the derech, typically it was couched in a legitimate claim, of sorts. From a bad rebbe experience to bad parents, there was always a reason, an excuse sitting neatly in the pocket to be taken out and read to any listening ear. "Rabbi, I believe in the Torah, but who are the rabbis to tell me what to do?!" When there is a claim, there can be a response. But today I am no longer hearing

these justifications for abdicating their role in the *mesorah*. Today I hear a shoulder shrug, I hear, not just an apathy — that's already a given — but a disconnect. In my recent experiences, kids no longer feel the need to rationalize their changed lifestyle, to explain why it's "just not for them." They simply say, "why should I?"

It is incumbent upon us to understand this paradigm shift of attitude toward our religion, because only when we understand it do we have a chance to stop it. We are living in a time when the past is no longer of value. American heroes are demonized, the Ten Commandments are no longer the source of truth. Our National Anthem is shamed, as is the sanctity of marriage. In an era where the past has no value, there is no direction for the future. Our youth are being taught that we no longer need to justify abandoning the history of our people, that what matters is how you feel in the present. The present culture leaves them internally unstable, with no chain to anchor themselves; therefore they can easily drift away.

It is the eternal battle of our omer vs. their coins.

The Rambam famously writes, (*Laws of Megilla*, 2:18), that in the future times all the prophecies will become null, save for the Book of Esther. Perhaps it is because the Book of Esther and by extension, the holiday of Purim, is a time that we don't just celebrate the miracle of the present, but rather we chain ourselves to our past in order to guarantee our future. Indeed, this is our role in creating our own Purim miracle.