

SHEMINI (LEVITICUS 9:1-11:47)

Silence Is Golden

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Sefiras Ha'Omer: Countdown to Shavuos

The Passover dishes have been packed up and the last crumbs of Matzah have been swept away. We can safely say that our Passover is completed and we can rest up until the next holiday.

Or can we? The next major Jewish holiday, Shavuos, will begin on Tuesday evening, May 18. Shavuos, which commemorates the Giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, comes out 50 days after Passover.

The interesting thing about Shavuos is that it is the only holiday that the Torah mentions without telling us the date. Instead, the Torah commands us to count seven weeks, starting on the second evening of Passover. After we have completed our 49-day count, the next night is Shavuos. Why doesn't the Torah just tell us to celebrate Shavuos on the 6th day of the month of Sivan, the actual date? Why is THIS holiday different from all other holidays?

The answer, I believe, is that in reality, Shavuos is just an extension of Passover.

Some people make the mistake of assuming that Passover is the celebration of Jewish freedom and independence. We were slaves to the Pharaoh in Egypt and now we are free. No one can tell us what to do!

Nothing could be farther from the truth. The purpose of the Exodus from Egypt was to allow our ancestors the religious freedom necessary to follow G-d's Commandments. The Talmud tells us that the group that left Egypt comprised only one fifth of the Nation of Israel. The other 80% didn't want to go. They weren't interested in leaving Egypt to go into the desert and receive the Torah. So G-d didn't take them!

The freedom we celebrate on Passover is the freedom to enjoy the blessings of liberty and the freedom to live as Jews. This is a privilege that is denied to many, even in the 21st century. The best way to celebrate the freedom of Passover is by accepting the Torah of Shavuos. As we fulfill the nightly Mitzvah of counting the days until Shavuos, we should count our blessings as well.

Sefiras Ha'Omer: A Time to Mourn

It happens every year. "Hey, Rabbi, something wrong with your shaver?" "Growing a beard?" "Did your lawn mower break?" "When's that coming off?"

The teasing ends very quickly when I explain to them that I am in mourning. The smiles instantly disappear and are replaced by looks of compassion and concern. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Who passed away?"

Unfortunately, the compassion and concern fades away once I explain to them that I am mourning for the students of Rabbi Akiva, who perished in a tragic plague, killing 24,000 people in 33 days. While various Jewish communities have different customs as to WHICH 33 days to commemorate, all customs acknowledge that this calamity befell our people during the Counting of the Omer, between Passover and Shavuot, some 2,000 years ago.

As is the case with all mourners, we don't make weddings, take haircuts, or listen to music this time of year. Some people wonder why we should mourn an event that took place so long ago. Unfortunately, however, history has shown that we have never been very far removed from misfortune.

Many people will commemorate next Monday as Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Memorial Day. (I say "many people" because there is a school of thought that prefers to commemorate the Holocaust on Tisha B'Av. Along with many Torah Sages, reportedly the late Prime Minister Menachem Begin was of that opinion.) We all know people who were personally affected by this horrendous and dreadful time in our history.

The horrific events that took place are far beyond our ability to comprehend. The question "why?" can never be far from our lips as we read and hear about the experiences of our fellow Jews.

I would never be so presumptuous as to even attempt to answer why G-d does what He does. Rather, I'd like to turn to this week's Torah Portion for an insight into how a Jew faces tragedy.

"Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, placed fire on it, and placed incense on it. They offered an unauthorized fire before G-d, that He had not commanded them to offer. Fire came forth from G-d and burnt them, so that they died before G-d." (Leviticus, 10:1-2)

Commentaries abound as to what was going on in this event. Did they intend to sin, did they have noble intentions in this voluntary offering in the Temple? Regardless of what their intent was, Aaron, the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest, must have been devastated. His sons, his disciples, his fellow Priests, were following in their father's footsteps in serving as *Kohanim* in the Temple. How painful it must have been for him to see the tragic deaths of these two young men.

Aaron, according to the Talmud, was a man "who loved all people, and brought them near to Torah." A man so full of empathy for every human being must have been particularly pained at the loss of his own children. A man so full of feeling must have overflowed with emotion in eulogizing his precious sons.

What words of grief, mourning, or consolation did he utter? The Torah records for us what is perhaps the most eloquent and moving eulogy in history:

"...and Aaron was silent." (Leviticus, 10:3)

Volumes have been written about the suffering and anguish that our People have had to endure throughout the millennia. We do not have the ability to fathom G-d's Master Plan. But there is another component of the story that perhaps deserves more attention. Where do our People get their strength and faith to endure adversity and torment? How do we manage to pull our lives together when we face such difficulties? "...and Aaron was silent." How many tears he could have cried, how many dirges he could have composed! Aaron accepted G-d's decision with dignity and grace. He understood that there are some things that we will never understand.

There is a beautifully inspiring (and heartbreaking) book that I read every year on Tisha B'Av. It is called "The Unconquerable Spirit-Vignettes of the Jewish Religious Spirit the Nazis Could Not Destroy." At the risk of being "culturally incorrect," may I suggest that a more positive observance of Yom Hashoah would place less emphasis on the atrocities of the Holocaust (which we dare never forget!) and more emphasis on the many miracles of people being saved, and the miracles of human (Jewish and non-Jewish) compassion and hope.

I recall the day I had the painful "privilege" of sitting with a man who bore the unbearable burden of informing his mother-in-law that her oldest granddaughter, his daughter, had died at the ripe old age of 40. She was, of course, hysterical. I watched in amazement as this broken man, not particularly religious as far as I know, calmly explained to his mother-in-law that there are certain things we just can't understand; that this is G-d's decision and we have to accept it. Afterwards he informed me that he had expected his mother-in-law to respond that way...that was how she had responded when one of his other children had died!

Where does such strength and fortitude come from? King David tells us: *"I lift my eyes to the mountains, from where does my help come? My help comes from G-d, the Maker of Heaven and Earth."* (Psalms, 121:1-2)

Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues visited the ruins of the Temple in Jerusalem. They had seen the Temple in all its splendor and majesty, and now they saw its destruction. As foxes scurried out of the Holy of Holies, the Sages tore their clothing in grief. To their surprise, Rabbi Akiva began to laugh. When asked

for an explanation of his behavior, Rabbi Akiva asked his companions to explain theirs. The Sages told Rabbi Akiva that they were overcome with sorrow because foxes were running around in the Holy of Holies, a place where only the High Priest was permitted to tread on Yom Kippur!

"That is exactly why I am laughing," he explained. He quoted to them from the Book of Zechariah (8:3-4): *"I will return to Zion and dwell in the center of Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth...The streets of Jerusalem will be filled with boys and girls playing in the open places."*

Rabbi Akiva went on to explain that just as G-d had fulfilled his warning to destroy the Temple, so too would He eventually keep the promise He had made to Zechariah to rebuild our holy City of Truth and Peace. The Sages agreed, "you have consoled us Akiva, you have consoled us." (Talmud; Makkos, 24b)

Rabbi Akiva suffered a loss so great that we mourn his students to this very day. He saw his life's work destroyed. He buried his son. He saw G-d's Temple in rubble and ashes. And yet, he looked to the future with hope and a smile.

"You have consoled us Akiva, you have consoled us." May we all merit to sing and dance in the restored Jerusalem of Rabbi Akiva's dreams.

Have a great Shabbos.

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