YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SHAVUOT 5782**

**Two Wavings**

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Unlike the rest of the festivals mentioned in the Bible, Shavuot has no fixed date. All we know about it is that it falls out fifty days after the festival of Pesach (*Vayikra* 23:15-16). The significance of this festival is also not clear in the text, as the Torah does not spell out a connection between Shavuot and the giving of the Torah.

However, two features of the festival of Shavuot are mentioned explicitly in the Torah: the connection between the festival and the *omer* offering, and the command to bring the two-loaves offering.

**The Torah Prohibition of New Grain**

The path to the festival of Shavuot begins with the command to bring the *omer* offering:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: When you come into the land which I give to you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then you shall bring the sheaf [*omer*]of the first-fruits of your harvest to the priest. And he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, to be accepted for you; on the morrow after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. And in the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a he-lamb without blemish of the first year for a burnt-offering to the Lord. And the meal-offering thereof shall be two tenth parts of an *efa* of fine flour mingled with oil, an offering made by fire to the Lord for a sweet savor; and the drink-offering thereof shall be of wine, the fourth part of a *hin*. And you shall eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor fresh ears, until this selfsame day, until you have brought the offering of your God; it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. (*Vayikra* 23:9-14)

These verses explicitly connect the *omer* meal-offering, the counting of the *omer*, and the festival of Shavuot (which is mentioned in the verses immediately following), on the one hand, and coming to the land of Israel and the agricultural reality which involves a harvest and sheaves, on the other.

The meal-offering brought by the people of Israel at the beginning of the harvest season is an *omer* of barley. In the commandment regarding the gathering of manna, it is explicitly stated that an *omer* is the amount of food that suffices for one person for one day (*Shemot* 15:15-16). We learn from this that we must offer to God at the beginning of the harvest season a meal-offering consisting of a day's portion of barley for one person.

The *omer* is given to the priest, who waves it before God. Together with the *omer*, a he-lamb of the first year is brought as a burnt-offering.

The commandment to bring the *omer* offering ends with the prohibition of "*chadash*" – "And you shall eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor fresh ears, until this selfsame day." The Torah establishes that one is prohibited to eat from the new grain until the waving of the *omer*. After the *omer* is waved on the sixteenth of Nisan, the new grain may be eaten.

**“And You Shall Count for Yourselves”**

After the bringing of the *omer* and its waving, we come to the second stage of the commandment:

And you shall count to you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the waving; seven weeks shall there be complete; even to the morrow after the seventh week shall you number fifty days; and you shall present a new meal-offering to the Lord. (*Vayikra* 23:15-16)

What is the purpose of this counting? It is clear from the verse that the count is directed toward the fiftieth day, when "a new meal-offering to the Lord" is brought. Indeed, the Torah immediately spells out the nature of this "new meal-offering," and commands the celebration of a holy day when it is brought:

You shall bring out of your dwellings two wave-loaves of two tenth parts of an *efa*; they shall be of fine flour, they shall be baked with leaven, for first-fruits to the Lord. And you shall present with the bread seven lambs without blemish of the first year, and one young bullock, and two rams; they shall be a burnt-offering to the Lord, with their meal-offering, and their libations, an offering made by fire, of a sweet savor to the Lord. And you shall offer one he-goat for a sin-offering, and two he-lambs of the first year for a sacrifice of peace-offerings. And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the first-fruits for a wave-offering before the Lord, with the two lambs; they shall be holy to the Lord for the priest. And you shall make proclamation on the selfsame day; there shall be a holy convocation to you; you shall do no manner of servile work; it is a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations. (*Vayikra* 23:17-21)

We are commanded to bring two wave-loaves on the fiftieth day, measuring a tenth of an *efa* each (like the *omer* offering). It too – like the *omer* offering – is waved before the Lord. However, while the *omer* offering is composed of unprocessed barley, these loaves are made of baked wheat. And while the *omer* offering is brought together with only a burnt-offering, the offering of the two-loaves is accompanied by peace-offerings as well.

Apart from the very obligation to bring the two-loaves offering on the fiftieth day, this day has halakhic significance for two additional reasons: it constitutes a "holy convocation" (the festival of Shavuot), and the waving of the two-loaves offering permits the bringing of meal-offerings from the new crop of grain. Just as the waving of the *omer* offering on the sixteenth of Nisan permits the eating of new grain outside the Temple, so the waving of the two-loaves offering on the festival of Shavuot permits the bringing of meal-offerings from the new grain in the Temple. This is established by the Mishna in tractate *Menachot* (68b):

The *omer* rendered [the new grain] permitted throughout the land, and the two-loaves offering rendered it permitted in the Temple.

**Waving to the Lord**

The counting of the *omer* begins with waving and ends with waving. We find waving in three other contexts in Scripture: Some of the priestly gifts are waved before God (for example, *Vayikra* 7:30), the metals donated for the building of the *Mishkan* were waved (*Shemot* 35:22), and the Levites were waved on the days of their consecration (*Bamidbar* 8:13). In all these cases, it seems that the purpose of the waving is to emphasize that the object being waved – and perhaps also the person waving it – belongs to God.

In the case of gifts given to the priests, the owner may come to the erroneous conclusion that the priest "owes" him for his gift, and the priest may similarly make the mistake of seeing the gift as a reward for his actions. The waving of the priestly gifts negates these errors, clarifying that the gift belongs to neither of them. The priestly gifts belong to God, and it is He who gives them – by way of their human owner – to the priest. The waving is a sort of offering to God, which allows the object to be offered to God but also to remain in the hands of man. The priestly gifts are waved before the Lord, but they are given to the priest.

The same is true with respect to the waving of the Levites. The Levites represent the people of Israel with respect to the Temple service, but in contrast to the priests, they are not absolutely set aside for the Temple service. The Levites serve in the Temple but maintain a connection to the people of Israel – the source from which they came and from which they receive their authority. The Levites are waved in order to express the understanding that despite their partial belonging to the people of Israel, when they serve in the Temple, they belong to God.

And finally, the same is true about the donations of metal to the *Mishkan*. When the people of Israel donated gold, silver, and copper to the building of the *Mishkan*, there was a danger that their donations would be accompanied by a sense of ownership. The waving of the metals was meant to express the understanding that the metals belonged from then on to God, and not to the person who brought them, as the Gemara states:

Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Forward and backward, that is, to Him to whom the [four] directions belong; upward and downward, that is, to Him to whom heaven and earth belong. (*Menachot* 62a)

When a whole-burnt-offering is brought, it need not be waved, for its belonging entirely to God is not in doubt. However, when a connection remains between the object and the world of man – for example, in the parts of a peace-offering that are given to a priest – the waving gives the object to heaven while at the same time leaving it on earth.

**The First-Fruits Offering**

The period between the barley harvest on Pesach and the wheat harvest on Shavuot, which is bookended by wavings, is the period of the farmer. During this period, the farmer moves about from field to field, and observes how his hired workers are harvesting and gathering his crop. The poor people also know that this is the time of the owner of the field, and they come to the threshing floors to gather gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and the corners of the field.

This is the period during which most of the story related in the book of *Ruth* takes place:

So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moavitess, her daughter-in-law, with her, who returned out of the field of Moav, and they came to Bet-Lechem **in the beginning of the barley harvest**. (*Ruth* 1:22)

So she kept fast by the maidens of Boaz to glean **to the end of the barley harvest and of the wheat harvest;** and she dwelt with her mother-in-law. (*Ruth* 2:23)

From the beginning of the barley harvest and until the end of the wheat harvest, Ruth clung to Boaz's maidens who were gleaning in the field. Boaz, during that period, was circulating among his fields and appraising his crop, the fruit of his labor, with delight and satisfaction. A sense of rejuvenation and freshness filled his heart, a feeling of a new beginning, with prospects for the future.

The Torah marks the borders of this festive period between the barley harvest and the wheat harvest with two things that must be brought to the Temple and waved.

The beginning of this period is marked by bringing the *omer* offering from the new grain and waving it to God: "When you come into the land which I give to you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then you shall bring the sheaf of the first-fruits of your harvest to the priest." God gives man the land and its produce, and man receives it with love and becomes its owner. However, at this moment of the beginning of the harvest, when the person only begins to see his crop, he brings his first fruit – one *omer*, a one-day portion – waves it, and declares: It is for God!

Only after this waving is the person permitted to eat of the new grain. In a sense, the waving is similar to the blessings recited before eating, which teach a person that everything he owns came to him from God.

At the end of this period, the person once again waves.

Like the other wavings in Scripture, so too the waving of the *omer* and the waving of the two-loaves offering – each comes at a moment when the person experiences his ownership of the field in a most tangible manner. The purpose of the wavings is to elevate the person and instill within him the profound understanding that God is the source of his property.

**Bread of Faith**

The Zohardirects our attention to the fact that the period between Pesach and Shavuot is accompanied throughout with bread. It begins in Nisan, with bread of one type – unleavened bread, matza; it continues in Iyar, with bread of another type – the manna; and it ends in Sivan, with bread of a third type – leavened bread, as the Torah describes the two-loaves offering: "they shall be of fine flour, they shall be baked with leaven." This is what the Zohar says:

Two types of bread were eaten by Israel: when they left Egypt, they ate matza, the bread of affliction, and in the wilderness they ate bread from heaven, as it is written: "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you" (*Shemot* 16:4). Therefore, the offering of this day [of the festival of Shavuot] is bread, and all the other offerings were offered with the bread. The bread is the main part, as is written: "And you shall offer with the bread seven lambs..." (*Vayikra* 23:18), "You shall bring out of your habitations two wave loaves" (ibid. 17). For this is the bread with which Israel became wise with the supernal wisdom of the Torah, and entered its ways.

We should now observe that during Pesach, Israel departed from the bread that is called "*chametz*," as it is written: "And no leavened bread [*chametz*] shall be seen" (*Shemot* 13:7), and: "For whoever eats that which is leavened…" (*Shemot* 12:19). What is the reason? It is because of the honor of the bread that is called "matza." Now that Israel merited a higher bread, would it not have been proper for the *chametz* to be abolished and not be seen at all? Why was the offering [of the first-fruits bread] *chametz*, as it is written: "they shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven" (*Vayikra* 23:17)? Also, on this day the Evil Inclination was negated, and the Torah, that is called "freedom," was available.

[This may] rather [be likened] to a king who had an only son who became ill. One day he wished to eat. They said: Let the king's son take this medicine, but before he does, no food whatsoever should be in the house. They did so. After he had taken the medicine, they said: From now on, he may eat whatever he desires and it will do him no harm.

Similarly, when Israel left Egypt, they did not know the essence and secret of faith. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Let Israel taste medicine, but while they take this medicine, no other food should be visible to them. As soon as they had eaten matza, which is a curative to aid in coming into and knowing the secret of faith, the Holy One, blessed be He, said: From now on, *chametz* is suitable for them and they may eat it, because it can no longer harm them. And all the more so on the day of Shavuot, when the supernal bread is present, which is a complete cure!

Therefore, we offer *chametz* to be burnt on the altar. Two other loaves of bread are offered as one. The *chametz* is burned in the fire on the altar, and cannot have power over nor harm Israel. Therefore, [the people of] Israel cleave to the Holy One, blessed be He, on this day through the remedy of Torah. If Israel observed those two types of bread, they would never be punished. (Zohar Sec. 2 *Tetzaveh* 183a-b)

The Zohar’s wordsrelate to the difference between the first waving, of the *omer*,and the second waving, of the first-fruits bread. At the time of the first waving – the waving of the *omer –* we eat matza, and *chametz* must not be seen or found. In contrast, at the time of the second waving, we bring the first-fruits bread to the Temple from *chametz*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In order to explain this phenomenon, the Zohar brings a parable relating to the son of a king, who when he was ill was forced to content himself with various types of medicine. After he recovered, he was permitted to eat whatever food he desired. Matza and manna – according to the Zohar – are the medicine, or as the *Zohar* phrases it: "the bread of faith."

Manna expresses absolute dependence on God. Each person gathers a portion that suffices just for that day, and relies on God that tomorrow He will provide him with his food from heaven. The person has no part in the preparation of the manna; everything is from God.

Like the manna, matza also expresses faith in God. Rabbi Natan, the disciple of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, noted that matza is comprised of only three of the four natural elements: It is made with earth (= flour), water, and fire (= the oven), but it has none of the fourth element – wind – the fermenting element, which is found in *chametz*. Matza is bread of affliction that expresses the absence of the artificial element provided by man. Matza symbolizes Israel's absolute dependence upon God, who redeemed them from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

Matza and manna fashion the experience of faith, and thereby heal Israel from the absence of knowledge that marked their time in Egypt, and from the absence of faith.

In contrast to matza and manna, *chametz* symbolizes man's capabilities. In order to move from the manna of the wilderness to the bread of *Eretz Israel*, a person must purchase a field, plow, sow, reap, thresh, grind, and bake. All of this work takes time, ability, resources, sophistication, and technology – and expresses man's superiority. As Rabbi Akiva famously said to the wicked Turnusrufus (*Tanchuma* *Tazria* 5), the fact that loaves of bread are nicer than stalks of grain expresses the fact that the deeds of man can be finer than those of God. *Chametz* expresses the deeds of man and his ability to shape and develop the world created by God.

Of course, alongside the fact that *chametz* expresses the greatness of human action, *chametz* harbors the danger of the erroneous idea that it is man's power and strength that brought him to where he is. In the wilderness – when the people of Israel ate manna and matza – there was no concern that they would forget God. In *Eretz Israel*, the land of wheat and barley, where the people of Israel ate the "bread of the mighty," a defect in their faith was liable to arise.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Zoharteaches us that the period of the *omer* addresses this defect. A person must undergo a comprehensive spiritual journey before he reaches the festival of Shavuot and is able to eat *chametz* and offer it to God. The days of the *omer* harness the days of the harvest into an experience of waving to God, accompanied by the recognition that all of the new grain is God's and it is He who gives us the strength to prosper.

At the beginning of the period of the harvest, *chametz* is forbidden; it may not be seen or found. The *omer* offering is brought then in its natural form, an *omer* of barley from nature, unprocessed. Any human involvement in the preparation of the *omer* offering would cause it to ferment. The waving of the *omer* elevates this unprocessed grain, which represents natural and primal reality, untouched by man, and presents it as belonging entirely to God.

After forty-nine days of clarification and repair of faith, over the course of which man internalizes the idea of the first waving and recognizes that all comes from Him, he is given the opportunity to participate with God in creation. He takes the wheat grains, and uses the powers instilled in him by God to change them into leavened bread.[[3]](#footnote-3) At the end of the process, the person rises to the level of faith and recognizes that even *chametz* – which expresses the power and deeds of man – is waved to God.

**A New Meal Offering**

The *Sefat Emet* (Shavuot5637) emphasizes the transition from the waving of the barley in the days of the *omer* to the waving of the wheat on Shavuot:

As for the *omer* offering and the two-loaves offering, the *omer* is brought from barley, which is the food of animals, whereas the two loaves are the food of man.

The idea is that bread is faith, as written in the Zohar… and the offering of the meal-offering is [a display of] faith and submission to God, may He be blessed, announcing that all is His.

Behold, at the beginning of the exodus from Egypt, it is written: "Yet you were naked and bare" (*Yechezkel* 16:7), and there was submission because of their low level, and for this reason the *omer* is the food of animals. Afterwards, they merited to clarify their character until they drew near to Mount Sinai. After all the attainments, one must still submit himself and believe in God, because the ultimate attainment is recognizing His glory. This meal-offering that comes after the count is called a new meal-offering, as it has the power of rejuvenation since it comes from the knowledge in man…

This is the order in the verse: "And you shall count… and you shall present" – that is to say, that all of man's desire should be to clarify his character and attain knowledge, so that thereby he will know how to submit himself before Him. These two submissions are all of a person's service… And on Shavuot, which is the fiftieth gate, these two loaves unite.

The words of the *Sefat Emet* rest on the two levels found in man: the animal level and the human level. Barley – animal food – expresses the animal side of man. This is his natural level, which relates to his body, his instincts, and his physical existence. Wheat – human food – expresses man's spiritual side, which elevates him above all the other creatures in the world. This is thought, understanding, and reason, over and above which is the service of God.

The *Sefat Emet* teaches us that one must cause his body, his needs, and his physical existence to submit to God. A person must attribute all of his material achievements to Him, and declare by way of the waving that all comes from Him. In order to eat from the new grain, a person must know that all of his food comes from God. This is the waving of the *omer* on the sixteenth of Nisan, on the morrow of the festival of Pesach, on the day of the exodus from Egypt.

However, at the end of the period of the *omer*, on the festival of Shavuot, a person is also required to wave. This waving teaches us that "after all the attainments, one must still submit himself and believe in God." Until the waving of the two-loaves offering, a person may eat of the new grain, for he has already internalized that all of his food comes from God, But he is still forbidden to offer a meal-offering to God from such grain, because he still must internalize that even his service of God, his spiritual attainments and his prayers, are all from God. This profound understanding is a separate level, requiring internalization and depth, and this is what is expressed by the waving of the first-fruits bread. Just as a person is required to understand that his grain and his material powers are from God, so too he must understand that even his spiritual achievements – they too are from God. A person waves both his body and his soul before God. One must bring first-fruits to God even from what is new in our spiritual world, and wave them before Him and proclaim that all is from Him.

This is the great secret of the transition from the festival of Pesach to the festival of Shavuot. The festival of Pesach expresses Israel's liberation from the Egyptians who chained them in the material world and turned them into slaves. The people of Israel left Egypt like an animal whose yoke was removed from it. On the festival of Shavuot, at the foot of Mount Sinai, Israel reached a new level – the level of wheat; the level of spiritual comprehension and knowledge. The festival of Shavuot is not about the bodies of Israel, but their souls. This insight is concisely expressed by the *Sefat Emet* in another passage (Shavuot 5640):

Learning on the night of Shavuot is based on what *Chazal* said: If you hearken to the old, you will be able to hearken to the new. Therefore we must accept upon ourselves on this night the Torah that we have learned until now, and this is preparation for the new.

Clarification, refinement, and preservation are required not only for eating and amassing wealth. Even a meal-offering to God must be preceded by waving, which expresses the internalization of the profound understanding that everything belongs to God. Just as the waving of the first-fruits bread, the bread of wheat, permits the offering of a new meal-offering to God, so acceptance of the old – reliance on tradition, the insight that each of us is only one small link in a long chain of transmitting Torah from Mount Sinai to eternity, and the internalization that every novel idea that one comes up with in his study is a gift of grace from God – all these are the waving that permits the new in Torah study.

The counting of the *omer*, which is accompanied by waving before and after, teaches us that every innovation, every beginning, every attainment, and every rise in level requires waving, internalization, and remembrance that it is God who gives us the strength to flourish.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Bringing an offering of *chametz* is exceptional even not in connection to Pesach, for we are commanded:"No meal-offering,which you shall bring to the Lord, shall be made with leaven" (*Vayikra* 2:11). This prohibition has two exceptions: The thanksgiving-offering, about which the Torah states: "With cakes of leavened bread he shall present his offering" (*Vayikra* 7:13), and the first-fruits bread on the festival of Shavuot. Even in these cases, the *chametz* is not offered on the altar, but rather given to the priests. See Ramban, *Vayikra* 23:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As cautioned in *Devarim* 8:7-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The waving of the first-fruits bread was accompanied by burnt-offerings and peace-offerings. This stands in contrast to the *omer-*offering which was accompanied only by a burnt-offering. Peace-offerings as well express man's partnership with God, for part of them are offered to God and part of them are eaten by man. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)