**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Meir Shpiegelman**

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In memory of my beloved parents Adia Bat Avraham, Alice Stone, z"l,
whose yahrzeit was 2 Tammuz,

and Yaakov ben Yitzchak, Fred Stone, z”l, whose yahrzeit is on 25 Tammuz.

Ellen & Stanley Stone, their children and grandchildren Jacob & Chaya,

Micah, Addie, Ruby; Zack & Yael, Allie, Isaac, Nate;
Ezra & Talia, Shai, Ami, Lielle, Keren

Yoni & Cayley, Azi, Kovie Shuha; Eliana & Marc, Adina, Emmy, Shira, Yisrael Meir, Simcha Zelig; Gabi & Talia, Adriana, Morrie, Jack

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Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families

In memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise,

Whose yahrzeit is 21 Tamuz. Yehi zikhro barukh.

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**PARASHAT PINCHAS**

**The Festivals**

The Torah’s system of festivals comprises, by one organizing principle, three pairs: Pesach and Shavuot are connected by the counting of the *omer*; Shemini Atzeret is connected to Sukkot (following immediately after it); and Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are connected by their characters and by the fact that they are the festivals of the beginning of the year.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Alternatively, we can organize the festivals in terms of the obligation of visiting the Temple. In several places, the Torah commands a pilgrimage to the Temple on the festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. For instance:

Three times a year shall all your males appear before the Lord your God in the place which He shall choose: on the festival of Matzot, and on the festival of Shavuot, and on the festival of Sukkot, and they shall not appear before the Lord empty. (*Devarim* 16:16)

To these pilgrim festivals we might add Shemini Atzeret, which begins immediately at the conclusion of Sukkot. These four festivals create a cycle that is clearly divided into two groups – Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret (the festivals of ingathering) on one hand, and Pesach and Shavuot (the festivals of the harvest) on the other. To emphasize the connection between Pesach and Shavuot, the Torah commands the counting of the *omer*.

On the other two special days discussed in the Torah, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, there is no obligation to visit the Temple, and it turns out that this fact is just one detail among the extensive set of differences between the three pilgrim festivals, on one hand, and Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, on the other.

**Pilgrim festivals and non-pilgrim festivals**

The most conspicuous difference between the two groups is the length of each festival. The three pilgrim festivals – Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot – last for seven days: Pesach and Sukkot are each defined as seven-day festivals (we will address Shemini Atzeret below), and the Gemara states that the sacrifices of Shavuot may also be offered for seven days (*Mo’ed Katan* 24b).[[2]](#footnote-2) Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, in contrast, are one-day holidays, as is Shemini Atzeret.

Upon closer inspection, we find that the Torah hints to this division by referring only to the three pilgrim festivals as *chag* (festival). Neither Rosh Hashana, nor Yom Kippur, nor *Shemini Atzeret* is referred to as *chag*. Moreover, while the seven-day festivals are scattered throughout the year, the one-day holidays are concentrated in the month of Tishrei, the seventh month (counting from Nissan). Another difference between the two groups concerns their sacrifices. The sacrifices of Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Shemini Atzeret are identical: a bull, a ram, and seven male lambs. On the pilgrim festivals, however, additional bulls are offered.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We might also point to parallels between the two groups of festivals, in pairs: between Rosh Hashana and Pesach, between Yom Kippur and Shavuot, and between Shemini Atzeret and Sukkot. Rosh Hashana and Pesach are both new year dates (according to the first *mishna* in *Massekhet* *Rosh Hashana*), and both commemorate the connection between God and Am Yisrael. On Rosh Hashana, Am Yisrael crowns God as King over the world; on Pesach, God redeemed Am Yisrael from Egypt and took them to be His people. Shavuot is the festival of the *giving* of the Torah, the day when the first set of Tablets was given, and Yom Kippur might be thought of as the festival of the *receiving* of the Torah – the day when the second set of Tablets was given.[[4]](#footnote-4) The connection between Shemini Atzeret and Sukkot is self-evident: they are celebrated on adjacent dates.

**The sacrifices of Sukkot**

In our *parasha*, the Torah lists the sacrifices for each festival. A quick review of the unit reveals a clear difference between the bulls offered on Sukkot and those offered on the other festivals. As noted, one bull is offered on Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Shemini Atzeret, while on Pesach and Shavuot, two bulls are offered. On Sukkot, in contrast, the number changes each day: thirteen bulls on the first day, twelve on the second day, and so on in descending order, until seven bulls are brought on the seventh day.

At first glance, the number of bulls seems to hint to a process of counting that leads from Sukkot to Shemini Atzeret, reminiscent of the counting of the *omer* between Pesach and Shavuot.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, this idea raises some difficulties. Firstly, it is not clear why the number of bulls decreases each day instead of increasing. In addition, the numbers themselves seem to make no sense: if the bulls indeed hint to a count from the first day of Sukkot until Shemini Atzeret, and if for whatever reason there is a descending order, why do we start at thirteen and end up at seven, rather than starting with seven and ending with one? *Chazal* answer this question by pointing to the total of seventy bulls over the course of the festival, corresponding to the seventy nations of the world (*Sukka* 55b).

**Festivals of Tishrei vs. the other festivals**

As indicated above, the festivals can be divided into two groups in two different ways: we can either place Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Shemini Atzeret into one group, with the three pilgrim festivals in the other; or we can consider Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur as one group, with the pilgrim festivals and Shemini Atzeret in the other.

If we look at the unit on the festivals in *Parashat Emor*, we find yet another possible division: the festivals of the seventh month (Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and Shemini Atzeret) in one group, with Pesach and Shavuot in the other.

The first difference between these two groups is the use of the term *shabbaton*, which appears in relation to the festivals of Tishrei (*Vayikra* 23:24,32,39)[[6]](#footnote-6) but not in relation to Pesach or Shavuot.

In addition, in *Parashat Pinchas*, the Torah defines the holidays of Tishrei as *mikraei kodesh* (holy convocations) and only afterwards addresses their individual natures; for example, *Bamidbar* 29:1 first defines Rosh Hashana as a *mikra kodesh* and afterwards calls it a *yom terua* (day of sounding the *shofar*). When it comes to Pesach and Shavuot, however, the Torah defines them as a time to eat *matzot* (28:17) and as the festival of Shavuot (28:26), respectively, and only afterwards characterizes each as a *mikra kodesh* (28:18 and 25, regarding Pesach, and the second half of verse 26, regarding Shavuot).

**What is a *mikra kodesh*?**

In order to understand the difference between the festivals of Tishrei and Pesach/Shavuot, we need to try to understand the meaning of the term *mikra kodesh*.

The concluding verses of *Parashat Emor* suggest that a *mikra kodesh* is a day when special sacrifices are offered:

These are the appointed seasons of the Lord, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations (*mikraei kodesh*), to bring an offering made by fire to the Lord, a burnt offering, and a meal offering, a sacrifice and libations, the thing of each day on its own day. (*Vayikra* 23:37)

However, adopting this definition presents a problem: the Torah commands that sacrifices be offered on all the days of Pesach, but only the first and last day of the festival are defined as *mikraei kodesh*, as we see earlier in the chapter, where it seems the term *mikra kodesh* means a day when labor is forbidden:

On the first day you shall have a *mikra kodesh*; you shall do no manner of labor…. On the seventh day, a *mikra kodesh*; you shall do no manner of labor. (*Vayikra* 23:7-8)

This interpretation of the term is supported by the fact that Shabbat, too, is referred to as a *mikra kodesh* (*Vayikra* 23:3), even though there is no “offering made by fire.”

Another possible explanation of the term arises in relation to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur:

In the seventh month, on the first of the month, you shall have a *shabbaton*, a memorial of shofar blasts, a *mikra kodesh*…. Only, on the tenth of this seventh month, it is Yom Kippurim; a *mikra* *kodesh* you shall have, and you shall afflict your souls, and you shall bring an offering made by fire to the Lord. (*Vayikra* 23:24, 27)

These verses raise the possibility that the meaning of *mikra kodesh* varies from one festival to the next, depending on the nature and significance of the day.

The exegetical difficulty posed by the term *mikra kodesh* leads to a difference of opinion among the *Tannaim*:

R. Eliezer says: [In the Torah’s definition of Rosh Hashana] it is written: “you shall have a *shabbaton*, a memorial of shofar blasts, a *mikra kodesh*” (*Vayikra* 23:24): “*shabbaton*” refers to the blessing of the Sanctification of the Day [in the *Amida* of Rosh Hashana]; “a memorial” refers to [the special additional section known as] *Zikhronot* (Remembrances); and “shofar blasts” refers to [the section known as] *Shofarot*; while “*mikra kodesh*” means “sanctify it by abstaining from labor.”

Rabbi Akiva said to Rabbi Eliezer: …“*Shabbaton*” means “sanctify it by abstaining from labor”; “a memorial” refers to *Zikhronot*; “shofar blasts” refers to *Shofarot*; while “*mikra kodesh*” refers to the Sanctification of the Day. (*Rosh Hashana* 32a)

According to R. Eliezer, the term *shabbaton* denotes the sanctification of the day and *mikra kodesh* denotes the prohibition on labor, while R. Akiva understands these terms in the reverse.

It may be that there are two meanings of the term *mikra kodesh*. If we look at *Parashat Emor*, we see in the commands concerning Shabbat, Pesach, and Shavuot that *mikra kodesh* signifies the prohibition on labor, while in the commands concerning Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Yom Kippur, it signifies an offering by fire. According to R. Akiva, on Rosh Hashana, too, *mikra kodesh* refers to the sanctity (meaning, the essential nature) of the day, as expressed in its sacrifices.

Thus, we end up with two groups of festivals: the festivals of the seventh month, in which *mikra kodesh* signifies the offering by fire; and Pesach and Shavuot, where the term signifies the prohibition on labor.

This division also explains the placement of the term *mikra kodesh* for each of the festivals in *Parashat Pinchas*. There, the festivals of the month of Tishrei are called *mikra kodesh* in deference to their special character, and therefore the Torah defines them, first and foremost, as *mikraei kodesh*; only afterwards does it address their more specific natures. Pesach and Shavuot, in contrast, are referred to as *mikraei kodesh* because of the prohibition on labor that they entail; therefore, the Torah first addresses the essential nature of each of these festivals and only afterwards notes the prohibition on labor (*mikra kodesh*).[[7]](#footnote-7)

**The uniqueness of the seventh month**

Having demonstrated that the festivals of the seventh month (Tishrei) are different from the other festivals (Pesach and Shavuot), we might now suggest that this difference arises from the dual sanctity of the former: each of the festivals that falls in the seventh month has its own sanctity as well as the sanctity of the seventh month.

Now we can go back to the question of the number of bulls offered on Sukkot. Sukkot is the link connecting two different groupings of festivals: the three pilgrim festivals, on one hand, and the festivals of the month of Tishrei, on the other. It is therefore proper that three bulls be offered: two as on the other festivals, plus a third as on the festivals of Tishrei. As we have seen above, the Torah wants to count the days from Sukkot until Shemini Atzeret (paralleling the counting of the *omer* from Pesach until Shavuot), and therefore commands that the number of bulls offered should decrease by one each day. If we set aside the three bulls that should logically be offered each day, we are left with a descending count from ten on the first day to four on the seventh day. Aside from the specific significance of these numbers, which I will not elaborate on here, we end up with a total of 49 bulls offered over Sukkot (again, with the exception of the three for each day) – paralleling the 49 days of the *omer*. Thus, just as we count 49 days from Pesach to Shavuot, with the fiftieth day being an “*atzeret*” (convocation),[[8]](#footnote-8) so we offer 49 bulls from the beginning of Sukkot to Shemini Atzeret, with the 50th being offered on the Atzeret itself.

Indeed, just as the counting of the *omer* expresses progress – from the exodus from Egypt on Pesach to the receiving of the Torah on Shavuot – so the counting of the bulls sacrificed on Sukkot expresses progress. Over the course of counting the *omer*, we progress from the barley (usually animal feed) that is offered on Pesach to the more elevated wheat (used for bread) that is brought on Shavuot. In parallel, we start Sukkot under the shade of the Clouds of Glory, in God’s abode, as it were, and finish off on Shemini Atzeret by bringing God’s presence into our own homes.

There is a difference between an ascending count and a descending count. In an ascending count, there is no explicit target date, so the counting symbolizes progress until it is halted. In a descending count, the main focus is on the conclusion. This is not a progression from one day to the next, but rather anticipation of reaching the end of the countdown. The count on Sukkot is a descending one: the essence of its significance is the conclusion on Shemini Atzeret, since it is only at that point that God returns with us, as it were, to our homes.

The Gemara in *Massekhet Sukka* (5a) deduces that a *sukka* has to be higher than ten handbreadths, since “the Divine presence has never descended lower than ten.” This indicates that during the days of Sukkot, God is above the *sukka*, not inside it. On Shemini Atzeret, we go back into our homes, together with God and together with the Torah. Thus, the agricultural year, which started with the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah, concludes with the Clouds of Glory (as at the time of the Exodus) and the receiving of the Torah, on Simchat Torah.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are both observed during the first ten days of the year – in other words, during the period that is the “beginning of the year.” Proof that this entire ten-day period is considered the “beginning of the year” may be found in the Gemara’s conclusion (*Rosh Hashana* 8b) that the freeing of slaves in the Jubilee year takes place on Yom Kippur and that the slaves occupy a sort of in-between status during the ten-day period from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This seems to make intuitive sense in view of the fact that we count seven weeks from Pesach, such that the entire eighth week should be holy and not just its first day. I will elaborate on this further in the *shiur* on *Parashat Behar*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On Pesach and on Shavuot, two bulls are offered. On Sukkot, the number of bulls is different on each of the days of the festival, but on none of the days is there just one. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is why it is specifically on Yom Kippur that the *Kohen Gadol* enters the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim*. The *Mishkan* is a continuation of the giving of the Torah, and the revelation of God in the *Mishkan* is an ongoing giving of the Torah. The *Kohen Gadol* therefore enters the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim* on Yom Kippur just as Moshe ascended to the top of Mount Sinai on that same date and received the second Tablets. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Proof for the idea that the descending number of bulls hints to a process of counting may be found in the Gemara (*Shabbat* 21b), which draws a comparison between the bulls offered on Sukkot and the candles lit on Chanuka, where the number increases each day. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As well as in relation to Shabbat (*Vayikra* 23:3). The plain meaning of the word “*shabbaton*” is desisting from labor, but it may also be related to the number “*sheva*” (seven), which would explain why it is associated with the holidays of the seventh month and with Shabbat – the seventh day of the week. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The scope of our present discussion does not allow for elaboration of further differences between *Parashat* *Emor* and *Parashat Pinchas*. We may simply note that in *Emor*, no mention is made of the daily sacrifice (*tamid*), nor the *mussaf* (additional sacrifice) for Shabbat, while in *Parashat Pinchas*, no mention is made of the prohibition of labor on Shabbat, nor is it referred to as a *mikra kodesh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Editor’s note: *Chazal* refer to Shavuot as Atzeret; see, e.g., Mishna *Rosh Hashana* 1:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)