

The Climb

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

A certain sadness washes over many people when *Yom Tov* ends, and they find difficulty in returning to performing the various mundane activities that comprise our days. After weeks of preparation for the great *chag* and then eight days of bliss, joyfully performing *mitzvos*, enjoying the family, partaking of special meals, taking trips, visiting old friends and the like, it suddenly all comes to a crashing end. After drinking the eight *kosos* at the *Sedorim* and making *Kiddush* so many times, the most difficult cup to drink has to be the one we made *Havdollah* on at the conclusion of the glorious *Yom Tov*.

Perhaps the way to deal with the shock re-entry into the world is to seek to maintain a more spiritual level of life as we practiced over *Yom Tov* rather than quickly jettisoning everything and jumping headfirst into the rat race.

The *Netziv*, in his introduction to his *peirush* on *Shir Hashirim*, discusses the *posuk* (*Devorim* 16:8) which states an obligation to eat *matzah* for six days, followed by a seventh day, which is an *atzeres* when all work is forbidden: “*Sheishes yomim tochal matzos uvayom hashvi’i atzeres laHashem Elokecha lo saaseh melocha.*” He says that the last day of *Pesach* is to inculcate in us the achievements of the *Yom Tov* so that they remain after the *chag* has ended.

The *Ramchal* discusses in several places that *matzah* is analogous to good and to the *yeitzer tov*. *Chometz* is analogous to sin and to the *yeitzer hora*.

When Hashem redeemed the Jews from slavery on the 15th of *Nissan*, they were at the 49th level of depravity. Therefore, He extended His powers, so to speak, and caused a great Divine light to shine that evening, immediately removing them from *Mitzrayim* before they would sink further and be rendered beyond salvation.

Every year, those powers reappear at the time that they originally were apparent to save the Jews. In order to raise ourselves to the level where we can benefit from them, we partake of the *matzah*, which influences us *letov* and strengthens the *yeitzer tov*. Abstaining from bread and *chometz*, we weaken the power of the *yeitzer hora*. Coupled with the other *mitzvos* of the night that we perform, viewing

ourselves as if we have been plucked from Mitzrayim, we can raise ourselves to the degree that we can benefit from the special *hashpa'os* that are manifest that first day of *Yom Tov*, and in *golus* the first two days.

After the boost that we receive on the first days of *Yom Tov*, the extra *hashpa'os* are removed and it is up to us to maintain the heights we reached. The *Bnei Yisroel*, at the time of their redemption, returned to the level of *tumah* they were on in Mitzrayim. The *Medrash* cites the *malochim* complaining at *Kriyas Yam Suf*, "*Halalu ovdei avodah zorah vehalalu ovdei avodah zorah*," the Jews were disbelievers like their Mitzri pursuers.

This is why we were given the *mitzvah* of *Sefiras Ha'omer*, enabling us to return to where *Klal Yisroel* was at the time of the first day of *Yom Tov*. Each day, we are able to rectify another *middah* and climb another rung as we ascend to *Shavuos*. We are then able to achieve the associated *tikkunim*.

Sefirah is the bridge that transports us from *Pesach* to *Shavuos*. *Pesach* and the freedom it represents is not an end to itself, but the beginning of a longer journey. Hashem redeemed us from slavery in Mitzrayim so that we could go on to complete the reason we – and the world – were created. From there, He took us to *Har Sinai* and presented us with the Torah, the defining essence of our people.

Thus, we celebrate *Pesach*, relive the experience of deliverance and freedom, and count towards *Shavuos* to show that we understand why we were freed and what the essence of our life should be. Each day, as we count, we seek to improve, so that by the time of *Matan Torah*, we will be worthy of the gift.

Therefore, instead of a countdown of how many days remain towards the anticipated date, we count forward – "Today is day one, today is day two" – until we complete the count and reach *Shavuos*. Each day, we proclaim that we have rectified another facet of our behavior and raised ourselves another step, climbing towards the goal.

We recognize that to receive the Torah, we have to devote ourselves to the task of becoming better and more wholesome. Every day, we work on getting a little better, a little holier, a little less enamored by physical attractions, becoming drawn instead to things spiritual, real and eternal.

As we count *Sefirah*, we admit that we won't get where we need to go if we are apathetic and lazy. We have to be energetic about our mission and recognize that success in life requires ambition, drive and hard work.

We take time each day to work on attaining a purity of character and clarity of thought necessary to function as *bnei* and *bnos* Torah. We acknowledge that scrolling through posts and flipping through glossy appeals to our lower forms do not aid us in the pursuit of what makes us better and happier people.

The mourning aspects of the *Sefirah* period have so taken over the seven weeks between *Pesach* and *Shavuos* that we can sometimes forget that there is more to *Sefirah* than refraining from weddings, haircuts and listening to music.

During *Sefirah*, we work to raise ourselves from the level of *se'orim*, which comprises the *Korban Omer* brought on *Pesach*, to the more refined *chitim* of the *Shtei Halechem* of *Shavuos*.

Chazal (*Yoma* 9b) teach that the second *Bais Hamikdosh* was destroyed because of *sinas chinom*. Simply explained, the people looked down upon each other out of baseless hatred. Perhaps we can say that until the period during which the *talmidim* of Rabi Akiva died because of a lack of respect for each other, there was hope that the Jews would be able to repent for the sins that caused the *churban Bais Hamikdosh*. However, when the terrible plague struck the Jewish people and the 24,000 *talmidim* died, it became obvious that the people were overcome with *sinas chinom* and were lacking in *ahavas Yisroel* and *achdus*.

They realized that there would be no quick solution to their *golus* under the Romans unless they would quickly repent for their sins. The fact that the *mageifah* took place during the days of *Sefirah*, when we are to be engaging in daily introspection and improvement, indicated that not only were the people not worthy of Torah, but they were also not worthy of the *Bais Hamikdosh*.

The same components that are necessary for *kabbolas haTorah* are necessary for *geulah*, so this special period of *Sefirah* was chosen as a time to improve ourselves and prepare not only for Torah, but also for *geulah*. By mourning the loss of the *talmidim*, we are reminded of the punishment for not loving

each other and dealing with each other respectfully. We see what happens when there is *sinas chinom* and a lack of respect for each other.

At the time of the *churban*, the people excelled in the study and observance of Torah, *mitzvos* and *chesed* (see *Yoma, ibid.*). The only area in which they were lacking was *ahavas Yisroel*. That alone was enough to cause the destruction of the *Bais Hamikdosh* and bring on *golus*.

In our day, we note the explosion of Torah and *frum* communities. There is so much that we can point to with great pride. *Yeshivos* and *Bais Yaakovs* are more plentiful and larger than ever. We have every conceivable type of *chesed* organization. There is unprecedented *dikduk b'mitzvos*. Yet, the fact that we remain in *golus* indicates that we are lacking in *ahavas Yisroel* and *achdus*. If *sinas chinom* wasn't prevalent among us, if there would be proper mutual respect, and if there wouldn't be *machlokes* and division, *golus* would have ended.

During these days of *Sefirah*, it is incumbent upon us to work to end the hatred, spite, cynicism and second-guessing of each other and of people who look different or see things differently than we do.

The *Sefas Emes* was once given a large sum of money for safekeeping by a visiting *chossid*. The *rebbe* placed the money in a secure place, but the next morning, it was gone. The *rebbe* entered the *bais medrash* and announced that *davening* would not begin until the money was returned to its rightful owner.

No one came forward.

Time passed, but the mystery wasn't solved. Finally, the *rebbe* went into his house, called over one of the attendants, and said, "Give back the money you took."

The attendant broke down and admitted his misdeed.

"If the *rebbe* knew who had taken the money," the *gabbai* asked, "why did we have to wait so long to confront him?"

An elder *chossid* explained that the *rebbe* knew who the culprit was; that wasn't the hard part. The challenge for the *rebbe* was being able to look another Jew in the face and accuse him of being a thief. It took the *rebbe* hours to get to that point, after he had exhausted all opportunities for the man to save face.

Upon hearing the *chossid's* explanation, the *Sefas Emes* confirmed what he had said.

During these days of *Sefirah*, as we seek improvement and mourn the passing of Rabi Akiva's students, we have to bring ourselves to the level of love and care for others that it hurts us to embarrass other people, even when they may be deserving of punishment. We must always do what we can to help people protect their dignity, as they were created in the image of Hashem.

As our communities grow large, *bli ayin hora*, there is a tendency to take others for granted and not be mindful of their needs and feelings. In a small community, every person is precious and is needed to form a cohesive group, so, naturally, their feelings and concerns are more readily addressed. In a small town, every customer in the kosher grocery is appreciated, as they are needed for the proprietor to earn an income. In larger communities, where there are more customers and clientele to choose from, the owner must be cognizant not to become flippant with the needs and feelings of his Jewish customers.

And it is not only storekeepers. Everyone who comes into contact with other people during the course of the day must take note of this. If we want to realize the levels the Torah sets for us to achieve goodness, contentment and Torah itself, we have to show respect for all. If we want to attain the freedom our forefathers did at the time of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* and merit the ultimate redemption, we have to not only achieve excellence in Torah and be more scrupulous in our conduct and observance, but also be more considerate and caring for all.

May we all merit to advance daily and acquire Torah and proper *middos* so that we merit the *geulah sheleimah b'meheirah*.