



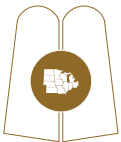
שפה ברורה

The Halachos of Sefiras Ha'omer



מטמונים

*Inspirational Short Essays
for Sefiras Ha'omer*



A Project of the
Midwest Agudas Yisroel
Council of Synagogue Rabbonim



שפה ברורה
THE HALACHOS
OF SEFIRAS HA'OMER



מטמונים
INSPIRATIONAL SHORT ESSAYS
FOR SEFIRAS HA'OMER

A project of
MIDWEST AGUDAS YISROEL
COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUE RABBONIM

שפה ברורה

Compiled and Written by:

Rabbi Yaakov Robinson

Rav, Beis Medrash Mikor Hachaim, Chicago, IL

Executive Director, Midwest Agudas Yisroel

Council of Synagogue Rabbanim

Reviewed by:

Rabbi Shmuel Fuerst Shlit"א

Dayan, Agudas Yisroel of Illinois

מטמונים

Written by:

Members of

Midwest Agudas Yisroel

Council of Synagogue Rabbonim

For questions or comments,
please contact (773) 279-8400

Table of Contents

שפה ברורה

SECTION I - Counting The Omer		
I.	Background	5
II.	Who is Obligated	5
III.	When Should it Be Counted	6
IV.	Missed a Day/Mistakes in the Counting	9
V.	Activities Prohibited Before Counting -	12
VI.	How to Count	14
III.	Accidentally Said the Day Before the Real Counting	15
SECTION II - Minhagei Aveilus During Sefira		
I.	Introduction	17
II.	Which Tragedies We Commemorate	17
III.	Which Days of Sefira	18
IV.	Which Minhagei Aveilus Apply	19
V.	Lag Ba'omer	21
מטמונים		
I.	The Power of a Yachid	23
II.	The Message of Milchigs	28
III.	Remembering Matan Torah	32
IV.	Our Task During the Days of Sefiras Ha'omer	34
V.	How to be a Student of Torah	37
VI.	A Foundation of Chessed	39
VII.	Addressing the Dangers of Freedom	40
VIII.	The Secret of the Omer	43
IX.	Freedom of Expression	45
X.	Count for Yourself	48
XI.	Fingerprints and Eyepoints and Kabbalas HaTorah	51
XII.	Days and Weeks - Lessons for Achieving Our Goals	53
XIII.	Dual Citizenship	55
XIV.	Cognizant Counting	57
XV.	The Paradigm of Ups and Downs	59
XVI.	The Connection of the Korban Ha'omer and the Shte Halechem	61
XVII.	Counting Up to Shavuot	64
XVIII.	Making Other's Needs, Our Needs	66
XIX.	Payment for Our Efforts	69

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

SECTION I COUNTING THE OMER

I. Background

There is a mitzvah to count the days from the second day of Pesach, on which the Korban Ha'omer was historically brought, until Shavuos. This counting is called Sefiras Ha'omer.

- A. D'oraysa or D'rabanan** - There is a debate among the *poskim* (halachic authorities) if this mitzvah nowadays is *d'oraysa* (Torah obligation) or *d'rabanan* (Rabbinic obligation). The consensus of the *poskim* is that this mitzvah is *d'rabanan* as a *zecher l'mikdash* (remembrance of the Beis Hamikdash).
- B. Reason for the Mitzvah** - There are many reasons that are given for this mitzvah. The most common explanation is that we, *Klal Yisroel*, count the days in anxious anticipation of Shavuos when we were given the Torah.

II. Who is Obligated

- A. Men** - All Jewish men are obligated in the mitzvah of Sefiras Ha'omer.
- B. Women** - Women are technically exempt from counting Sefira because it is a time-bound positive mitzvah, but they may

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

choose to count if they wish.

C. Children - Boys of chinuch age (around 5 or 6 years old) should be trained to fulfill this mitzvah.

◆ **Bar Mitzvah** - If a boy became a bar mitzvah during Sefira, he may continue counting with a *beracha* (blessing) if he did not miss any of the days while he was still a minor.

D. Geir (Convert) - A person who converted to Judaism in the middle of Sefira is obligated to count the rest of Sefira. No *beracha* should be said, however, even if he didn't miss any days before the *geirus* (conversion).

III. When Should it Be Counted

A. Proper Time to Count Sefira -

1. **L'chatchila - At Night** - The proper time to count Sefira is at night.
 - a. **Mitzvah Min Hamuvchar (Most Preferred)** - The ideal time to count Sefira is at the beginning of the night, 50 minutes after *shekiah* (sunset). If one will be davening Maariv later (see E. below) he may postpone his counting until that time.
 - b. **L'chatchila (Preferred)** - If one did not count Sefira at the beginning of the night, he may still count *with a beracha* the entire night until *alos hashchar* (dawn) the next morning.
 - c. **Counting During Bein Hashmashos (Between sunset**

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

and nightfall) - As stated above, one should ideally wait until *tzeis hakochavim* (50 minutes after sunset) to count, but in cases of need one may already count during *bein hashmashos*. In this case, it is best to count again later without a *beracha*. There is a discussion, however, if one should say a *beracha* on counting Sefira during *bein hashmashos*:

- i. **Shul with Maariv Right After Shekiah** - Many shuls that daven maariv shortly after *shekiah*, count Sefira after maariv with a *beracha* even though it is still *bein hashmashos*. If one regularly davens with this *minyan*, he should follow the *minhag* of the shul and count then with a *beracha*.
 - ii. **Generally Particular to Only Count after Tzeis Hakochavim (Nightfall)** - A person who generally counts Sefira only after *tzeis*, and one day he has a need to count Sefira earlier (i.e.- he is davening at an earlier *minyan* than usual and he is concerned that he will forget to count later) should do the following: He should count Sefira during *bein hashmashos*, *without a beracha* and make the following stipulation - "If I forget to count Sefira again later after *tzeis*, then this should count as my counting. But, if I remember to count later, then this counting now is void and only my counting later with a *beracha* should count."
 - iii. **Counting Before Shekiah (Sunset)** - One should not count the next day's Sefira before *shekiah*, even if it is after *plag hamincha* (1¼ halachic hours before sunset). One who did count Sefira before *shekiah* would need to count again that night *but* without a *beracha*.
2. **B'dieved - During the Daytime** - If one forgot to count Sefira at night, he may still count the next day but *without a beracha*.

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

- a. **Continue Afterwards with a Beracha?** - As long as one counted Sefira that day, whether during the night or during the daytime, he may continue to count the rest of Sefira with a *beracha*.
- b. **Delayed to Count Until the Following Bein Hashmashos** - If one forgot to count at night and the entire next day and it is already the following *bein hashamoshos*, he may still count Sefira until a maximum of 25 minutes after *shekiah* and then continue on subsequent days to count with a *beracha*.
- c. **Counting After Shacharis** - Some people have a praiseworthy *minhag* (custom) to repeat counting Sefira, without a *beracha* every day after Shacharis. This ensures that they will not accidentally miss an entire day of Sefira.
3. **Not Yotzei (Did Not Fulfill His Obligation) - Missed the Entire Day** - If one missed counting an entire day, it is too late to count that day's Sefira. There is also no system for making up a missed day. See IV below for the details of how to proceed for the rest of Sefira after missing a day.

B. Said Krias Shema Al Hamittah (Bedtime Shema) - If one remembers to count Sefira after already having said the Bedtime Shema, he may still count Sefira at that time.

C. Cloudy Day - Since one can easily make a mistake on a cloudy day, one should be careful not to count until it is definitely night.

D. Friday Night-

1. As stated above, one should not count Sefira before *shekiah*. Therefore, an early Shabbos *minyan*, should not count Sefira after maariv if it is still before *shekiah*. In this case, it is

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

important to set up a reminder to count later, because this is a very common scenario when people forget to count Sefira altogether.

2. If one accepted Shabbos early and then realized that he didn't count Friday's Sefira, he may still count at that time.

E. Maariv -

1. **After Maariv**- Ideally, Sefira should be counted after Maariv.
2. **Arrived Late to Maariv**- If someone arrives late to Maariv and the *tzibbur* (congregation) is already counting Sefira, and he is concerned that he will forget to count later, many Poskim are of the opinion that he can count with the *tzibbur* first and then daven Maariv afterwards.
3. **Hearing from the Baal Tefilla** - Just hearing the *shliach tzibbur* count Sefira does not release an individual from his personal obligation to count.

IV. Missed a Day/Mistakes in the Counting

A. Background - There is a debate among the Rishonim (Early Commentaries) if Sefira is one long mitzvah or if it is forty-nine separate mitzvos. The practical difference between the two is in the case if one missed counting a full day of Sefira. If it is one long mitzvah, he no longer has an obligation to count on subsequent days. If it is forty-nine separate mitzvos, he still has an obligation to continue counting on the subsequent days.

B. Practical Halacha - In deference to both opinions of the

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

Rishonim, the practical halacha for someone who misses a day is as follows: He should continue counting Sefira (in case it is forty-nine separate mitzvos), but no *beracha* should be said (in case it is one long mitzvah). The best thing for him to do is to hear the *beracha* from someone else, and then count the day himself.

- ◆ **It is important to re-emphasize that a person who missed a day of Sefira, SHOULD continue to count the rest of Sefira. According to most Rishonim, he is still fulfilling the mitzvah. He only lost out on the beracha.**

C. Being Motzi Others in the Beracha - If one missed an entire day of Sefira, there is a debate among the *poskim* if he may continue counting with a *beracha* by being *motzi* (saying on behalf of) another person with his *beracha*. This is most relevant when the *baal tefilla* is embarrassed not to say the *beracha* in front of the whole congregation. A Rav should be consulted in this case.

D. Intentionally Missing a Day - A person should not choose to book a flight or schedule an elective surgery that will cause him to miss a day of Sefira – even if the trip is for a mitzvah purpose.

E. Knows He Will Miss a Day - According to most *poskim*, someone who knows that he will miss one of the days of Sefira (surgery, etc.) may still start counting Sefira with a *beracha* until that date.

F. Counted the Wrong Day - If one accidentally counted the wrong day and didn't realize his error until the next night, he

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

can no longer count with a *beracha*.

G. Mistakenly Corrected Oneself - If one counted the correct day and then mistakenly corrected himself and counted the wrong day, he may still continue to count with a *beracha*. This is because the mistaken correction does not undo the correct count that was done first.

H. Weeks and Days - The mitzvah is to count both the weeks and the days -

1. **Counted Only the Days** - There is a difference of opinions if one fulfilled the mitzvah if he only counted the day without mentioning the week.
2. **Counted Only the Weeks** - Everyone agrees that if one only counted the weeks without mentioning the days he did not fulfill the mitzvah and he must count again.

I. Not Sure if Missed - If one is uncertain if he missed a day of Sefira, he may nevertheless continue counting on future days with a *beracha*.

J. International Dateline - If one crosses the international dateline during Sefira, he should bring his *shaila* to a competent Rav. The general halachos are as follows -

1. **Travelled from West to East** - If one crosses the dateline from west to east he will end up repeating a day of Sefira. For example, a person who left Australia on the 22nd day of the Omer will land in Los Angeles a day later on the 22nd day of the Omer. In this case, he should count the 22nd day over again, but without a *beracha*, and then continue to count the future days with a *beracha*.

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

2. **Travelled from East to West-** If one crosses the dateline from east to west he may end up missing a full day of Sefira. For example, a person who left Los Angeles on the 22nd day of the Omer, may land in Australia on the 24th of the Omer without ever experiencing the 23rd day of the Omer. He should discuss with his Rav if there is any way for him to 'catch' the end of the 23rd day mid-flight and count then without a *beracha*, and then he would be able to continue with a *beracha* on the subsequent days. In a case where this is not possible, and he was unable to count the entire 23rd day, he would have to count from the 24th and on without a *beracha*.

PLEASE NOTE- This shaila can be avoided completely by travelling to the Far East and Australia via Europe. It may cost a little more money and time, but it is very worthwhile to do if it can work with one's budget and schedule.

V. Activities Prohibited Before Counting -

A. The Prohibition - One may not start any of the following activities within 30 minutes of the proper time to count Sefira (i.e.- 20 minutes after *shekiah*), because of a concern that he may get distracted and forget to count -

1. **Eating** - One should not have a "meals-worth" of food. This would be a sizable amount of bread or mezonos items. A snack, smaller than the amount above or of other food items (fruits, vegetables, etc.), is permissible.
2. **Drinking** - One should not drink more than a '*k'beitzah*' of any intoxicating beverage. Other beverages are acceptable.

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

3. **Sleeping** - One should not take even a short nap, because of a concern that he will sleep longer than expected and miss that night's counting.
4. **Melacha (Work)**- One should not engage in any time consuming work, such as mowing the lawn or doing laundry.

B. Started When Permissible - If one started these activities when it was permissible to do so, he would not have to stop when the time for counting arrives as long as he will have time to count later.

C. Started When Not Permissible - If one started one of the above activities when it was already prohibited to do so, he would have to stop immediately and count Sefira before proceeding.

D. Exceptions -

1. **Shomer** - If one appoints another person to be a *shomer* (guardian) to remind him to count later, none of the above restrictions apply. He may rely on the *shomer* to remind him.
 - a. **Acceptable Shomrim** - One can only choose a *shomer* who does not need a *shomer* himself to remind him to count later. Therefore, for example, one cannot choose as his *shomer* someone that is also having a meal.
 - b. **Alarm Clock** - Most poskim are of the opinion that alarm clocks or timers are acceptable as a *shomer*.
2. **Later Minyan** - If one always davens Maariv at a later *minyan*, none of the above restrictions apply, because we are confident that he will remember to count later after the *minyan*.

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

VI. How to Count

A. Beracha -

1. One should recite the *beracha* before counting.
2. *Before* starting the *beracha*, one should already have in mind what day of Sefira it is.
3. If one counted the wrong day, but corrected himself immediately, no new *beracha* is needed. If he only realized later, he should count again with a new *beracha*.

B. Counting -

1. **“Ba’omer” vs. “La’omer”** - There is a discussion if the proper way to count is to say *“Ba’omer”* or *“La’omer”*. Both are acceptable, and one should follow his family *minhag*.
2. **Writing the Sefira** - There is a debate among the *poskim* if one can fulfill his mitzvah by writing what day of Sefira it is. Practically, one should not fulfill his obligation by writing the day. *B’dieved*, if one did only write what day it is, he may only continue counting on subsequent days without a *beracha*.

C. Standing - One should count Sefira while standing.

D. Language - One should understand what he is saying when counting Sefira. It is preferable to count Sefira in Hebrew, but the consensus of the *poskim* is that one can count in any language that he understands.

E. “L’shem Yichud”- Many people have the custom to recite *“L’shem Yichud”* before counting, others specifically do not recite

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

it. One should follow his family *minhag*.

F. Hearing the Counting from Others - One should say the *beracha* and count the Sefira himself. In a case of need, like when he missed a whole day of Sefira, he may hear the *beracha* from someone else, but he should still do the counting himself. In the rare case that someone is simply unable to even do the counting himself, he may listen to someone else who will count on his behalf. In this case, he may continue to count with a *beracha* when he is able to do so.

III. Accidentally Said the Day Before the Real Counting

A. The Concern - If one mentions what day of Sefira it is (for example someone asks him what day it is) before officially counting, it may be considered his counting for that night. This would take away his opportunity to count later with a *beracha*.

B. Practical Halacha - Starting from *plag hamincha* (1¼ halachic hours before *shekiah*) one should avoid -

1. Saying what day of Sefira it will be that night.
2. Answering what day of Sefira it is to someone who asks. One should instead answer, "Yesterday's Sefira was...".

C. Exceptions -

1. **Said as a Question** - Many *poskim* are of the opinion that if the correct night of Sefira was mentioned but only as part

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

of a question (i.e. “Is tonight the 5th night of the Sefira?”) it is not considered his counting, and he may still count that night with a *beracha*.

2. **Had in Mind Not to Fulfill His Obligation** - If one did mention the correct day of the Sefira but specifically had in mind not to fulfill the mitzvah, he may still count that night with a *beracha*.

SECTION II

MINHAGEI AVEILUS DURING SEFIRA

I. Introduction

Throughout history, many tragedies have befallen Klal Yisroel during the time of Sefira. To commemorate these tragedies, there are certain *minhagim* of *aveilus* (customs of mourning) that apply during Sefira.

II. Which Tragedies We Commemorate

1. The most famous and primary tragedy that we commemorate is the loss of Rebbi Akiva's 24,000 students who died during this time period.
2. The *Shibolei Haleket* (brought in Chok Yaakov OC 493) lists 4 additional reasons for these *minhagim* -
 - a. The judgment of evil people after death takes place between Pesach and Shavuos.
 - b. It is a time of judgment for our yearly grain supply.
 - c. The crusades happened during Sefira.
 - d. The Chmielnitzky massacres of 1648-1649 (*Tach V'Tat*) happened during Sefira.

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

III. Which Days of Sefira

A. Different Minhagim - There are many different *minhagim* as to which days of Sefira these *minhagim* of *aveilus* apply. The main point is that one should at least keep 33 days, because that is the number of days during which Rebbi Akiva's students died. The following is the full list of opinions that discuss the timing of the *minhag* of *aveilus* -

1. All of Sefira, except Erev Shavuos. (Arizal, Steipler, Chazon Ish)
2. From the beginning of Sefira until the 34th day of the Omer. (Shulchan Aruch)
3. From the beginning of Sefira until the 33rd day of the Omer. (Rama)
4. From the first day of Rosh Chodesh Iyar until the morning of the 3rd day of Sivan. (Magen Avraham)
5. From the day after Rosh Chodesh Iyar until Erev Shavuos. (Rama)
6. From the day after Pesach until Rosh Chodesh Sivan, excluding the two days of Rosh Chodesh Iyar. (Derech Chaim)
7. From Pesach until Shavuos except the three days of Rosh Chodesh.

B. Most Common Minhagim - All of these are acceptable *minhagim* and one should follow his family *minhag*. Most commonly in America, people either keep the "first half" of Sefira from the beginning until Lag Ba'omer (2. or 3. above) or the "second half" from Rosh Chodesh Iyar until the 3rd of

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

Sivan (4. above).

C. Switching Minhagim- Many *poskim* are of the opinion that one can change his *minhag* from year to year.

IV. Which Minhagei Aveilus Apply

A. During the Portion of Sefira that One is Keeping, the following activities should not be done -

1. **Weddings and Other Celebrations** - One should not schedule a wedding during his 33 days of observing the *minhagei aveilus* of Sefira.
 - a. **Vort** - An engagement party (“vort”) is permissible, but there should be no dancing or music.
 - b. **Sheva Berachos** - A wedding that was done at a permissible time but its Sheva Berachos extend into the time of keeping the *minhagim* of Sefira, may have singing but dancing should be avoided. Some *poskim* are more lenient and permit music and dancing.
 - c. **Attending a Chasuna** - One may attend a chasuna that was scheduled during the time that he is observing the *minhagim* of *Sefira*. He may even participate in the dancing, but he should not shave for the occasion.
 - d. **Bar Mitzvah** - If one is celebrating a Bar Mitzvah during Sefira, the common *minhag* is to avoid music and dancing at the *simcha* (happy occasion).
2. **Music and Dancing** - One should not listen to music or dance during the time that he is observing the *minhagim* of

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

Sefira.

- a. **Recorded Music** - Even recorded music is not permitted (including non-instrumental music).
 - b. **Singing** - One is permitted to sing during Sefira if it won't lead to dancing.
 - c. **Chol Hamoed Pesach** - Individuals who are observing the "first half" of Sefira, may nevertheless listen to music during Chol Hamoed Pesach.
 - d. **Professional Musician** - A professional musician may play at weddings and give music lessons during Sefira.
 - e. **Music Lessons** - One may take music lessons and practice musical instruments during Sefira. This type of music does not bring joy.
 - f. **Exceptions - Music not for the sake of listening enjoyment need not be avoided. For example,**
 - i. Exercise music for rhythm.
 - ii. Crib mobile or car music to calm children.
 - iii. Background music in a store or an elevator
 - iv. Listening to music in the car to avoid falling asleep.
3. **Shave or Haircut** - One should not shave or get a haircut during the time that he is observing the *minhagim* of Sefira.
- a. **Shaving for Work** - One may shave for work if he is concerned that it will lead to a financial loss.
 - b. **Mustache** - One may shave his mustache if it interferes with his eating.
 - c. **Bris Milah** - The *baalei bris* (father of the baby, the *sandek*, and the *mohel*) may shave and take a haircut in honor of a bris milah. Preferably, it should be done the morning of the bris, but if necessary, it may be done the night before.
 - d. **Health** - If one needs to shave or get a haircut for health

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

reasons, it would be permissible.

- e. **Pidyon Haben and Bar Mitzvah** - The father of the child at a Pidyon Haben and a Bar Mitzvah boy *may not* take a haircut or shave in honor of the simcha.

B. Permissible Activities - One *may* do the following during Sefira -

1. Buy new clothing.
2. Say the *beracha* of “She’hechyanu”.
3. Go on trips or vacations.
4. Do construction or renovation of a house.

V. Lag Ba’omer

The activities that are normally forbidden during Sefira are all permissible on Lag Ba’omer (33rd day of the Omer).

A. Starting in the Morning - According to most *poskim*, these activities only become permissible on the morning of Lag Ba’omer. There are many people, however, who have a *minhag* to allow music and dancing on the night of Lag Ba’omer. One should follow his family minhag.

B. Lag Ba’omer on Sunday - When Lag Ba’omer falls on a Sunday, one may shave and take a haircut on the Friday before (not Thursday night) in honor of Shabbos.

C. Wedding - A wedding that started during the day of Lag Ba’omer may extend into the night of the 34th day of the Omer.

HILCHOS SEFIRAS HA'OMER

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

I. The Power of a Yachid

HARAV AVROHOM CHAIM LEVIN SHLIT" A
ROSH HAYESHIVA, TELSHE YESHIVA-CHICAGO
YOSHEV ROSH, MIDWEST AGUDAS YISROEL
COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUE RABBONIM
CHICAGO, IL

(From the notes of Rabbi Avrohom Lipschutz
Mashgiach Telshe Yeshiva - Chicago)

PART 1

The pasuk in Parshas Bechukosai (21:9) says, "*U'fanisi aleichem v'hifreisi eschem.*" ("I will turn my attention towards you, and I will make you fruitful and increase you"). Based on the Toras Kohanim, Rashi interprets this pasuk to mean that, "I will turn away from all my other dealings to give you all of your due reward."

Harav Elya Meir Bloch zt"l (Sefer Pninei Daas) explains this Rashi as follows - The world consistently experiences major events. On the surface it seems that these events have a primary source that caused them and perhaps there are some secondary causes on the side. We need to understand, however, that we with our minimal understanding and knowledge are unable to truly discern which are the primary causes and which are the secondary. Sometimes it is the exact opposite of what we would expect. For example, later in Bechukosai the pasuk says "*v'nasati panai bachem*" (21:17), and Rashi interprets this to mean - "*poneh Ani mikol iskai l'hara lachem*" (I will turn away from all of my dealings to punish you). What this means to us is that if there is, for example, a major war between two countries, it may not have necessarily been caused by nationalistic reasons directly related to those two countries. It may only be happening because of something directly related to Klal Yisroel, that they were the ones deserving of a punishment

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

and it was brought about by these wars.

The pasuk earlier takes this powerful concept one step further, “*v’nasati panai b’nefesh ha’ocheles*” (I will pay attention to the person that eats...). Rashi once again interprets this to mean that, “I will turn away from all my dealings and focus in on *him*”. We see from here that Hashem not only focuses in on the actions of Klal Yisroel as a whole, but even on each individual. This, therefore, may mean that Hashem will create a World War that others think is happening because of the actions of several nations, when in reality it is all being staged by Hashem to bring about the proper punishment for one individual Yid. (See Sefer Pninei Daas for more on this)

We learn from here that one should never underestimate the power and importance of every individual and that which he does. After all, it may be that the whole world is revolving around this *yachid’s* actions. The whole world may be impacted by his deeds.

This concept is spoken about by the Ramban in Parshas Kedoshim (20:3) where he emphasizes that every time someone sins it has a negative impact on the entire nation. This is learned from that fact that if someone offers his son to *molech* (a form of idol worship) the judgment is that “*am ha’aretz yirgamuhu ba’aven*”. Meaning, every man in Klal Yisroel has an obligation to be involved in the punishment of this man. Why should everyone take part of the punishment? It is because this man’s sin caused damage to the entire world by causing Hashem’s *shechina* (Divine Presence) to leave Klal Yisroel. If his actions affected them all so negatively, they have a right to be part of his punishment. One man’s deeds can affect the whole world.

The Targum on the pasuk in the end of Koheles, “*sof davar hakol nishma*” (“in the end, all will be heard”), says as follows, “That which is done in this world privately, will eventually be publicized and

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

become known to all mankind". Why is it that all of man's actions will eventually be displayed for all to see? Where is the *middah k'neged middah* in that? The explanation of this can be understood based on what we have been saying until now. Even though he is only an individual that did one private act, that act nonetheless had an impact on all of Klal Yisroel and even on the entire world. If so, his act is relevant to them and it will therefore be publicized to them *l'asid lavo*.

The impact of every individual is not limited to negatives things, it even works *al achas kama v'kama* (all the more so) in the realm of the positive. The Malbim on the pasuk quoted above (Bechukosai 26:9) "*u'fanisi aleichem v'hifreisi eschem*" explains as follows - "In the end of days, I will turn to the nation that is close to me to give them an unlimited, great and eternal spiritual reward." What causes this great reward? It was the good deeds of one individual. How can the deeds of one person bring such great reward? It is because his actions caused so much good for his entire nation and the entire world. Being that his seemingly small actions had a great impact, he will merit a "great reward."

PART 2: LAG BA'OMER

Lag B'omer is the *yahrtzeit* of the Holy Tanna, Rebbi Shimon Bar Yochai ז"ל (Rashb"i). Klal Yisroel commemorates his *yahrtzeit* in a way that we do not find by any other individual. Perhaps the reason he deserves this is because he accepted upon himself to be an individual that will try save the entire world. A person that has positive impact on the entire world, deserves to have a *yahrtzeit* that is commemorated by the entire world.

The Gemara in Sukkah (45b) relates, "Rav Chizkiya said in the name of Rebbi Yirmiyah, that quoted from Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai, 'I am able to exempt the entire world from the judgment

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

it deserves from the creation of the world until today.” Rashi explains that Rashb”i understood that because of his merits he would have been able to accept upon himself all the punishments of the world to exempt them from needing judgment. On a similar note, also in Sukkah, Rashb”i commented, “I have seen all the *bnei aliyah* (those that strive to grow) and they are few. If there are only one thousand of them, my son and I are among them. If there are only one hundred of them, my son and I are still among them. If there are only two of them, my son and I are those two.” We see from these Gemaras that even though Rebbi Shimon Bar Yochai was only an individual, his actions and his greatness literally saved the entire world.

This truth is even more evident from an incident related in the *Hashmotos* of the Zohar Hakadosh (Bereishis Siman 17 Daf 105b): One day Rebbi Shimon Bar Yochai went out and saw that the world was dark. He then saw an angel that was as big as a mountain and had 30 flames of fire coming out of his mouth. The angel threatened, “I will destroy the entire world because this generation does not contain 30 tzaddikim.” Rashb”i answered him, “Go and tell *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* that Rashb”i is here.” The angel reported this to Hashem, but Hashem told the angel, “Nevertheless, destroy the world and don’t pay attention to what Rashb”i told you.” When the angel informed Rashb”i of Hashem’s response, Rashbi asked him to return to Hashem and tell Him, “Even if there aren’t 30 tzaddikim, if there are at least 10 Hashem should not destroy the world. And even if there aren’t 10, there are two...myself and my son. And if there aren’t even two, there is one, and I am the one, as it says in the pasuk ‘*tzaddik yesod olam*’ (a righteous person is the foundation of the world).

We see clearly that he was one man, but in his merit alone the whole world was able to stand. THIS is the power of an individual.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

PART 3: SHAVUOS

We also see the power of an individual in Megillas Rus. Boaz was an individual that took a stand to help Rus and redeem her. He did a mitzvah that no one else was willing to do. From this one small act, we have *Malchus Beis Dovid* (Boaz and Rus are the ancestors of Dovid Hamelech and ultimately of the *Melech Hamashiach*). The Medrash (Rus Rabbah 5) relates, "If Boaz would have known that Hashem would write about him 'He handed her some parched grain' (Rus 2:14), he would have fed her fatted calves instead." The Medrash there continues, "In the past, if someone did a good deed, the Navi (prophet) would record it. Now, if someone does a mitzvah who will write it down for posterity?" The Medrash answers, "Eliyahu Hanavi will write it, and *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* and *Melech Hamashiach* will come and sign it." We see from here so clearly that even today one person's actions can make such a powerful impact that it can literally change the whole world. Nothing goes unnoticed; it will all be written and signed. With this in mind, it is incumbent upon every individual to do everything within his reach to make the world a better place and to do all of his mitzvos with a full heart.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

II. The Message of Milchigs

RABBI ZEV COHEN

CONGREGATION ADAS YESHURUN, CHICAGO, IL

“*Minhag Yisroel Torah*,” every minhag of Klal Yisroel is full of Torah and deep meaning. One such minhag is the one to eat milk products on Shavuos. What is the meaning of this minhag? More specifically, the Rama quotes a minhag to have two loaves of bread on Shavuos as a remembrance of the *Shtei Halechem* (two loaves of bread sacrifice) that was brought on Shavuos, and he emphasizes that one of the loaves should be *milchigs*. Practically, most people fulfill this *minhag* by having cheesecake or cheese blintzes. What is the meaning of this *minhag*, wouldn't it be sufficient to just drink a glass of milk?

I would like to better explain the meaning behind these *minhagim*, but to properly do so we will need a little background.

Part 1 -

The Magen Avraham quotes a Zohar that says that the seven weeks of Sefiras Ha'omer correspond to the *shiva nekiim* (seven purification days) of a *niddah*. The Magen Avraham continues that since Chazal teach us that *dam neechar v'naaseh chalav* (the body transforms its blood into milk), it makes sense to have milk products on Shavuos to symbolize the blood of the *shiva nekiim*.

The Chidushei Ha'rim takes this comparison of Sefira to the *shiva nekiim* one step further. He points out that normally one is forbidden to cut both his fingernails and his toenails on the same day. The one exception to this rule is on Erev Shavuos, that one can cut both sets of nails. The question is, why is Erev Shavuos different? The Chidushei Ha'rim answers that we look at Erev Shavuos like an *Erev Leil Tevilla*. Just like a woman does a *chafifah*

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

and cuts all her nails in preparation for her *tevilla*, so too all of Klal Yisroel do a symbolic *chafifah* and cut all of their nails to prepare for their night of closeness with Hashem on *Leil Shavuos*. The Sfas Emes adds a complementary idea that on the night of Shavuos the “purity of a *mikveh* descends upon every individual in Klal Yisroel.” This concept would help us understand why there is a *minhag* to stay up all night on Shavuos; after the *shiva nekiim*, a *chafifah* and a *tevilla*, we stay up all night with Hashem like a *chassan* does with his new *kallah*.

Part 2 -

The *Korban Ha'omer* of Pesach is made out of barley and the *Shtei Halechem* of Shavuos is made out of wheat. Why the difference? The Aruch Hashulchan explains that these two *korbanos* respectively represented the spiritual level of Klal Yisroel at those two times. Barley was historically only used as animal fodder, wheat on the other hand was the quintessential human food. At the time of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, all of Klal Yisroel was in a very low spiritual state. We were in some ways no greater than animals, “*nimshal k'beheimos nidmu*,” and we therefore brought a *korban* made from animal food to show where we were holding spiritually. By *Matan Torah* on Shavuos we had grown to the spiritual level of being *bnei adam* (true humans) and we therefore brought a *korban* that was made from human food to symbolize our newly achieved elevated status.

Rav Yisroel Neuman shlit”a asks an additional question based on another difference between these two *korbanos* - The *Korban Ha'omer* was specifically made out of *matzah*, whereas the *Shtei Halechem* was specifically made out of *chametz*. Why this additional difference? This is especially puzzling because we rarely put *chametz* on the *mizbeiyach*.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

He answers this question based on a *yesod* that can also be found in the works of the Ramchal and others. *Chametz* represents the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination), and *matzah* represents the *yetzer hatov* (positive inclination). For this reason, we really should refrain from eating *chametz* all year round, but Hashem wanted us to have the '*yetzer hara*' in our lives and for us to struggle to overcome it. At the beginning of Sefira, it's too dangerous to bring a *korban* made from the *yetzer hara* (*chametz*). This is because we didn't receive the Torah yet to be properly equipped and have the strength to battle this *yetzer*. Only after *Matan Torah* were we able to have a *korban* made from the *yetzer hara* (*chametz*), because by then we had received the '*Torah tavlin*' (antedote of Torah) to battle against it.

It is amazing to point out that the above chiddush is practically explicit in the pesukim of Megillas Rus. The pasuk writes (1:22), "They came to Beis Lechem at the beginning of the barley harvest." Why is it important to know that it was specifically the beginning of the barley harvest? To answer this question, we need to know when the barley harvest was. The Targum on this pasuk says that the barley harvest was "*b'mali yoma d'Pischa*", meaning Erev Pesach. It turns out that the barley harvest was exactly when we brought the barley *korban* of Pesach, which all represented the notion that on Pesach we were on the spiritual level of animals. The pasuk later in the Megillah says(2:23), "...to glean until the end of the barley harvest and of the wheat harvest." This time the pasuk mentions the wheat harvest as well, and seemingly it is describing the end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest. The wheat harvest amazingly was around Shavuot time which was the same time that we brought the wheat *korban*, which all represented that by Shavuot we had grown to be on the the spiritual level of true yidden. We see from these pesukim that even the harvest seasons hint to the this concept that in a spiritual sense we start out like animals on Pesach and with steady growth during Sefira we rise to the level of humans on Shavuot!

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

This may be another reason why we read Megillas Rus on Shavuos, it follows the same pattern of - Pesach to Shavuos, Barley to Wheat, Animal to Human.

Conclusion -

Based on all of the above, we can suggest the following explanation for our *minhag* to eat *milchigs*, and specifically cheesecake, on Shavuos. After staying up all night, we have two fundamental lessons to remember. One is to realize that we have achieved great closeness to Hashem, and the other is to remember that through receiving the Torah we now have the tools to meet all the challenges of the *yetzer hara*. To accomplish both of these goals at once, we eat a food item that is both *milchigs* and *chametz*. We eat *chametz* to symbolize that after a whole night of learning Torah we are now empowered to fight the *yetzer hara* represented by that *chametz*, and we also eat *milchigs* in it to symbolize the concept of the *shiva nekiim* and *dam neechar v'naaseh chalav* that brought us so close to Hashem, like the closeness of a of a *chassan* and *kallah*. Cheesecake (or even better, a cheese danish) is the perfect food to accomplish both messages.

The beauty of every detail of a minhag Yisroel, *ayom v'nora!*

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

III. Remembering Matan Torah

RABBI ASHER EISENBERGER

AGUDATH ISRAEL OF DETROIT, SOUTHFIELD, MI

The Mishna in Avos (3:8) teaches, “*ha’shocheach davar echad mimishnaso mischayev b’nafsho*” – “One who forgets one thing from what he learned deserves to lose his life.” The Mishna arrives at this conclusion from a pasuk in Sefer Devarim (4:9) in which Moshe issues a stern warning to never forget the event of Matan Torah:

רק השמר לך ושמור נפשך מאד פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו עיניך ופן
יסורו מלבבך כל ימי חיך והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך - יום אשר עמדת לפני
ה' אלקיך בחורב

“But be careful and guard yourself vigilantly lest you forget the thing that your eyes beheld, and lest they leave your heart throughout your lives; and you shall teach them to your children and to your grandchildren – the day when you stood before Hashem your G-d at Chorev [Sinai]...”

This verse is cited also by the Gemara, in Maseches Menachos (99b), which establishes on the basis of Moshe’s warning that forgetting material one has learned violates a Torah prohibition.¹

In this pasuk, Moshe instructs us to preserve the memory of Ma’amad Har Sinai, and the Ramban, in his commentary to this verse, writes that the Torah here introduces a command to remember Ma’amad Har Sinai each day. Yet, Chazal also infer from this verse a warning against forgetting words of Torah. Rav Aharon Kotler² (Mishnas Rabbi Aharon, vol. 3) explains that retaining our Torah knowledge and remembering Ma’amad Har Sinai are, in fact, one and the same. The Torah (Devarim 5:19)

1. The Gemara there cites different views as to whether one violates one, two, or three prohibitions.

2. 1891-1962.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

says about the voice that Bnai Yisrael heard at Mount Sinai, “*v’lo yasaf*”, which Targum Onkelos explains to mean, “*v’lo pasak*”— “it did not cease.” The sounds of Sinai, Rav Aharon explains, continue to be heard, every time a Jew studies Torah. The event of *Matan Torah* is continually ongoing, occurring every time we learn, and thus forgetting a piece of Torah is akin to forgetting the event of *Ma’amad Har Sinai*.

Rav Aharon adds that this explains why we have no mitzvos commemorating *Ma’amad Har Sinai*. We observe numerous mitzvos to commemorate the event of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, but the Torah does not command any mitzvos aimed at preserving the memory of our receiving the Torah at Sinai. And although Shavuos is celebrated to mark this occasion, the Torah never explicitly associates the Shavuos celebration with *Ma’amad Har Sinai*. Rav Aharon explains that no specific commemoration of *Matan Torah* is necessary because every detail of the Torah itself commemorates this event. Every word of Torah we study reenacts *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, and thus we experience this event anew each day. As such, there was no need for Hashem to issue any particular commands for the sake of commemorating *Matan Torah*.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

IV. Our Task During the Days of Sefiras Ha'omer

RABBI YECHEZKEL GREENBERG
CONGREGATION BAIS YISROEL, ST. LOUIS PARK, MN

There is a Mitzva to count Sefiras Ha'omer during the seven-week period from Pesach to Shavuot. The Ohr Hachaim explains that since Klal Yisrael were in a state of *tum'ah* (impurity) from having been in Mitzrayim for so long, they needed a process of *taharah* (cleansing) similar to the need for a woman who is a *niddah* to undergo a seven-day purification process. Although the *niddah* only requires seven days, the Yidden required seven weeks because of the length of their stay in Mitzrayim and the depth of *tum'ah* that they had sunk to, and also because Hashem wanted them to reach the high spiritual level necessary to be eligible to receive the Torah.

It is this process that Klal Yisrael went through that we commemorate on a yearly basis, but there is one big difference. Today as we go through the process leading up to *Kabbalas* (accepting of) Hatorah, we have already received the Torah. The Ohr Hachaim in Parshas Beshalach quotes the Medrash that the *Yam Suf* (Reed Sea) initially refused to split for the Jewish people, until Moshe Rabbeinu "bested" the sea with his arguments. The question is that we find a number of times later in history that our leaders (i.e.-Yehoshua at the *Yarden* (Jordan) River and R' Pinchos ben Yair in Chullin 7a) caused water to split without the same resistance; were they greater than Moshe?! The Ohr Hachaim answers that the splitting of the sea in Moshe's time was a much greater feat, because it was done before we had received the Torah. (As Sifsei Chaim (p. 259) explains at length, when Hashem first created the world, the world ran its course solely through the Chesed and intervention of Hashem. In the year 2448, Hashem set a new world order, where from then onward Bnei Yisrael, with the power of the Torah and

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

through their actions, orchestrate how the world, or “nature,” runs its course.) With the power of Torah there is no end to what we can accomplish, especially during our yearly run-up to *Kabbalas Hatorah* in the weeks of Sefira.

Ohr Gedalyahu explains that the days of Sefira are divided into three parts, corresponding to the three pillars upon which the world stands (Avos 1:2): *Torah*, *Avodah* and *Gemilus Chasadim*. The last third is the final stretch of our preparation for Shavuos (the Yom Tov of *Kabbalas Hatorah*) and corresponds to the pillar of Torah. This final third begins on Lag Ba'omer, as the Chasam Sofer demonstrates that on that date the *Mann* (manna) began to fall from heaven, and Chazal tell us “*Lo Nitna Torah Elah L'ochlei Hamann*,” the Torah could only be given to those who were sustained by eating the *Mann*. That is because the spiritual food purified the physical aspects of our bodies to enable us to receive the Torah. Lag Ba'omer is the day that R' Shimon bar Yochai revealed many hidden secrets of the Torah before his death, and represents the idea that Sefira is a time to make strides not just in our learning of Torah but also in our *ameilus* (toiling) in Torah to properly prepare to receive the Torah on Shavuos.

We sometimes get discouraged with our learning and feel that since we aren't accomplishing too much anyway, there isn't much point in working so hard at it. The story is told about a father who came to the Steipler Gaon (R' Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky) and wanted to pull his son out of Yeshiva because he wasn't having *hatzlacha* (success). The Steipler turned to the boy and asked, “What did you learn this year?” “Mishnayos,” answered the child. “Can you say a Mishna for me?” asked the Steipler, and the boy complied. “Did you know this Mishna before the year began?” “No,” was the response. The Steipler turned to the father decisively and exclaimed, “That's not *hatzlacha*?! He knows a Mishna!!” The Steipler understood the *chashivus* (importance) of every Mishna, and the true meaning of

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

hatzlacha.

We have so many opportunities for learning in the *Botei Kenesiyos* and *Botei Midrashos* of our various Kehillos; let us take advantage of them and do our best to strengthen ourselves in this area during this period of Sefira.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

V. How to be a Student of Torah

RABBI YITZCHOK MARGARETEN
CONGREGATION SHOMRE SHABBOS, CLEVELAND HEIGHTS, OH

We are all aware that *talmidei* Rebbi Akiva died during the days of Sefiras Ha'omer. Chazal tell us that the reason they died is “*she'lo nahagu kavod zeh bazeh*”- they did not show proper respect to each other. It is not our job to understand exactly what was missing, for after all, we are discussing the students of Rebbi Akiva. But it was clearly a lack in the area of *bein adam la'chaveiro* (interpersonal relationships). Let us stop and analyze what we lost.

The Gemara tells us in Yevamos (62b) that “*v'haya ha'olam shameim*”, that the world was desolate after the death of these talmidim until Rebbi Akiva came to the south and taught Torah to a new set of students. An overwhelming part of our *Torah She'baal Peh* (Oral Torah) comes from these five new students that Rebbi Akiva taught. Imagine how much more Torah we would have, how many more *talmidim* there would have been, if 24,000 more *talmidim* of Rebbi Akiva would have been in the world to teach Torah. Yet the Ribbono Shel Olam decided that because of the lack of *bein adam la'chaveiro* it was better to have just 5 *talmidim*, not 24,000. The lesson is that Torah needs to be taught with *tahara* (purity) and any lack in *bein adam la'chaveiro* takes away from the purity of Torah. The conduit of Torah has to be pure. Specifically in the days of preparation for *kabbalas HaTorah* the Ribbono Shel Olam taught us this message.

In truth, this is clear in the Rambam. The Rambam in Hilchos Talmud Torah (4:1) says -

וכן הרב שאינו הולך בדרך טובה אע"פ שחכם גדול הוא וכל
העם צריכין לו, אין מתלמדין ממנו

“A Rabbi who is not going on a good path, even if he is a very

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

wise and all of Klal Yisroel needs him, do not learn from him.”

My Rebbe, HaRav Yaakov Weinberg zt”l, pointed out that the Rambam stressed that “all of Klal Yisroel needs him.” This means that he is the only one who knows the halacha, and if we do not learn it from him, we will not know it. Nevertheless, the Rambam is clear, it is better not to know at all than to know by learning from someone that is “not going on a good path”. Torah is not just knowledge; it is “*Divrei Elokim Chaim*” (the Words of the Living G-d) which must be given over by people who are not sullied in any way. This is a lesson of Sefiras Haomer, to make ourselves fit to be teachers and students of Torah.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

VI. A Foundation of Chessed

RABBI YAAKOV MEYER

AISH DENVER, DENVER, CO

The first night of Sefiras Haomer is “*Chessed She'b'chessed*” (kindness within kindness).

It's the source for everything and that is where everything begins in our *Avodas Hashem*. It's where our nation began. It's what Avraham Avinu taught us we needed if we were to become the nation, and it's the foundation of *Kol HaTorah Kulah* (the entire Torah).

At it's most simple and at the same time, at its deepest foundation, it reflects the reality that our entire being, and our entire potential for ascending in our *Avodas Hashem* is dependent on our focusing outward. Caring for others. Constantly looking for ways to do chessed for others (starting with those closest to us and working from there) and at the same time recognizing that every fiber of our being, and every moment of our existence is totally dependent on the Almighty.

This is the yesod (foundation) if we are serious in our attempt to receive the Torah in 49 days from now. Everything is dependent on it's yesod. For starters, let's make sure that a day never goes by without consciously performing an act of *chessed* (even if you consider it a minute one) for someone.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

VII. Addressing the Dangers of Freedom

RABBI DONIEL NEUSTADT

CONGREGATION BNEI ISRAEL

YOSHEV ROSH, VAAD HARABBONIM OF DETROIT

SOUTHFIELD, MI

We need to understand why Sefiras Ha'omer starts immediately during Pesach. Granted, it is a time to prepare for the *Kabbalas Hatorah* on Shavuos. This is what the Sefer Hachinuch writes, that we should be counting in anticipation like a “slave yearns for shade.” Nevertheless, it would seem to make more sense to wait until we are completely free-men after Krias Yam Suf (splitting of the Reed Sea) and only then start this new mitzvah? Why is it set up that even before we have a chance to digest the matzah, we are already moving on to this next mitzvah?

Perhaps we can answer as follows. It is clear from Sefer Melachim (Haftara on the second day of Pesach) that Klal Yisroel did not bring a Korban Pesach during the periods that they were involved in *avodah zara* (idol worship). Even though the majority of Klal Yisroel were not worshipping idols, nonetheless during these periods the Korban Pesach was not brought by anyone. Why did this happen? If anything, at times like these it would have been more appropriate to specifically be mindful to ensure that the korban Pesach is brought. Wouldn't it help counter the negative powers of the *avodah zara* that was happening? We also see that the halacha is that an idol worshiper himself is exempt from bringing the Korban Pesach, but why would that be? They have the status of being Jews and are obligated to perform other mitzvos like eating matzah and marror, why would they be exempt from the Korban?

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky in his Sefer Emes L'Yaakov (Parshas Bo) explains that the Korban Pesach is meant to draw Klal Yisroel away from *avodah zara*. Therefore, one whose actions have estranged him

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

from Hashem is exempt from this korban. This halacha is unique and isn't found anywhere else in the Torah. Why is it set up this way?

Rav Yaakov zt"l explains as follows - Pesach is the Yom Tov that celebrates our independence and becoming a nation. As celebratory as an independence day can be, it also carries with it a potential risk. One can mistakenly see such a day as an opportunity to create a nationalistic day that only celebrates the newfound freedom and release from any burdens or responsibilities. "We can do what we want, we are no longer slaves to Pharaoh!" Even the Korban Pesach which is accompanied by a Hallel (songs of praise) can be misused as a statement that we are celebrating our independence like other nations, without any recognition that this independence brings along with it a new set of responsibilities. We may have left being "slaves" to Pharaoh, but the masses need to realize that we need to transfer this commitment to becoming "servants" of Hashem. We cannot be an independent and free nation unless it comes with a "*Kabbalas ole Machus Shamayim*" and subjugation to Hashem's mitzvos. Any other approach or attitude can bring destruction and loss to this new nation.

This potential danger explains why there was no Korban Pesach during periods that Klal Yisroel had idolaters among them. If there would have been a Korban Pesach then, there would be many individuals that would bring the very same korban as those that fear Hashem, but with a completely different intent and purpose. They would not use the korban as a form of commitment to Hashem and taking on His yoke, but rather as sign of nationalistic independence divorced of any religious value. This is what happened during the entire period of the Melachim. A proof to this idea is the fact that halacha does not allow a person that has estranged himself from Hashem and worships idols to bring a Korban Pesach. It is because of this same danger that we have been describing, we would rather

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

have him not bring the korban at all if he may end up bringing it for all the wrong reasons.

Based on this approach of the Emes L'yaakov, perhaps we can explain why there can be no separation between *Yetzias Mitzrayim* and the beginning of counting Sefira. Right at the moment of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* the threat of “tasting freedom” and not channeling our allegiance to Hashem began. Therefore, it was and is critical to remind ourselves immediately why we left, it was only in order to commit ourselves to Hashem and receive his Torah at Har Sinai. We need to declare that there is no freedom without the Torah, “*ein lecha ben chorin elah mi she'oseik ba'torah*”. This is why Sefira couldn't start a few weeks later or at least after *Kerias Yam Suf*, the danger was already lurking and to wait a week or two may have already been too late. This is the yesod of Sefira, to show our commitment to *Malchus Shamayim* and this had to happen right away without any break in between them.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

VIII. The Secret of the Omer

RABBI EPHRAIM NISENBAUM
JEWISH LEARNING CONNECTION, CLEVELAND, OH

The Midrash (Vayikra 28:6) relates that when Haman approached Mordechai to accord him the honor Achashveirosh had instructed, he found him teaching his students the laws of the Omer offering.

Haman asked Mordechai what the Omer was and he explained that on the sixteenth day of Nissan the Jews brought this offering.

“Was it brought from silver or gold?” Haman asked.

“No, it was from barley,” Mordechai replied.

“It must have been a very large measure, then.”

“No, it was actually a very small measure!” said Mordechai.

Haman lamented, “Well, your small measure of barley accomplished more than the ten thousand silver coins I offered Achashveirosh (to destroy the Jewish people)!”

A couple of questions may be asked. First, what is the significance of the Omer that it was able to overpower Haman’s evil decree? Furthermore, why is the barley offering brought that day referred to as the Omer offering when the Omer is merely the name of the measure? It is also strange that the mitzvah of counting the days between Pesach and Shavuot, Sefiras ha’Omer, is called by the name of the measure.

The Midrash Shir Hashirim (5:2) quotes Hashem as telling the Jewish people, “Open for me an opening of teshuvah the size of an eye of a needle, and I will open for you openings wide enough for

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

cattle and wagons to pass through.” Rav Shlomo Wolbe explained that the Midrash does not mean that one *may* open an opening even the size of the eye of a needle, but rather it *must* be only the size of a needle’s eye. Spiritual growth must begin with tiny steps. Taking on too much at a time will only be counterproductive, since it will be difficult to maintain, ultimately leading to despair.

This, then, may be the understanding of the Omer offering. The period between Pesach and Shavuos is when we prepare to receive the Torah. Developing proper character in preparation for the Torah requires taking small steps, as represented by the offering of a small measure of a lower quality grain. The offering is called the Omer because its small measure is an integral part of its lesson—to begin with small steps. The counting of this period is referred to by that name for the same reason, because that is the only way to prepare properly for the Torah.

Haman could not fathom how one could offer such a measly offering to the Al-mighty. But Mordechai understood that if the Jewish people were to do Teshuva, they would have to follow the path charted by the Omer offering, beginning with small and measured steps. It was these small steps that allowed them to be spared from Haman’s nefarious plans and led them to “*kiymu v’kiblu*,” a new reacceptance of the Torah.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

IX. Freedom of Expression

RABBI HENOKH PLOTNIK
CONGREGATION BAISTEFILA, CHICAGO, IL

Many of the popular *kushyos* (questions) that families share at their Seder table on Pesach should be asked at the outset of Maggid, but the lessons learned need to be carried all the way until “*Zman MatanToraseinu*” (the time of the giving of the Torah, i.e.-Shavuos), the ultimate purpose of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*.

After “*Mah Nishtana*” we respond with “*Avadim Hayinu*”, which would seem to indicate that it is an answer to the child’s questions. If it is indeed a direct answer, its message seems anything but clear. How is the content of “*Avadim Hayinu*” an answer to the four questions of “*Mah Nishtana*”? Additionally, following this, the Haggadah continues the narrative with the *Tannaim* (Rabbis from the time of the Mishna) spending the entire night expounding about *Yetzias Mitzrayim*. Is there any logic to this sequence?

Perhaps the message is this. Our release from “*eved*” (slave) status was not merely one from physical servitude; it was a shift in the way that we perceive ourselves and our potential. An *eved*, as expounded upon by Rav Leib Bakst zt”l (Kol Aryeh Parshas Bo), is limited in every area of life. He can do no more than what is dictated to him by his master. There is no growth and all of his ambitions are stunted. This is why an *eved* that chooses to stay beyond his minimal sentence is given the punishment of *retziah*. Initially he became a slave against his will and that can’t be held against him. Now, that he decided on his own not to go free, he is responsible and needs to be punished for choosing to remain as a person with an *eved* mentality, a life bereft of any growth.

We can perhaps spin the *Mah Nishtana* to be questions of genuine curiosity about the nature of the mitzvos of the night.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

Perhaps the child is asking as follows: Are we striving to fulfill *mitzvos d'oraysa* (Torah commandments like matzah and maror), *minhagim* (customs like the 'matbilin/dipping') or *mitzvos d'rabanan* (rabbinic commandments like the 'mesubin/leaning')? Why is this night different that we are "all over the place" with our observance of Pesach?

The answer is "*Avadim Hayinu*". We used to be slaves and had no desire or ability to grow, but now we are free from slavery and its slave mentality. We are so free that, using the framework and guidelines that are given to us, we can even invent new mitzvos and even *minhagim* that are binding on all of Klal Yisroel... forever! This is how we show freedom. This is further illustrated by the *Tannaim* that stayed up the entire night learning and expounding on the lessons of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*. They were expressing that their ability to keep uncovering more and more was unlimited. Ambitious indeed. Slaves no more.

As we observe the days of Sefira, we are once again demonstrating our desire to grow and build within the yesodos of the Torah. We enact days that are a *zecher l'mikdash* (in memory of the counting done in the times of the *Beis Hamikdash*) to count and prepare for Shavuot. Pirkei Avos lists 48 traits a person acquires through Torah and a person needs to practice in order to acquire Torah. These 48 traits correspond to the 49 days of Sefiras Ha'omer, with an extra day to review our accomplishments and goals. This practice of working on acquiring these traits is an even further indication that our release from Mitzrayim offered us the opportunity to grow daily and constantly. Eventually this growth leads to us achieving our predestined goal of being *Mikablei HaTorah* (recipients of the Torah) and a "*Mamleches kohanim v'goy kadosh*" (a kingdom of princes and a holy nation).

This could perhaps be one more lesson to take from the popular

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

custom to stay up all night on *Leil Shavuos*. Unlike the *eved* of a *basar v'dam* (slave to a human master) whose every hour is dictated by his task master, we are free to spend our entire night as we wish in learning and growing in Hashem's Torah as we proudly declare ourselves "*ana avda d'Kudsha Brich Hu*" (we are servants of Hashem)!

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

X. Count for Yourself

RABBI YAAKOV ROBINSON
BEIS MEDRASH MIKOR HACHAIM, CHICAGO, IL

It is well known that the Torah was written with exacting precision. Not a single letter, let alone an entire word, is written in the Torah without a specific meaning or message.

The pasuk of Sefiras H'aomer says, “*U'sfarmem lachem mimacharas hashabbos*”(Count for yourselves on day after the day of rest). What is meant to be learned from this seemingly superfluous word “*Lachem*” (for yourselves)?

The Mishna Berura(499:5 and in Be'ur Halacha “*U'mitzvah*”) quotes a debate among the poskim that addresses this question from a halachic perspective. The Pri Chadash is of the opinion that ‘*lachem*’ is simply teaching us that counting Sefira is different than the counting that is done for the years of the *Shemmitah* and *Yovel* cycles. As opposed to *Shemmitah* and *Yovel* which are only counted by the *Beis Din* (religious court), Sefira needs to be counted by each individual. That being said, according to the Pri Chadash, one can still fulfill his personal obligation by hearing the counting done by another person on his behalf. This would work using the mechanics of “*shomeah k'oneh*” (listening is like saying), much like what we do by kiddush and hamotzie on Shabbos.

The Levush and Chok Yaakov, however, take the word ‘*lachem*’ one step further. They understand it to be a charge for each person to literally count *himself*. Meaning, as opposed to basically all other speech-related mitzvos that one can fulfill his obligation by listening to another person recite it on his behalf... Sefira is different. For the mitzvah of Sefira, the counting must literally be uttered by his own lips.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

The question is - Why? Why would Sefira be different than other mitzvos in this regard? Why can't one dispense their obligation using *shomeah k'oneh*?

Sefer Rivevos Ephraim (Rabbi Ephraim Greenblatt zt"l) quotes a Sefer N'os Desheh that offers a beautiful thought to address our question. I would like to develop his idea with some additional sources-

We are taught in Pirkei Avos, "*Derech Eretz Kadma La'Torah*"- Good middos are a prerequisite to Torah. Sefira is the time that we work on this "*Derech Eretz*" before receiving the "Torah" on Shavuos.

Sefiras Ha'omer is the time that we count in anxious anticipation for *Kabbalas Hatorah*. It is time, however, that we don't just wait passively, we use it to proactively and diligently prepare for that auspicious day. We are gifted 49 days to work on our character refinement, to make us worthy and fitting recipients of the Torah. To this end, the Alter of Kelm famously designated these 49 days to use to work on the 48 *kinyanei Torah* (with a full review on the last day), and Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky suggests that this is the reason why Pirkei Avos is learned specifically between Pesach and Shavuos. They are all ways to help us better prepare ourselves for a *Kabbalas Hatorah* on Shavuos.

Self-development by definition is a very personal experience. I would like to illustrate this with the following amusing story - Little Joey was caught cheating on a test and was sent to the principal's office. While being reprimanded by the principal for his actions, Joey asked the principal, "How do you know that I was cheating?" The principal responded, "Because you were sitting next to Steven during the exam and you had all the same answers." With a bit of *chutzpah* Joey continues, "...and how do you know that I was

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

cheating off of Steven, maybe he was cheating off of me?” The principal quickly retorts, “I was considering that option until I saw that on question #5 Steven wrote ‘I don’t know’, and you wrote ‘I don’t know either!’”

Many of us are guilty of living our lives like Joey takes his tests, constantly looking over our shoulders instead of looking into ourselves. We consistently use others as our measuring stick when we have only ourselves to compare to. Why cheat if even when you don’t get caught you have already failed? After all, his mission is not yours, and even if it was... he can’t do it for you.

Perhaps this is the reason why the Torah demands of us, “*U’sfartem Lachem*”. Count for yourself. This is the one time that no one can do it for you. It’s a strong reminder that one should never lead his life by trying to be better than others, it is only expected of us to better than we were the day before.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

XI. Fingerprints and Eyeprints and Kabbalas HaTorah

RABBI ARYEH RODIN
CONGREGATION OHEV SHALOM, DALLAS, TX

In *Hilchos Krias Shma* (Orach Chaim 61:5), the *Mechaber* writes that the *minhag* is to cover one's eyes when saying the first *pasuk* of *Shma* to help one focus on what he is saying. I would like to share with you the following idea that can have a tremendous impact on us every time we say *Shma*.

There is a common denominator that links our eyes and our fingers. Each reflects our uniqueness. Our fingers contain our fingerprints which no one else possesses. The iris in our eyes also has its unique configuration of muscles and blood vessels. As a matter of fact, eye scans are being used to identify individuals and can be more accurate than fingerprints which are often rubbed against each other and on objects and experience the wear and tear of daily living.

Consequently, as one is about to say *Krias Shma* one of the thoughts that he should have is, "Hashem, you created me in a singular fashion. Of the billions and billions of people that are alive today and the billions and billions of people that populated this planet from the dawn of history nobody has or has ever had my fingerprints or my eyeprints. Similarly, nobody can ever serve You, Hashem, in the distinctive way that I can."

What a powerful and ennobling thought this is. It can make each of us realize the love and *chashivus* (appreciation) that Hashem has for us and the greatness that we possess. It can be used as a springboard to serve Hashem in the most lofty manner.

The counting of the Omer is a time of introspection and

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

spiritual growth. As we build up to Shavuot and our own personal *Kabbalas HaTorah* let us take the lesson of our fingerprints and eyeprints to understand how special we are in the Eyes of Hashem and act accordingly!

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

XII. Days and Weeks - Lessons for Achieving Our Goals

RABBI GERSHON SCHAFFEL
YOUNG ISRAEL OF SKOKIE, SKOKIE, IL

The period of Sefiras HaOmer is the time in which we prepare to receive the Torah. Although there are many customs and practices, the Torah only mentions one mitzvah, counting the days leading up to Shavuos. We count from one to forty-nine to prepare for *kabbolas HaTorah*.

What is interesting about the mitzvah is that we are commanded to count days as well as weeks. Poskim discuss whether one fulfills the mitzvah if he counted days, without weeks or weeks without days but ideally, we count days and weeks. Why isn't it sufficient to count just days or just weeks?

The answer to this provides us with some instruction as to how to fulfill our learning goals. How many people have become inspired to complete a major learning project? I would imagine that many of the readers have thought about finishing Shas, Mishnayos or Tanach. How many people, however, have fulfilled that wish? Why do we often have a hard time actualizing such important and worthy goals?

Part of the answer is that when we consider the scope of the project, we become intimidated. How am I going to commit to 7 ½ years of Daf Yomi to finish Shas? I'll never be able to do it. Finishing all of Mishnayos? Impossible! It's too much material to complete. Why begin if I will certainly fail?

Counting the Omer teaches us how to set goals to complete large projects. One who counts all forty-nine days achieves three goals, one large, one small and one middle-sized. There is the small goal

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

of counting each day (each day representing a separate mitzvah), the medium-sized goal of counting seven weeks, and a large count that includes all of the days (temimos). If one focused on the large goal of counting forty-nine days, one may be intimidated by the project. Therefore, we begin with small steps and achievement, working towards a medium sized goal, counting the completed weeks and finally realizing the large goal of having counted the entire term. We have to learn to apply this model to all of our learning goals. We need to have immediate goals, e.g., another Daf or Perek, medium sized goals, e.g., each Massechta that is completed, and a large goal, e.g., the completion of Shas. This lesson is the perfect preparation for Shavuos so that we can set for ourselves goals that are large but achievable by taking small steps.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

XIII. Dual Citizenship

RABBI MOSHE SCHECTER
BEIS MEDRASH MIKOR HACHAIM, CHICAGO, IL

“*U’sfartem lachem... sheva shabason... chamishim yom.*” (“Count for yourselves...seven weeks...fifty days.”)

We learn from these pesukim that the mitzvah of Sefiras Ha’omer is specifically to count both the weeks and the days. Why is the mitzvah set up in this fashion?

Perhaps we can answer this question by properly understanding the following aspect of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* -

Seven days after *Yetzias Mitzrayim* we seemingly experienced a *Yetzias Mitzrayim* all over again at the *Yam Suf* (Reed Sea). Why did Hashem need to take us out twice?

The Sfas Emes explains that when we left Mitzrayim, each Jew did not have the personal merits to deserve to be redeemed. Nevertheless, we joined together as a Klal and the merit of the combined *tzibbur* made us worthy to leave Mitzrayim. Only later, after seven days under the protection of Hashem, was each Jew as an individual worthy to be redeemed.

The Medrash is well known that that Hashem split the sea into twelve lanes, one lane for each *shevet* (tribe). The Sfas Emes, however, quotes a Medrash that the sea in fact split into many more lanes than 12, there were 600,000 mini-lanes! One lane for each person in Klal Yisroel! The Sfas Emes uses this to explain the pasuk in Tehillim (74:13), “*atah porarta b’azcha yam.*” Literally translated, this means, “You broke apart the sea with your might”. There is a *remez* (hint) here, though, to a deeper understanding. The word ‘*porarta*’ means crumbled, similar to the word ‘*peirurim*’

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

which means crumbs. The pasuk uses this word to teach us that the sea was split into small pieces, like crumbs, to give each individual Jew his own lane. By doing so, Hashem was showing the greatness of each individual Jew. As if to say, "For you alone, it was *k'dai* (worth it) to split the sea."

This may be why we needed two separate redemptions. The initial *Yetzias Mitzrayim* underscored the *chashivus* (importance) of the *klal*. The second *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, seven days later at the Yam Suf, highlighted the greatness of each *yachid* (individual).

Every Jew has a dual mission in life. He must focus on his personal growth, while at the same time also focus on the growth and well being of his community and his nation as a whole.

Perhaps the idea of counting both the days and the weeks of Sefira is to emphasize this dual mission. During these days of preparing for *Kabbalas Hatorah*, we must focus both on the individual, which is represented by the days, and on the *tzibbur*, which is represented by the weeks. In this way, at *Kabbalas Hatorah*, we can receive our dual citizenship.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

XIV. Cognizant Counting

RABBI MOSHE SCHEINBERG
AGUDAS YISROEL OF WEST ROGERS PARK, CHICAGO, IL

וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת מיום הביאכם את עמר התנופה
שבע שבתות תמימות תהיינה

“And you shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the rest day, from the day when you bring the Omer of the waving - seven weeks, they shall be complete.”

The Sefer Ksav V'Kabbalah asks, Why does the pasuk say that the Sefira - seemingly a mere measure of time, is to be done “*lachem*”- for you? If the intent of the mitzva is merely to record time, there is nothing about that act that is connected to the person. The pasuk is simply telling a person “*u'safirtem*”- to count should be sufficient. What does the work “*lachem*” imply?

The answer is that the period of Sefiras Haomer, the time between Pesach and Shavuot, is not merely a block of time that we mark on our calendar. It is a process which the Torah intended to be for the benefit of Klal Yisrael, “*lachem*” for you. We find other time keeping periods, such as the seven days of the *zayin nekiim* (seven day purification period of a niddah). This act of counting also referred to as “*v'safra lah*”, are not days where a mere sequence is tracked. A person counting those days must be cognizant of her status as a whole and aware of her transition from one state - *tumah* (impurity) to another- *tahara* (purity). These are not merely days of counting. These are days when one's new identity begins to emerge and develop.

So are the days of Sefiras Haomer. During this period of time, we reflect on what makes us unique as Klal Yisrael. We take steps to reinforce those conclusions. By doing so, we reinforce our

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

identity. If utilized properly, we arrive at the Yom Tov of Shavuos in a frame of mind different than we left Pesach. When we do so, we have realized the purpose of Sefiras Haomer and then the Sefira is truly "*lachen*".

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

XV. The Paradigm of Ups and Downs

RABBI ARIEL SHOSHAN

AHAVAS TORAH: THE SCOTTSDALE TORAH CENTER,
SCOTTSDALE, ARIZONA

“Vayavo Amalek v’yilachem im Yisrael b’Rifdim.” Amalek came and waged war with Yisrael in Refidim (Shemos 17:8). With these few words, the Torah tells us of the first attack of the Jewish people after the great miracles of *Mitzrayim* and *Krias Yam Suf*, a brazen moment that made our people vulnerable throughout the generations.

Chazal tell us that our national vulnerability was a function of our own misdeeds. While Refidim is clearly the name of the geographical location where we were attacked, the name itself contains a hint of our shortcomings as we arrived there. The Mechilta records that Refidim indicates that “there the Jewish people distanced their hands (*rafu yideheim*) from Torah.” Only on account of our own steps backward in our service of Hashem, an attack from an outside source had become possible.

Our zeide, the Baltimore Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Yaakov Yitzchak HaLevi Ruderman zt”l notes the challenge this assertion poses to our overall understanding of the process of rising from *Yetzias Mitzrayim* to *Har Sinai*. We have always been taught that Klal Yisrael was submerged in the 49th gate of impurity on the day of their liberation, and that the 49 days of Sefiras HaOmer are the days during which we emulate our forbearers and grow day-by-day to ready ourselves to receive Torah as they had. Perhaps we have assumed, or even been told, that each day is a day that the Jewish people improved themselves in a linear progression, rising one gate at a time to become the prophets they would be at the foot of the mountain. But if this were so, how can we understand the words of the Mechilta that teach that at Refidim we took steps

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

backwards? If the 49-day march of the Jewish people 3,328 years ago is our model for upward mobility, how can it be accepted that they themselves slipped?

The answer informs every important process in our lives, including the very *avodah* of Sefiras HaOmer. By noting that Klal Yisrael were imperfect at least one point in their aliya from the depths of impurity in Mitzrayim, Chazal are teaching us about every process. In all moments of growth, religious, emotional, or otherwise, we take steps forward and we take steps back. We become a little more dedicated, a little more honest, or a little more courageous. And then we slip. We grow more, and then we slip again, but we find the strength to make sure the progress outpaces the slide. The Rosh Yeshiva zt"l points out the fallacy of growth without challenge and without periodic failure to overcome. By learning that the Jewish people's travels from the spiritual degradation of Mitzrayim to the foot of *Har Sinai* included a place in which "they distanced their hands from Torah", the Torah is debunking the myth of upward progress without errors and transgressions along the way.

Indeed the original weeks of Sefiras HaOmer are the paradigm for healthy and committed growth. Refidim tells us that the paradigm, and every process of our own lives, include the ups and downs of a life well lived.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

XVI. The Connection of the Korban Ha'omer and the Shte'i Halechem

RABBI SHIMON SILVER

YOUNG ISRAEL OF PITTSBURGH, PITTSBURGH, PA

Sefiras Haomer is a counting that connects two *korbanos* (sacrifices), the *Korban Ha'omer* (barley sacrifice) on the second day of Pesach and the *Shte'i Halechem* (two loaves of bread sacrifice) that were brought on Shavuos.

It seems to be, however, that there is also an independent reason to count sefira, because it is clear that irrespective to these *korbanos* one still has to count. If so, why does the Torah connect Sefira to these two *korbanos* – the *Omer* and the *Shte'i Halechem*?

It is well known that Shavuos is the Yom Tov of “*Zman Matan Toraseinu*” (The Time of Giving of the Torah). We even mention it this way in our *tefillos*, and we read the appropriate portions of the Torah for it. It is interesting to note, however, that the Torah itself never describes the Yom Tov of Shavuos in this vein. In fact, Shavuos could even sometimes fall out on the fifth of Sivan (in times when the new months are consecrated by witnesses), and not even coincide with the day that the Torah was given! The Torah calls this Yom Tov, “*Chag Shavuos*”, “*Yom Habikurim*”, and “The Day of the *Mincha Chadasha*”, but never references the fact that it is the day that the Torah was given. Why is it this way, if we all know this day as “*Zman Matan Toraseinu*”?

Perhaps we can answer that the Torah intentionally wishes to leave this aspect of the Yom Tov as *Torah Sheb'al Peh* (oral tradition). Obviously, Pesach celebrates *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, but the goal of it all was to bring us to *Har Sinai* to receive the Torah. This was told to Moshe Rabbeinu in Parshas Shemos when he was

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

standing on *Har Sinai*, “On this mountain, you will serve Hashem!” That is, Hashem was telling Moshe Rabbeinu, the entire purpose of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* will be to come back to this place to receive the Torah. This message, as paramount as it is, could all be derived through *Torah Sheb'al Peh*, it does not need to be explicit.

The explicit words from Written Torah (in Emor) intend to teach us an additional lesson about Shavuos and personal growth that needs more emphasis. A Yom Tov is not meant to be a memorial for a past event; it must be celebrated in the present. Granted, it will always carry the same message, but it always needs to be fresh and invigorated.

Hashem arranged *Yetzias Mitzrayim* to take place in the spring – *aviv shel se'orim* (spring harvest of barley). We offer the *Korban Ha'omer* then to recognize the renewal and freshness, the *hischadshus*. From that *korban* until Shavuos, we count and prepare ourselves, just as they did at the time of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* until *Matan Torah*. On Shavuos, Hashem arranged that it should be a “*Yom Bikurim*” (Day of First Fruits) and a “Day of the *Mincha Chadasha*” (A day of the New Mincha Offering). Both of these titles symbolize that it is a day for a second *hischadshus*. In essence, from Pesach until Shavuos it is one long period of *hischadshus* (renewal), starting with the new barley on Pesach and ending with new wheat on Shavuos.

The only difference is that the *hischadshus* of *se'orim* (barley) comes suddenly, with no preparation, whereas the *hischadshus* of *chitim* (wheat) comes with preparation. This is paralleled in the fact that on Pesach we eat *matzah*, which is made quickly with no time to prepare, and on Shavuos we have the *shte'i halechem* from *chametz*, that take time to rise and leaven.

We learn from this that in fact Sefiras Ha'omer is both an independent counting related to *Mattan Torah*, and is also connected

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

to these *korbanos* that teach us the lesson of *hischadshus* and the need for freshness in our *Avodas Hashem*.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

XVII. Counting Up to Shavuos

RABBI CHAIM TWERSKI
BAIS CHAIM DOVID, LINCOLNWOOD, IL

The *Yomim Tovim* (holidays) of the Jewish calendar connect us to our history. We eat matzos on Pesach to commemorate the exodus from *Mitzrayim* when we left in a rush without having time to let the dough rise. On Sukkos, we sit in the sukkah to commemorate our living under the protective clouds in the *midbar* (desert), or according to a second opinion our living in tents in the *midbar*. Shavuos, of course, commemorates *kabbalas haTorah* which took place on the sixth day of Sivan.

Chazal tell us that the mitzvah of Sefiras Omer is related to the time in the *midbar* that we as a people anticipated the receiving of the Torah. They were so eager to acquire the Torah that they asked Moshe Rabbeinu to let them know when the momentous occasion was going to happen. When they were told, they eagerly began counting the days to that event.

It is nearly universal that when a person is excited about a future event, he will count down, not up. Such is the habit of students anticipating their graduation; they will mark their calendars as to how many days are left until the end of the school year. A *chassan* and *kallah* do the same in anticipation of their wedding day. Even rocket launches are based on 'd minus' the amount of days, then the amount of hours, minutes, and seconds left until takeoff. If so, we need to ask, why is the counting of Sefiras Ha'omer not done in the usual manner of anticipated events? Why by Sefira do we count up and not down?

We might answer this by looking at the count of Sefira in a different light. The count towards Shavuos is not merely counting the 'passage of time until' the event, rather it is counting the

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

'days of preparation for' the event of *kabbalas haTorah*. The focus is not on the future, but on the past. In the *midbar*, the 49 days between leaving *tumas* (the defilement of) *Mitzrayim* and *kabbalas haTorah* were days of *Aliya* (growth). As a result of their sojourn in *Mitzrayim* the Jewish people were not yet at a level to be able to receive the Torah. All of Klal Yisroel actively used that time to work on perfecting their *middos* and raising their level of spirituality to be suitable recipients of the Torah.

Based on this, we can understand why we 'count up' during Sefira and not down. The days of Sefira are meant to commemorate and relive those special days of spiritual elevation. Indeed, there are some who have a custom to use the days between Pesach and Shavuos to study and practice each of the 48 ways by which the Torah is acquired (from Pirkei Avos - one each day, and the last day to review all of the 48 ways). If so, we are not just counting down, we are building up to our goal. We thus count accordingly, we build ourselves and count up to our *kabbalas haTorah* on Shavuos.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

XVIII. Making Other's Needs, Our Needs

RABBI ELI YELEN

CONGREGATION YAGDIL TORAH, SOUTHFIELD, MI

I took my son to the eye doctor. Sitting in the waiting room, was an elderly gentile woman. She was sitting next to another woman that was looking at a recipe in magazine and quipped, “That must be a Jewish recipe, because it doesn’t mix milk and meat. I grew up among Jews, and I know they don’t mix milk and meat. You know, I once even dated a Jewish boy, but my mother didn’t let me marry him. She told me – you can’t marry them. I really don’t understand why not, though. If you can pray to a Jew, why can’t you marry one?”

I was thinking about her seemingly logical argument, and why it’s flawed. Usually people perceive marriage as two equals. “I’m coming in with who I am, and I’m marrying my spouse where she is.” Unfortunately, however, that system usually does not work. Each spouse needs to make steps to move in the direction of the other. The more similar and more compatible that they can become, the better the marriage will be. If someone wants a “marriage” to Hashem and to cleave to Him, he needs to elevate himself to emulate Him.

The Chofetz Chaim zt”l in his preface to Sefer Ahavas Chesed, explains several *pesukim* (verses) in Parshas Eikev:

Firstly the Torah tells us to fear Hashem. The prerequisite to that – is “*v’holachto bidrocho’*”, one must emulate Hashem’s ways. He is compassionate, so must you be compassionate, etc.

Once one attains *Yiras Shomayim* (Fear of Heaven), he might think he has to only be involved with G-dly matters, and he should leave no time for human interactions. The Torah, however,

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

teaches us otherwise. If one wants to merit the higher level of ahavas Hashem (Love of G-d), he must meet the requirements of “*v'holachto b'chol drochov*” – an increased practice of emulating Hashem in all His ways.

The Chofetz Chaim continues, that if one wants to rise to even the next level of *dveikus Ba'Hashem* (Clinging to G-d), the pasuk exhorts him that he must once again fulfill the prerequisite of “*v'holachto b'chol drochov*.” Then and only then will it be possible for Hashem to bestow upon him the level of *dveikus*. To “marry” Hashem, one has to be like Hashem.

We can now understand the death of Rebbi Akiva's twenty four thousand talmidim that died during this period of Sefiras Ha'omer. Chazal say they were punished for not being “*noheg kovod ze b'zeh*” (not properly honoring one another). They didn't disgrace one another; they just didn't give *kovod* (honor) to each other. The question is, why should they deserve such a devastating punishment just for not giving honor? We find the commandment to honor parents, but where in the Torah does it say that one MUST give *kovod*, and if not – he is liable of death?

Rav Boruch Sorotzkin zt”l answers this question by pointing out that Chazal in one place say that Rebbi Akiva had twenty four thousand students, but in another it says that he had twelve thousand pairs of students. Rav Sorotzkin explained that Chazal were emphasizing to us that each talmid had his pair – his *chavrusa*, but that was the end of his world. They were so totally enveloped with their *chavrusas*, they didn't notice any of the others. So, what's so terrible with that?

In light of what was said above from the Chofetz Chaim, we can better understand. When one learns Hashem's Torah, he becomes one with Hashem. “*Yisroel, v'oraysa v'Kudsha Brich Hu, chad hu*”

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

(“The Jewish people, the Torah and Hashem are all one”- Zohar). When an individual becomes One with Hashem, one is more similar to Hashem. Through this emulating and being more similar, he attains all the levels of *yiras Hashem*, *ahavas Hashem*, and *dveikus Ba’Hashem*. If these talmidim were not *noheg kovod* to each other, thereby displaying that other people were not that important to them, it is a sign that they did not properly connect and become One with Hashem. These students were intended to be the *Mosrei HaTorah* (transmitters of the Torah) and once they exhibited that they lacked these necessary character traits, they needed to be removed and replaced by others.

There are unbelievable stories about Gedolim that while they spent every moment devoted to learning Torah, that was only how they allotted time for their own needs. When it came to the needs of others, they were willing to do anything and be totally involved in seemingly mundane details. This is because they understood that in order to be G-dly, other people’s needs need to be important to you, and that you have to be cautious to always give kovod to others. They didn’t suffer or lose out from their dedication to others, on the contrary, they became so much greater.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

XIX. Payment for Our Efforts

RABBI ELI YELEN

CONGREGATION YAGDIL TORAH, SOUTHFIELD, MI

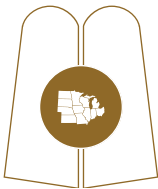
In Parshas Bechukosai we are given the charge to be “*ameilim b'Torah*” (people that toil in their Torah learning). There is reward in store for those who commit themselves to Torah learning, but the Chofetz Chaim points out that we see from the tefilla that we say after learning that we have a very unique payment system. “We toil, and they toil. We toil and receive payment, but they toil and receive no payment.” Why would they not get paid for their toil? Doesn't every skilled laborer get paid for his labor? The Chofetz Chaim explains that if a tailor, for example, works hours on a suit that ends up not fitting the customer, he isn't going to get paid. We on the other hand, even if we toil (seemingly) in vain, even if our understanding of a Gemara or a sugya is not correct and even if we don't “produce”, we will still always get paid for the toil.

We see this idea from a Gemara in Pesachim (21b). The Gemara tells us that Shimon Ha'amsuni derived lessons from every “*es*” in the Torah. Only when he reached the pasuk, “*Es Hashem Elokecha tiro*” (“One must Fear Hashem your G-d”), he had nothing to derive. He asked himself, “Who else should one fear other than G-d?” Because of this question he retracted his entire life's project and proclaimed, “Just as I received reward for my *derashos* (interpretations), so too I will receive reward for retracting from them!” We see clearly that reward is dispensed based on toil, not productivity.

The Gemara relates that Rabbi Akiva came along later and found a way to derive a lesson from the word “*es*” in the pasuk “*Es Hashem Elokecha tiro*.” He interpreted to include the need to have awe and reverence for *Talmidei Chachomim* (Torah scholars).

SEFIRAS HA'OMER ESSAYS

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz asks a basic question on this Gemara. How could it be that Shimon Ha'imsuni, whose life mission was to interpret every “*es*” in the Torah was unable to figure this out and Rabbi Akiva was? What did Rabbi Akiva see that Shimon Ha'imsuni didn't? He answers that Rabbi Akiva saw the integrity of Shimon Ha'amsuni himself. Here was a person who devoted his life to expounding every “*es*” and wrote volumes on it, and when he reached a point which appeared to show that his premise was false, in one swift moment was willing to discard it all. To have such brutal honesty and not “*dreidel*” out of it to maintain his “*shittah*” (position), displayed a level of greatness that is worthy of awe. This type of person can be included in the pasuk of “*Es Hashem Elokecho tiro*”!



*A Project of the
Midwest Agudas Yisroel
Council of Synagogue Rabbonim*