

The Ultimate Wedding: God & Israel

Counting the Omer:

- And you shall count from the next day after the sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete; To the next day after the seventh sabbath shall you count fifty days; and you shall offer a new meal offering to the Lord. (Lev 23:15-16)
- Seven weeks shall you count; begin to number the seven weeks from such time as you begin to put the sickle to the grain (Deut 16:9)
- The idea of counting each day represents spiritual preparation and anticipation for the giving of the Torah¹ which was given by God on Mount Sinai at the beginning of the month of Sivan, around the same time as the holiday of Shavuot. The Sefer HaChinuch (published anonymously in 13th-century Spain) states that the Israelites were only freed from Egypt at Passover in order to receive the Torah at Sinai, an event which is now celebrated on Shavuot, and to fulfill its laws.
- When the Children of Israel left ancient Egypt they were told by Moses that 49 days after the Exodus, they would be given the Torah. The populace was so excited at the prospect of a spiritual liberation, following the physical emancipation from Egypt, they kept a count of the passing days that ended with the giving of the Torah at the foot of Mount Sinai (Midrash Rabbah Emor)
- The period of counting the *Omer* is also a time of semi-mourning, during which the Halakha (Jewish Law) forbids haircuts, shaving, listening to instrumental music, or conducting weddings, parties, and dinners with dancing. Traditionally, the reason cited is that this is in memory of a plague that killed the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva (ca. 40–ca. 137 CE). According to the Talmud, 12,000 *chavruta* (pairs of Torah study partners), 24,000 in all, were killed (they were either killed by the Romans during the Bar Kokhba revolt 132–136 CE or they died in a "plague") as a sign of Divine anger during the days of

the *Omer*-counting for not honoring one another properly as befits Torah scholars.

- Lag BaOmer, the thirty-third day of the Counting of the Omer, is considered to be the day in which the plague was lifted, (and/or the day in which the rebellion saw a victory during the uprising of Bar Kochba) so on that day, all the rules of mourning are lifted. Lag B'Omer is also the *yahrzeit* of R. Shimon Bar Yohai, the author of the Zohar. On the day of his death, he revealed deep kabbalistic secrets which formed the basis of the Zohar. According to the *Bnei Yissaschar*, on the day of his death, bar Yochai said, "Now it is my desire to reveal secrets... The day will not go to its place like any other, for this entire day stands within my domain..." Daylight was miraculously extended until he had completed his final teaching and died. As such, the custom of lighting fires on his *yahrzeit* (anniversary of death) symbolizes this revelation of powerful light.

Shavuot: The Wedding Night:

- Tikkun Leil Shavuot
 - In keeping with the custom of engaging in all-night Torah study, Rabbi Isaac Luria, a leading Kabbalist of the 16th century, arranged a special service for the evening of Shavuot. The *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* ("Rectification for Shavuot Night") consists of excerpts from the beginning and end of each of the 24 books of Tanakh (including the reading in full of several key sections such as the account of the days of creation, The Exodus, the giving of the Ten Commandments and the Shema) and the 63 books of Mishnah, followed by the reading of Sefer Yetzira, the 613 commandments as enumerated by Maimonides, and excerpts from the Zohar, with opening and concluding prayers. The whole reading is divided into thirteen parts, after each of which a *Kaddish di-Rabbanan* is recited when the Tikkun is studied with a minyan.

- The entire text ends with the entire Book of Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs), followed by the Sheva Berachot of a wedding ceremony.
 - All of Torah...written and oral and all commentaries, are part of the ever-growing Ketubah between the bride of Israel and the groom of God
- *As a harvest holiday*
 - What is textually connected in the Bible to the Feast of Shavuot is the season of the grain harvest, specifically of the wheat, in the Land of Israel. In ancient times, the grain harvest lasted seven weeks and was a season of gladness (Jer. 5:24, Deut. 16:9-11, Isa. 9:2). It began with the harvesting of the barley during Passover and ended with the harvesting of the wheat at Shavuot. Shavuot was thus the concluding festival of the grain harvest, just as the eighth day of Sukkot (Tabernacles) was the concluding festival of the fruit harvest. During the existence of the Temple in Jerusalem, an offering of two loaves of bread from the wheat harvest was made on Shavuot. (Neusner)
 - *A Wedding*
 - God chooses us as betrothed and we accept the betrothal on the first night of Passover. Our “acceptance” is the placing of the lamb’s blood on the doorposts; a physical action
 - We are engaged and prepare for the wedding during the Counting of the Omer. At first there is some trepidation, but once we get to the 33rd day (Lag B’Omer) both parties are committed and getting excited to get married
 - We get married and agree to the “ketubah” on Shavuot, with a reading of the entire ketubah (just as we do at a wedding)
 - We have a honeymoon from Shavuot until the 17th Day of Tammuz (62 days later), when we break God’s heart with the molten calf incident. (God breaks our heart centuries later by having the walls of Jerusalem conquered on 17th of Tammuz)

- God entirely forgives us and we re-enter our marriage covenant on Yom Kippur, when Moses comes down with the 2nd set of tablets from Sinai...the ultimate sign of forgiveness. This is one of the primary understandings for over 2000 years as to why *Yom Kippur is an extremely joyous holiday* (said twice in the Talmud). Even after our breaking our marriage agreement at Sinai with the calf; we come back together with God and renew our vows...only with a deeper maturity and understanding of God's love for us.
 - **R. SIMEON B. GAMALIEL SAID: THERE NEVER WERE IN ISRAEL GREATER DAYS OF JOY THAN THE FIFTEENTH OF AB AND THE DAY OF ATONEMENT.** ON THESE DAYS THE DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM USED TO WALK OUT IN WHITE GARMENTS WHICH THEY BORROWED IN ORDER NOT TO PUT TO SHAME ANY ONE WHO HAD NONE. ALL THESE GARMENTS REQUIRED RITUAL DIPPING. THE DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM CAME OUT AND DANCED IN THE VINEYARDS EXCLAIMING AT THE SAME TIME, YOUNG MAN, LIFT UP THINE EYES AND SEE WHAT THOU CHOOSEST FOR THYSELF. DO NOT SET THINE EYES ON BEAUTY BUT SET THINE EYES ON [GOOD] FAMILY. GRACE IS DECEITFUL, AND BEAUTY IS VAIN; BUT A WOMAN THAT FEARETH THE LORD, SHE SHALL BE PRAISED. AND IT FURTHER SAYS, GIVE HER OF THE FRUIT OF HER HANDS; AND LET HER WORKS PRAISE HER IN THE GATES.
 - *Moses went up onto the mountain . . . On 17 Tammuz, the tablets were broken. On the 18th, he burned the [Golden] Calf and judged the transgressors. On the 19th, he went up for forty days and pleaded for mercy. On 1 Elul, he went up to receive the second tablets, and was there for forty days. On 10 Tishrei, G-d restored His goodwill with the Jewish people gladly and*

wholeheartedly, saying to Moses, "I have forgiven, as you ask," and gave him the Second Tablets. (Rashi, Exodus 32:1 and 33:11)

- *Succot then becomes the second honeymoon... The only holiday where we are commanded to be joyous!!!*
 - *Succot also becomes the beginning of our taking our own responsibility to truly be partners with God in the sustaining of the world, and where we take on our obligation to make the world more whole, complete, righteous, and to truly be a "light unto the nations". It is our honeymoon in our own private chamber with God.*
- From Rabbi Kalynomous Kalmah Shapira z"l (the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto) on a teaching for Shavuot:
 - *I learned from my holy father in law, of blessed memory, who repeated a teaching in the name of a tzaddik about the saying of the safes, that every person must say to himself: "When will my deeds reach the level of my ancestors'?" He explained that to "reach" is also to "Touch". It is sufficient for your actions to touch upon theirs*
 - This was taught by the Rebbe on Shavuot of June 12, 1940, in the mist of the greatest hell the Jewish people had ever known. It was his teachings like this that prompted the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto to ultimately revolt, leading to the greatest defeat of the Nazis to that point as the Jews stood up for themselves, their beliefs, and their faith.