

Well-Bread

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Counting toward Bread

The Torah's description of the holiday of Shavuot highlights a surprising theme. After describing the *Chag Hamatzot*, it frames the next holiday in light of the *Korban Shtei Halechem*, the two breads:

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. You shall bring out of your habitations two wave loaves of two tenth deals; they shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven; they are the first fruits to the Lord. And you shall offer with the bread seven lambs without blemish of the first year, and one young bull, and two rams; they shall be for a burnt offering to the Lord, with their meal offering, and their drink offerings, an offering made by fire, of sweet savor to the Lord. Then you shall sacrifice one kid of the goats for a sin offering, and two lambs of the first year for a sacrifice of peace offerings. And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the first fruits for a wave offering before the Lord with the two lambs; they shall be holy to the Lord for the priest. And you shall proclaim on the same day, that it may be a holy gathering to you; you shall do no labor in it; it shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations.

Vayikra 23:15-21

(טו) וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת מיום הביאכם את עמר התנופה שבע שבתות תמימת תהיינה: (טז) עד ממחרת השבת השביעת תספרו חמשים יום והקרבתם מנחה חדשה לה': (יז) ממושבתכם תביאו לחם תנופה שתיים שני עשרנים סלת תהיינה חמץ תאפינה בכורים לה': (יח) והקרבתם על הלחם שבעת כבשים תמימים בני שנה ופר בן בקר אחד ואילם שנים יהיו עלה לה' ומנחתם ונסכיהם אשה ריח ניחח לה': (יט) ועשיתם שעיר עזים אחד לחטאת ושני כבשים בני שנה לזבח שלמים: (כ) והניף הכהן אתם על לחם הבכורים תנופה לפני ה' על שני כבשים קדש יהיו לה' לכהן: (כא) וקראתם בעצם היום הזה מקרא קדש יהיה לכם כל מלאכת עבדה לא תעשו חקת עולם בכל מושבתכם לדרתיכם: ויקרא כג: טו-כא

The Torah states that after counting seven weeks, forty nine days, from Pesach, the fiftieth day is a Chag on which we offer two loaves of bread. This holiday, which we call Shavuot, is the culmination of Sefirat Haomer, and it is celebrated by two loaves of bread, the central feature of the chag. It is noteworthy that the Torah does not make mention of *Matan Torah*, which the Talmud teaches occurred on Shavuot.

This description is puzzling. Why is this Chag characterized by one activity- one *maaseh mitzvah*- the offering of the *Korban Shtei Halechem*, the two breads? Why is it the culmination of the counting from Pesach? In addition, how does this relate to the description found in the

nusach hatefillah of “zman matan torateinu” and to the reading of *Megillat Rut* on Shavuot? In short, what is the meaning and message of the bread of Shavuot?¹

A Foundation of Matzah

No one disputes the importance of matzah. Matzah, the unleavened bread we are commanded to eat on Pesach is of paramount importance both from a halachic and hashkafic perspective. Eating matzah on Pesach is a biblical responsibility, and conversely, eating leavened bread on Pesach is punishable by *karet*. We know that Jews go to great lengths to ensure the *kashrut* of matzah, and we distance ourselves from chametz with great stringency over Pesach. Rav David Ben Zimra (1479-1573) explains the rationale for this phenomenon:

And therefore I rely [in my explanation] on what the Rabbis taught in their teachings that chametz on Pesach is an allusion to the Yetzer Hara and that is the leavening in the dough, and therefore a person must be completely rid themselves of it and search it out from all the recesses of his mind and even a minute amount is not insignificant.

Shu”t Radbaz 3:546

ועל כן אני סומך על מה שאמרו רז"ל
במדרשות כי חמץ בפסח רמז ליצה"ר
והוא שאור שבעיסה ולכן כלה גרש
יגרש אותו האדם מעליו ויחפש עליו
בכל מחבואות מחשבותיו ואפילו כל
שהוא לא בטיל
שו"ת רדב"ז חלק ג סימן תקמו

Chametz represents the evil inclination, with its fermentation- induced inflation, the symbol of arrogance and hubris. In contrast, matzah, with its basic ingredients and unpretentious appearance, represents the ideal Jewish perspective, one of humility and simplicity. Hence, we begin our year of Jewish festivals fashioning our personalities in the model of matzah, the basic symbol of Pesach. Similarly, the *Korban Omer*, the meal offering brought on the second day of Pesach, which marks the beginning of the counting until Shavuot, is comprised of matzah. However, the Torah’s description of Shavuot mentioned above may indicate another perspective.

Wellness of Chametz

The concept of counting from Pesach until Shavuot described by the Torah suggests a period of growth and anticipation. This notion is amplified by many commentaries who characterize this time as one of personal refinement and improvement in preparation for *kabalat hatorah* on Shavuot. Many recite a daily prayer after counting the Omer asking Hashem for inspiration during this time, which is focused on purity and heightened *kedusha*. If, in fact, we are climbing the ladder of spirituality to the climax of *kabalat hatorah*, why at the apex do we offer a *korban* of leavened bread- the *Shte Halechem*? I would have expected the *korban* of Shavuot be one of spiritual perfection, symbolized by matzah? Perhaps we can suggest that from a different perspective, *lechem*, leavened bread, is nobler and more refined than matzah.

Matzah is *lechem oni*, the bread of affliction of Egypt and the bread of our exodus from slavery, which represents basic survival. The Jewish people ate matzah at their lowest spiritual plane, as they were rescued from the depraved Egyptian society. Matzah, according to the Zohar (cited

¹ Special thanks to Mrs. Ora Lee Kanner, my dear mother- in- law, for her insight and helpful suggestions on this topic.

by Rav Zadok Hakohen of Lublin in *Pri Tzaddik, Vayikra, LChag Hapesach*) is *meichlah datvata*-medicinal food. It is spiritual medicine designed to help nurture a desperately assimilated nation of slaves to spiritual health and wellness. Hence, just as a critically ill patient begins his regimented diet with only the most elemental foods, so too the Jews ate matzah, the most basic of foodstuffs, to survive and begin a path to health. In contrast to this strict, rigid diet, bread represents the expansion of health and fullness of life. Whereas the critically ill person is limited not only in his diet, but in his ability to be involved in the world, the healthy person may eat and partake in the goodness of the world around him. Bread represents this wellness.

The Holiday of Bread: Of Torah and Chessed

Shavuot, the culmination of the period of Sefirat Haomer, exemplifies the spiritual wellness of the Jewish people. During our march to Sinai, we matured from a band of slaves to an *am segulah*, a treasured nation, prepared to receive Hashem's exalted gift, the Torah itself. This achievement is expressed through a *korban* of chametz, the *Shte Halechem*. Our diet on Pesach is limited and restricted both physically, with the mitzvah of eating matzah and a *Korban Omer* of matzah, and spiritually, as we had only a handful of mitzvot. In contrast, on Shavuot, we are prepared for a regimen that is open and expansive, one of leavened bread. We are prepared to face the multifaceted opportunities and challenges of life, having refined ourselves during the period of the Omer and equipped with a Torah that guides us through every aspect of life. Perhaps this is why Shavuot does not have a specific date and name in the Torah; it is not an independent holiday. Shavuot is the culmination of Pesach, the fulfillment of the process of our national birth after we reached a state of spiritual health.

We can now appreciate why Matan Torah occurred on Shavuot. This is the time when we were spiritually mature and ready to embrace the world, and we were given the Torah to engage, and inspire it. Although we must be grounded and rooted in a world of matzah with humility and rigid discipline, we should not be confined. We should use this foundation of spiritual medicine as a beginning to expand into the world, a world of chametz, to elevate it as an offering to Hashem.

Perhaps this can shed light on the story of Rut and its relevance to Shavuot. The theme of *geirut*, conversion to Judasim, which is prominent in Megillat Rut, also manifests the role of bread. A potential convert approaches the Jewish community and begins with an experience of matzah. The Talmud requires that we teach a potential convert *miktzat mitzvot kalot* and *miktzat mitzvot chamurot*, a narrow sampling of commandments. However, the destiny of the conversion and acceptance of Mitzvot is not limited to these few. *Kabalat Hatorah* of the individual, much like the communal *geirut* at Sinai, means is to embrace the Torah in its entirety as way of life. This acceptance of the entire Torah, the convert's personal *Naaseh Venishmah*, is the commitment to follow the path of Torah throughout all of life, the vast experience of Matzah. Rut tells Naomi that wherever Naomi will go, Rut will go. She wants to live a life inspired by Torah at each and every turn, a life that engages chametz and sanctifies it as a *Korban*.

Finally, the expansiveness that is reflected in a life of chametz is the expansiveness of heart and spirit that is manifest in a life of generosity. That generosity, *chessed*, can exist only with *harvacha* and *harchava*, a life lived to its fullest. Ultimately, Chazal see the most important

message of Rut as one of chessed. This element of chessed is part and parcel of the life of *Beit Lechem*, literally the "house of bread." It is this generosity, personified by Boaz, who opens his fields and eventually his heart and marries Rut, that is celebrated on this Yom Tov of *Matan Torah*. Our *Kabalat Hatorah* is our commitment to the ideal of chessed, the value with which the Torah begins and concludes according to our tradition. A life of Torah is a life of chessed, a life lived to its fullest, a life represented by chametz, "well-bread."

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