

# A Walk Down the Aisle

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## Korban Omer: A Unique Beginning

Sefirat HaOmer, is the colloquial term for our counting of the days between Pesach and Shavuot. It is so called because the counting commences after the Korban Omer, the offering which was brought in the Beit Hamikdash on the first day of Pesach. In several ways, this Korban is unique among its class of offerings, meal offerings, termed Menachot. The Torah presents the motivation for the Korban Omer in an unusual way:

*And if you offer a meal offering of your first fruits to the Lord, you shall offer for the meal offering of your first fruits green ears of grain dried by the fire, grain beaten out of fresh ears.*

**Vayikra 2:14**

וְאִם תִּקְרִיב מִנְחַת בְּכוֹרִים לַה' אֲבִיב  
קִלּוּי בֹאֵשׁ גֵּרֵשׁ כֶּרְמֶל תִּקְרִיב אֶת מִנְחַת  
בְּכוֹרֶיךָ:  
וַיִּקְרָא בַּיּוֹד

Rashi observes that this commandment refers to the annual Mitzvah of the Korban Omer, yet the Torah introduces it with the word *im* (if) as if it were an optional Korban. This seems to accent a voluntary aspect or theme of this Korban. The Midrash emphasizes this concept of volition as an integral part of the Korban. In Parshat Emor, the Torah reiterates the laws of the Korban Omer and the Sifra explains a seemingly superfluous word in the text:

*And he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, according to your will; on the next day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it.*

**Vayikra 23:11**

*According to your will, we do not coerce the community against its will.*

**Sifra Emor 7**

וְהִנִּיף אֶת הָעֹמֶר לִפְנֵי ה' לְרִצְוֹנְכֶם  
מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת יִנִּיפְנוּ הַכֹּהֵן:  
וַיִּקְרָא כֹּגֵיץ  
לְרִצְוֹנְכֶם, אֵין כּוֹפִים אֶת הַצִּיּוֹר עַל  
כּוֹרְחוֹ  
סִפְרָא אַמּוֹר פְּרִשָׁה ז'

Based on this source, the Minchat Chinuch (Rav Yosef Babad, 19<sup>th</sup> c. Poland) notes that although all Korbanot must be offered willingly, the Korban Omer requires *ratzon gamur*, complete and total agreement (Mitzvah 302:15).

In addition, the composition of the Omer is unique. In contrast to almost all other Menachot which must be comprised of wheat, the Omer consists of barley. The role of barley in this Korban appears in another highly unusual context, in the third chapter of the Navi Hoshea:

*1. Then said the Lord to me, Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a lover, and an adulteress; even as the love of the Lord toward the people of Israel, who look to other gods, and love cakes of raisins. 2. So I bought her for me for fifteen pieces of silver, and*

(א) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי עוֹד לְךָ אִהָבָה  
אִשָּׁה אִהְבַת רַע וּמִנְאֻפֶת כֹּאֲהַבַת ה'  
אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהֵם פְּנִים אֶל אֱלֹהִים  
אֲחֵרִים וְאִהְבֵי אִשִּׁישֵׁי עֲנָבִים: (ב)  
וְאִכְרַה לִּי בַחֲמֶשֶׁה עָשָׂר כֶּסֶף וְחָמֵר

for a homer of barley, and a letekh of barley; 3. And I said to her, You shall remain as mine for many days; you shall not play the harlot, and you shall not be for another man; so will I also be for you. 4. For the people of Israel shall remain many days without a king, and without a prince, and without a sacrifice, and without a pillar, and without an ephod, and without teraphim;

### Hoshea 3

Rashi explains this passage in a remarkable fashion:

For fifteen pieces of silver, and for a homer of barley, and a letekh of barley: Targum Yonatan explains: and I redeemed you according to my command on the fifteenth day of the month of Nissan and you gave the money, shekels, as an atonement for your souls. **And I said that you should offer before me an Omer brought of barley**, as if to say, I did not trouble you with difficult things. "With fifteen silver pieces" is the numerical value of "Nissan". And in the Pesikta it explains that the fifteen silver pieces is the fifteenth of Nissan and a homer and a letekh that is forty five (for a homer is 30 seah and a letekh is a half a homer), then, And I said to her, You shall remain as mine for many days: days is two, many is three, this is five; **these are the fifty days between Pesach and Shavuot**, on that day I gave them the Torah and in it I warned them.

שערים ולתך שערים: (ג) ואמר אליה ימים רבים תשבי לי לא תזני ולא תהיי לאיש וגם אני אליך: (ד) כי ימים רבים ישבו בני ישראל אין מלך ואין שר ואין זבח ואין מצבה ואין אפוד ותרפים:  
הושע פרק ג

ב) בחמשה עשר כסף וחומר שעורים ולתך שעורים: ת"י ופרקתינון במימרי ביום חמשה עשר לירח ניסן ויהב ית כסף תקליא כיפור לנפשיהון ואמרית דיהון מקרבין קדמי עומר ארמותא מעללת שעורין כלומר לא הוגעתים בדברים קשים, בחמשה עשר כסף בגמטריא ניסן ובפסיקתא הוא נדרש בט"ו כסף בט"ו בניסן וחומר ולתך הרי ארבעים וחמשה שהחומר ל' סאה והלתך חצי חומר:  
ג) ואמר אליה ימים רבים תשבי לי - ימים שנים רבים שלשה הרי חמשה אלו נ' יום שבין פסח לעצרת בו ביום נתתי להם התורה ובה הזהרתיה

According to Rashi, this chapter of Hoshea which describes Hashem's prophet hiring an unfaithful wife for a sum of barley is an allusion to the period of the counting of the Omer, the fifty days which began with the barley offering of the Korban Omer on Pesach. We should consider, what is the significance of this Korban as the beginning of our count, and what do we learn from its unique character and symbolism?

## Shte Halechem: The Culmination of Counting

The Korban Omer is only the beginning of the counting. The ensuing seven week tally culminates with another Korban Mincha, known as the Shte Halechem, two breads that were offered in the Beit Hamikdash on Shavuot. The Torah describes the period from the Korban Omer until the Shte Halechem:

15. 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; 16. To the next day after the seventh Sabbath shall you count fifty days; and you shall offer a new meal offering to the Lord. 17. You shall bring out of your habitations two wave loaves of two tenth deals; they shall

(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':

*be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven; they are the first fruits to the Lord ... 21. 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 23:15-17, 21**

... (כא) וקראתם בעצם היום הזה  
מקרא קדש יהיה לכם כל מלאכת עבודה  
לא תעשו חקת עולם בכל מושבתכם  
לדרכתכם:  
ויקרא כג: טו- יז, כא

The finale of the count, the Shte Halechem, is similar to its counterpart, the Korban Omer, in many respects. It too is a Korban Mincha offered by the community and it requires tenufa, waving, just as the Omer. Both Menachot create new allowances, as the Omer enables us to eat the grain of the new year known as chadash, and the Shte Halechem enables this new grain to be used in Menachot in the Beit Hamikdash. However, there are marked differences between the two. The Omer consists of barley and is baked as Matzah. In contrast, the Shte Halechem is comprised of wheat and has the unique distinction of being chametz, leavened, which is highly unusual for Menachot. Clearly, there is a process- a transformation- which occurs during the period of counting which results in a distinct and different Korban Mincha at the end of the Sefirah process. Interestingly, the Torah proscribes that this progression develop over seven weeks, each with its seven days. How do we understand the religious development symbolized by the different Menachot and this sevenfold pattern?

## A Jewish Wedding

Perhaps this can all be understood if we consider an altogether different topic: the Jewish wedding. According to Halacha, to covenant of marriage consists of two stages, erusin (betrothal) and nissuin (marriage). The first step consecrates the woman to her husband through the act of kiddushin, practiced today in the form of the groom giving a ring to the bride. The second step of nissuin exists when the couple enters their new home, the chuppah and their quiet moment alone, upon which time full marital responsibilities obtain. In years bygone these two phases of marriage were separated by many months, while today only a few moments bridge the almost unnoticeable transition. While these two steps are closely related, they may not be identical. We know that kiddushin, the act of betrothal requires two witnesses. These onlookers are indispensable; without them the kiddushin would be invalid. The Or Sameach (Rabbi Meir Simcha Hakohen, 19<sup>th</sup>- 20<sup>th</sup> c., Dvinsk) in his commentary on the Rambam (Ishut 10:2) wonders whether the chuppah, the nissuin, requires witnesses as well. Perhaps nissuin is just an extension of kiddushin, and thereby requires witnesses as well?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik quotes his grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik, who answered this question unequivocally.<sup>5</sup> He taught that the concept of nissuin is fundamentally different from that of erusin and ruled that no witnesses are necessary for nissuin. In addition, although the woman's clear consent is critical for the kiddushin, Rav Chaim held that it was unnecessary for the nissuin, as all she requires is basic cognizance and understanding. Rabbi Soloveitchik

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's quotes this insight in his eulogy for his uncle, Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, entitled "Ma Dodech Midod," published in *Divrei Hagot Vehaaracha*, where he expands upon the Rav Chaim's principle.

explains his grandfather's position by demonstrating that there is a fundamental, qualitative distinction between the two stages of marriage. Kiddushin is a formal kinyan, a contract, which is a defined legal action. It is governed by the parameters of all legal instruments of transfer that require specific intent, and it is binding because of the mutual consent of the husband and wife. It is a limited partnership in that the couple may not yet live together, and they maintain their distinct identities. In contrast, nissuin does not require neither intent of acquisition nor witnesses, because it is not a maaseh. It is not a defined action. There is not specific act of nissuin; the marriage is simply the de facto result of the couple being together under the chuppah. Rav Soloveitchik explained the essence of nissuin:

*The betrothed man and woman wrap their lives in one fulfillment. Their fates intertwine, destinies merge and from the individual is born the true unity. There is in the chuppah/ yichud a symbol of joint experiences, turbulence times and challenges of a metaphysical, existential covenant. The husband and wife that marry, each checks the heart of the other, feels their experiences and knows their way of their spirit. The unity of hearts that beat in common rhythm, with mutual effect; the prayers and longings that spire and soar above as one; and the complementary desires, the feelings that emerge from one source erase the otherness of personality and two foreign individuals, who have become connected through a strong, profound and essential bond.*

הארוס והארוסה כורכים את חייהם בקיום אחד. גורליהם מתמזגים ייעודיהם מתלכדים ומן הייחוד נולדת היחדות האמיתית. יש בייחוד חופה מן הסמליות של שיתוף ניסיונות הרפתקאות ואתגרים של כריתת ברית מיטאפיסית אקסיסטנציאלית. הבעל והאשה הנשואים – כל אחד בוחן לבב משנהו מרגיש את חווייתו ויודע את הלך רוחו. איחוד הלבבות הדופקים בריתמוס אחד הנפעמים ומפעמים הדדית התפילות והתחנונים המיתמרים ועולים מעל כאחד הרציות המקבילות הרגשות הנובעים מאפיק אחד מנשלים את האחרות הפרסונאלית של שני היחידים הזרים שנתקשרו בקשר אמיץ תוכני ועצמי.

**דברי הגות והערכה**

We learn that nissuin is not an extension of the kiddushin, which is a measurable, defined act. It is a new reality, one that simply devolves from the melding of two lives into one, the presence of a new entity which is the synthesis of shared existence.

## Pesach: The First Phase of our Covenant

We know that our bond with Hashem is one that that is described as a marriage covenant. The Megillah of Shir Hashirim portrays a loving relationship between a young woman and man that Rashi explains is an allegory of the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people. We can suggest that just as a union between two people develops through the two stages of erusin and nissuin as we described above, our union with Hashem unfolded over two stages, the first on Pesach and the second on Shavuot.

We read the beautiful tale of Shir Hashirim specifically on Pesach, as during this time we commemorate our initial covenant with Hashem through yetziat Mitzrayim. We had encountered Hashem before the exodus, through our forbearers and through His miraculous interventions in Egypt. However, this nascent relationship was only concretized formally with the exodus as we entered a covenant with Hashem. We committed ourselves to a covenant with the blood of milah and Pesach, and He committed Himself by redeeming us. He chose us as his

nation, as the Torah describes, *bni bchori Yisrael*, that we are His firstborn. This initial phase parallels kiddushin, the initial, formal bond between us and Hashem. Hence, the holiday of Pesach is associated with Matzah, dough which is rudimentary and undeveloped, much as a relationship of erusin is not a fully developed marriage. The symbol of this kiddushin is the Korban Omer, a Korban of Matzah, which symbolizes the embryonic stage of our relationship with Hashem. Barley, the primary ingredient of this Korban, expresses this notion as well, because it is a less dignified food than other grains. The Netivot Shalom (Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, 1911- 2000, Israel) articulates this parallel between the Omer and kiddushin and suggests why the ensuing count, Sefirat HaOmer is in multiples of seven:

*And parallel to this concept of counting seven clean days it says, from the day that you offer the Omer of waving, because the counting of the seven clean days follows the kiddushin before the nissuin and one could say that the commandment of the bringing of the Omer is an aspect of kiddushin between Hashem and the Jewish people.*

**Netivot Shalom Sefirat Haomer Essay 2**

וכלפי ענין זה של ספירת ז"נ נאמר  
מיום הביאכם את עומר התנופה. כי  
הנה ספירת ז"נ הרי היא אחר קידושין  
קודם נישואין וי"ל דמצות הבאת  
העומר ענינה בחי' קדושין בין ישראל  
להקב"ה.  
נתיבות שלום ספירת העומר מאמר  
שני

If the Korban Omer symbolizes the stage of kiddushin, which begins the anticipatory process leading to the wedding- the nissuin, then just as a bride prepares herself by counting seven clean days before her wedding, so too we count seven weeks of seven days in anticipation of our union with Hashem.<sup>6</sup> In light of this parallel, the role of intent and volition of the Korban Omer is well understood. Just as the act of kiddushin, requires specific intent, so too, our initial commitment to Hashem, symbolized by the Korban Omer, must be solely, *lirtzonchem*, of our complete and total volition. Perhaps now we can appreciate Rashi's interpretation of the story in Hoshea. The Navi is demonstrating that the relationship of a husband and wife is the model for our relationship with Hashem. The barley, the Korban Omer, was the currency and symbol of our commitment to a process that developed over the course of fifty days and which requires subsequent fealty.

## Shavuot: A Walk Down the Aisle

The culmination of this process is the nissuin, the consummation of our marriage to Hashem. This occurred with Matan Torah on Shavuot. The Midrash Rabbah ties this concept to a verse in Shir Hashirim:

*"On the day of his marriage and on the day of the joy of his heart;" on the day of his marriage, this is Har Sinai, on the day of the joy of his heart, this is the Ohel Moed.*

**Vayikra Rabbah Acharei Mot 20**

ביום חתונתו וביום שמחת לבו, ביום  
חתונתו זה הר סיני, וביום שמחת לבו זה  
אהל מועד  
ויקרא רבה פרשת אחרי מות פרשה כ

<sup>6</sup> Tosafot articulates this parallel between the counting of the Omer and the counting of a woman's seven clean days and even suggests initially that perhaps just as one counts the Omer aloud, so too a woman should count aloud (see Tosafot, Ketubot 72a Vesafra and Menachot 65b Usfartem). In fact, the Shelah accepts this practice *l'maaseh*, see Shnei Luchot Habrit, Shaar HaOtiot, no. 376.

The Shavuot wedding metaphor illuminates a beautiful Midrash regarding our experience at Sinai:

Rabbi Yosi said, Yehuda would expound, (Devarim 32:2) 'And he said, Hashem came from Sinai' don't read it as this, rather Hashem came to Sinai to give the Torah to the Jewish people or perhaps otherwise, rather **He came from Sinai to accept the Jewish people, as this groom who goes out to greet his bride.**

And they stood, they pressed together [...] we learn that the mountain was uprooted from its place and they encroached and stood beneath the mountain as it says (Devarim 4:11) 'and you came close and you stood under the mountain'.

**Mechilta D'Rabi Yishmael Yitro**

אמר ר' יוסי, יהודה היה דורש, (דברים לג ב) ויאמר ה' מסיני בא, אל תקרא כן, אלא ה' לסיני בא, ליתן תורה לישראל או אינו אומר כן, אלא ה' מסיני בא, לקבל את ישראל, כחתן זה שהוא יוצא לקראת כלה.

ויתיצבו, נצפפו. [מלמד שהיו ישראל מתיראין מפני הזיקין מפני הזועות מפני הרעמים מפני הברקים הבאים. - בתחית ההר]. מלמד שנתלש ההר ממקומו, וקרבו ועמדו תחת ההר, שנאמר דברים ד יא) ותקרבו ותעמדון תחת ההר.

**מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל יתרו - מסכתא דבחדש פרשה ג**

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (1934- 1983, New York) in his volume, *Made in Heaven* (p.144), explains the Midrash in light of our parallel:

*The chuppah also recalls the revelation at Mount Sinai. The revelation at Sinai is seen as the marriage between God and Israel, and many marriage laws and customs are derived from the Sinai experience. It is taught that before giving the Torah to the Israelites God held the mountain over their heads. The mountain over their heads was like the chuppah under which the bridal couple stands.*

Shavuot is not only a commemoration of our receiving the Torah from Hashem. It is the celebration of the consummation of our marriage to Hashem. Matan Torah represents the final stage in our covenant with the Almighty as it is our nissuin. As Rabbi Soloveitchik explained, nissuin is more than just a formal, legally binding state. It is the most profound connection, the merging of destinies and an intimate closeness and understanding. With the revelation at Sinai, Hashem shared His essence with us to create this profound bond, as the Talmud teaches:

'Anochi' is an acronym for I wrote Myself and gave it.

**Shabbat 105a**

אנכי - נוטריקון: אנה נפשי כתיבת יהבית. מסכת שבת קה.

This is our profound bond of Torah with Hashem, one that is intimate and exclusive like a marriage in which we are privy to the secrets of His heart. It is one that creates one unified, shared entity of Hashem, Torah and the Jewish people, as our tradition teaches. This inherent connection through Torah, much like the chuppah of nissuin, requires no specific action or particular Mitzvah. Hence, the holiday of Shavuot does not involve any specific *mitzvot maasiot*-practical religious actions. It is simply *Atzeret*, a time of cessation of work to enable us to focus on our relationship as we stand beneath the canopy of Har Sinai. The Korban of Shavuot, the Shte Halechem, symbolizes this climax of our relationship. It is comprised of the noble ingredient wheat and is prepared as chametz which both symbolize the advanced degree of fulfillment in our connection. It differs from the Omer in that the intentionality of focus is less

crucial, as it does not represent a juridical agreement but rather the emotional and spiritual reality of a developed relationship.

The anticipation of Shavuot, the preparation for our wedding, is one which ought to be filled with great emotion. Rabbi Soloveitchik relates that this is expressed in some congregations in their Tefillot:

*The relationship between God and us is described as a marriage in the piyutim for the seven weeks separating Shavu'ot from Pesah. All of these piyutim are centered around a verse in Shir ha-Shirim (1:7), "Why shall I be like one veiled in mourning (ke-otyah)?" The Midrash says that otyah is "ke-armalta, like a widow." I remember that in the old batei midrashim in Lithuania, they used to recite payit every Shabbat between Pesah and Shavu'ot. Many of the piyutim were written by Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, and all of them centered about one idea, namely, that there is a love affair between Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu and Yisrael. And Shavu'ot is when the love of Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu for Yisrael, and vice-versa, that of Yisrael for HaKadosh Barukh Hu, is consummated. Shavu'ot is the yom hanisu'in, the day of marriage.*

***The Lord is Righteous in all His Ways p. 193***

We should anticipate Shavuot, our Matan Torah, with the excitement and anticipation as we would for a wedding. When we finally reach this great day of excitement, *Yom Chatunato*, we should aspire to feel a sense of profound joy and exhilaration, much as we do when we participate in a chuppah. We watch as the bride and groom walk down the aisle, moved by a sense of commitment and overwhelmed by joy and happiness. It is a time of great love. Shavuot is our walk down the aisle with Hashem. It is a time to feel our emotional bond with our Beloved. It is an opportunity to appreciate our commitment and to feel the excitement and joy of our spiritual journey together with Hashem. It is a time in which we celebrate Torah, the ultimate connection that consummates our unification with Hashem, which is renewed each year on the anniversary of our wedding at Har Sinai.