YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**shavuot**

**Days of *Tikkun Ha-middot***

**Rav Shlomo Levy**

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

From the second day of Pesach until Shavuot, we count the forty-nine days of *sefirat* *ha-omer*. What is the purpose of these days?

Let us first consider the fundamental prohibition of the week of Pesach:

Even the smallest amount of leaven on Passover makes whatever mixture it is in — whether of its kind or of another — forbidden, even to derive benefit from it. (*Shulchan Arukh*, *OC* 447:1)

This halakhic principle means that if even a tiny crumb of *chametz* falls into a large dish on Pesach, all of the food becomes forbidden. The *Zohar (Bereishit* 226b) explains the spiritual significance of *chametz* on Pesach in the following manner:

At this point, Israel began to enter the holy portion of the Holy One, blessed be He, and to destroy the leaven from within them. These are the mistaken alternatives that hold sway among the pagan nations, which are called “other gods” or “foreign gods.” They are called leaven as well, the Evil Inclination. [Israel began] to enter the *matza*, to enter the holy portion of the Holy One, blessed be He.

Even a tiny “crumb” of the *yetzer* *ha-ra*, the Evil Inclination, can cause tremendous damage to one’s spiritual wellbeing.

Now let us consider the words of R. Elazar Ha-Moda’i (*Yoma* 76a): “Which attribute is greater, that of good or that of punishment? You must say that it the attribute of good over the attribute of punishment.” Applying this to our case, if one crumb of the *yetzer* *ha-ra* can cause tremendous damage, one crumb or one spark of the *yetzer* *ha-tov*, the Good Inclination, must have the capacity to bring about massive achievements. At times, we may underestimate the power of one moment of *mitzva* fulfillment, of repentance, or of good deeds. However, we must recall that such a moment contains within it staggering potential.

This touches upon an essential aspect of the character of Pesach. The holiday of Passover is an occasion on which God expresses His passionate love for the Jewish People. Indeed, we read in *Shir Ha-Shirim* about God’s eagerness to bring about the Exodus: “Listen! My beloved! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills” (2:8). On Pesach, we have the opportunity to connect to God quickly, without preparation. Although Pesach commemorates a one-time event, it is the source from which the Jewish People derive power to continue our journey.

In parallel, the holiday of Pesach is also the starting point for the period of *sefirat* *ha-omer*. Counting from the day of the offering of the *omer* reflects a process that is the opposite of Pesach. When it comes to *sefirat* *ha-omer*, there are no shortcuts or express lanes. On the contrary, we must work toward Shavuot in an intensive and gradual manner. As we count, we make our way slowly and moderately towards the Giving of the Torah.

In fact, both approaches are essential; neither can exist without the other. On the one hand, it is necessary to have an orderly framework in order to advance, to accomplish, and to achieve. One-time phenomena have only a short-term effect. For this reason, a strong and stable foundation is indispensable. On the other hand, there is great importance to remembering unique events, those that defy the norm, and we must extract the maximum from such occurrences.

For example, if a poor person knocks on the door, the homeowner may not claim that the *mitzva* of *tzedaka* is not included in his daily schedule of serving God. One must rejoice when a *mitzva* falls into his lap, as if finding a great treasure; the *mitzva* must be carried out willingly and wholeheartedly. This is true when it comes to the fulfillment of *mitzvot*, which express our love for God, but also when it comes to events in which we sense God’s love for us.

Thus, it is only the combination of the two which creates an even, effective path to proceed in the service of God.

To what are we supposed to dedicate the days of *sefirat* *ha-omer*? This is a period of *tikkun ha-middot*, improving our attributes, bettering our character. Some mistakenly believe that the essence of serving God is to fulfill active *mitzvot*, while *tikkun ha-middot* is an esoteric pursuit for the righteous and saintly. But although fulfilling the *mitzvot* is indeed a critical element of divine service, at the core of the human mind and soul lie the *middot*. It is specifically these *middot* that define the self of any person, not practical actions.

However, *tikkun ha-middot* is not only significant in terms of improving one’s interpersonal behavior; this pursuit also connects one to the Torah. Every *mitzva* in the Torah is tied to one of the *middot*, so that improving *middot* allows a person to connect, truly and deeply, to the Torah itself.

Let us consider, for example, Rambam’s organization of his *Mishneh Torah*. He places a unique set of *mitzvot* in the Book of *Ahava* (Love or Adoration): prayer, blessings, circumcision, *tefillin*, and *tzitzit*. This is because one must work on the attribute of love in order to improve one’s relationship to these *mitzvot*.

Unfortunately, many people are unaware of this point, and thus they fail to sufficiently invest in *tikkun ha-middot*. If a father sees his son fail to wash his hands before eating bread, he will certainly rebuke him, but will he do the same if his son exhibits arrogance? Often he will not, and sometime he may in fact be pleased by his son’s aggression and strength.

These are issues that are certainly central to the days of *sefirat* *ha-omer*, a period of *tikkun ha-middot*. Over the coming days, we must work harder to improve our character. This will allow us to be fully prepared for the holiday of Shavuot, as a prerequisite for receiving the Torah anew — as we do each year.