

Commentary with Rabbi Benjamin Hecht

The Movement from Fate To Destiny

The holidays of *Pesach* and *Shavuot* are clearly connected. **Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Horeb, Edoth 23** states that both mark the creation of the Jewish nation; *Pesach*, the physical creation and *Shavuot*, the spiritual. They, in many ways, do not stand alone and, indeed, if both mark elements of the creation of the nation, to understand *am Yisrael* must demand an understanding of both these pillars of nationhood. Furthermore, it would seem that to fully comprehend the essence of one of these historical commemorations demands knowledge of the other. We are the product of neither simply *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt, or *Ma'amud Har Sinai*, the Revelation at Sinai. We are the product of both.

The two holidays are, in fact, tangibly connected through the counting of the *omer* and many commentators focus on this process in explaining the connection between these two festivals. In **Omer: Movement Towards Sinai, Insight 5761-29** (see <http://www.nishma.org/articles/insight/insight5761-29.htm>), we also addressed this issue within the context of the classic perception of the *omer* period as one of growth, as a time that we prepare for acceptance of the Torah. The time from *Yetziat Mitzrayim* to *Ma'amad Har Sinai* is seen historically as a period of time in which the Jewish Nation experienced the greatest movement of inner being, from the low level they fell to in Egypt -- and they were at when they departed from Egypt -- to the high level they experienced in receiving the Torah. The call of the *omer* is for us to similarly undergo such a movement of growth. This is a passage that we discovered may be more complex and surprising than one may, initially, think. Yet, the challenge in such explanations is that they really focus solely on the movement from the lows of the Egyptian experience to the heights of Sinai. *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, its value and special significance, seems not to be included in this process. The focus, though, cannot be solely on the movement from the depravity of Egypt to the

holiness of Sinai, although this is still clearly part of the process of the *omer* period. There is a unique lesson in the Exodus. There is a unique lesson in the Revelation at Sinai. There must also be a further unique lesson in this combination, connected through the *omer*. This must also be uncovered.

It is within this context that the words of Rabbi Hirsch may reveal the potential for a further significance. He connects *Pesach* and *Shavuot*, yet this connection seems to be passive. The former represents one idea, the latter another; together they form the basis of our nation. The connection of *omer*, though, creates a further dynamic relationship between these two concepts. They do not just exist independently, to be molded together to form the basic pillars of the Jewish nation. There is a movement of one into the other. *Pesach* precedes *Shavuot*. Applying Rabbi Hirsch's words, it would seem that the physical creation of the nation must precede the spiritual creation: we need a body in which to place a soul. More significantly, though, the presence of a national Jewish body alone would seem not to immediately lend itself to this incorporation of a national Jewish soul. There is a process by which a nation moves from being a physical entity alone to a full entity with body and soul. This process is also part of the building blocks and essence of our nation. This is the process, for *klal Yisrael*, of the *omer*.

To further elucidate this idea, the theory of shared fate and shared destiny presented by **Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, Kol Dodi Dofek** may assist. On the surface, it would also seem that the Rav is also simply presenting two static, independent pillars that are fundamental to the structure of the Jewish nation. The question is: is there a dynamic movement between fate and destiny? If we can answer that question in the affirmative, then we may be able to understand the dynamic nature of the *omer* period in connecting *Yetziat Mitzrayim* to *Ma'amad Har Sinai*.

There is a classic concept presented by the *ba'alei mussar*, the ethicists of the Jewish People: that while one is to be concerned with one's *ruchniyos*, one's spiritual development, over one's *gashmiyos*, one's physical development, when it comes to the other, one must be concerned about his/her *gashmiyos* over his/her *ruchniyos*. Of course, any statement can be taken to an extreme and this statement does not mean that one should ignore one's *gashmiyos* needs nor lack any concern for another's level of *ruchniyos* but the basic theory has merit. What really is *gashmiyos*? It is concern for the necessities of

life that, basically, allows one to physically live. On the most basic level, that is food and shelter. It may then develop into a desire for greater physical comfort – but it is at this stage that we also enter the realm of *ruchniyos*. What really is *ruchniyos*? It is basically the determination of why I wish to live. We begin with a desire to survive, take action to survive but then we question why we actually wish to survive. Concern for *gashmiyos* is the first concern – to survive; concern for *ruchniyos* is the latter concern – answering the question of why we actually wish to survive. The prime pursuit one should have for oneself should be this latter concern. The prime concern one should have for another though, must be the former. I must push myself to accept the greater challenge of determining why I should live but, in connection to another, my goal must be to create the situation where his/her needs of survival are met so that he/she can contemplate the reason this is important. My relationship with myself is to push myself. My relationship with the other is to create the situation so that the other can push himself/herself.

This idea may also be expressed in a different manner. It is well known that Aristotle maintained that an unexamined life is not worth living. A modern professor of philosophy, Simon Critchley, in his work Continental Philosophy, adds that an unlived life is not worth examining. This idea may also open our eyes within the realm of Torah. To gain the full value of Torah, it had to be given – and has to be continuously imparted -- to ones who have begun the journey of life, ones who face the challenges of survival. Only within that context, within the framework of one who is fully living – with all the challenges and heights included in that term, is it possible to gain the full intensity of the Torah. *Ruchniyos* can only be achieved as one encounters the realm of *gashmiyos*. That is the significance of this world. (See **Pirkei Avot 4:22.**) It is not only that we are commanded to assist the other with *gashmiyos* above *ruchniyos*. The full impact of *ruchniyos* is, in fact, not even possible without bringing someone into the challenge of living within this world. An unlived life cannot fully be *mekabel* Torah, accept the Torah. (There is much more to discuss regarding this issue and the difference between a spirituality that is just another form of pleasure, a type of spiritual hedonism, which emerges when *ruchniyos* does not flow from the encounter with the world, and true Torah spirituality which builds upon the encounter of living – yet this must be for the future.)

These ideas can also be applied to the concept of shared fate and shared destiny. What is shared fate? It is the recognition that our individual survival is bonded together, that I cannot survive without you just as you cannot survive without me. The concern is survival; the concern simply moves from the level of the individual to the level of the group. This is shared fate. Our survival is intertwined in the group survival. It is not only that I need you to survive in order to ensure that I can survive but, also and furthermore, that if I wish for you to survive, I must recognize that I also have to be concerned that I survive. *Ha b'ha talya*, one is dependent upon the other. This was the basic building block of Jewish nationhood at *Yetziat Mitzrayim* as the nation recognized that what happened to them as a group impacted on them individually and that what happened to them individually impacted also on all of them. The focus was not on my survival or your survival – but rather our survival. (The failure that met Moshe in his first meeting with Pharaoh, leading actually to greater enslavement, can be understood, on a certain level, of furthering this intertwined bond. Moshe's subsequent actions included a personal dimension. His actions was for the us.)

With the survival of the group at *Yetziat Mitzrayim* now starts the process that is connected with the question of why one should survive, why we should survive – why there should be a Jewish People. This is the realm of questioning. There is elation in the final act of freedom from Egypt as the armies of Pharaoh are destroyed in the Sea. There is thanksgiving to and praise of God. But what then happened; then emerged the questioning: Why do I survive? Will I really survive? Why do we survive? Will we really survive? This initiates the question of purpose which is necessary for the determination of a shared destiny. We are a group. We survive as a group. But now what? It should now not be surprising that the nation questioned and faced adversity, much from their own making. They were searching. This is the process by which fate leads to destiny. Survival can only be the first stage. In fact, concern for survival must be the first stage. Only then is it possible to reach for the second stage – a purpose for survival – which can only emerge from the dynamic realm of insecurity, ignorance and the question.

This is the path of the *omer*. Through its days, we experience the movement from the concern for survival to the concern for why we wish to survive. This was the answer of *Ma'amad Har Sinai* where God, Who granted us survival, informs us of the purpose of and

the reason for this survival. Yet this answer as to why it was important for the Jewish nation to survive had to be preceded by a process through which the members of this nation began to experience why they needed this answer. They had to experience that void between just living to eat and understanding why one eats to live.

At Pesach we rejoice over our physical creation and our bond of shared fate that emerged from our survival; and thank God for the gift of being. At Shavuot, we rejoice over our spiritual creation and our bond of shared destiny that emerged with our recognition that being must have purpose; and we thank God for the Torah. One, though, cannot truly rejoice in the recognition of an answer to the question of why we should survive unless one experiences the need for answering this question. One must feel the void in simply having survival without a purpose to truly experience the value of having a purpose. This is the time between *Pesach* and *Shavuot* as we move from fate to destiny. This is the time of the *omer* as we prepare to accept the Torah through recognizing our need, as individuals, and as a collective, for it.

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