

From the Rabbi's Desk

May 2019

Chaverim,

The seder is over. Now, we are in the midst of counting the Omer. At the Passover seder, we are enjoined not only to remember the biblical story of the Exodus, but also feel as though we were there. We are asked to feel empathy for our ancestors, to understand their flight from slavery, their entry into the wilderness, and putting their faith in God and God's appointed leader. When the Israelites trusted the process that God put before them through Moses, they began a journey toward Sinai. Their journey took them to the mountain where they experienced God. Sinai was not an end, but a beginning of a never-ending cycle. Through the annual counting of seven weeks of seven days that is the Omer, we relive an ancient journey in our own time, experiencing our own exodus and possibly, at the end of the counting, an ascendance to a new Sinai.

The Omer is also tied to the agricultural cycle. The ancient Israelites counted the weeks between the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. However, the fixing of the dates for Pesach and Shavuot was without respect to variations in planting and harvesting times. Thus, the counting of the Omer is not a guide for farmers, but rather an understanding that our collective fate is tied to the cycles of nature. Through nature we are tied to God. As the Psalmist ecstatically celebrates in Ps. 104:

He waters mountains from His lofts,
from the fruit of Your works the earth is sated.
He makes the grass sprout for cattle,
grass for the labor of humankind
to bring forth bread from the earth,
and wine that gladdens the heart of man
to make faces shine brighter than oil,
and bread that sustains the heart of man.

By our labor in the physical world, we reap produce that sustain us. In our present day, we harvest not only in fields, but also in factories and office spaces. As well as the Exodus, the Passover seder symbolizes the first of our harvests.

We consume in ritual fashion fruits of our labors. The time of the Omer can be for us a time for evaluating our ongoing relationship with the Divine.

What is the nature of our relationship? Clearly we no longer hold as truth the biblical system of rewards and punishments for our behaviors. Our theology has evolved alongside our scientific understandings of our world. One way this theological evolution is reflected is our Reform excision from our liturgy the second paragraph of the *v'ahavta*. Regardless, we cannot escape our relationship with the world that surrounds us. It clearly sustains us. But our faith demands we understand our relationship with nature in a different way. Torah in Gen. 2:15 teaches that we are servants to our environment, not it to us. The words are *l'avda ulshamrah*. This phrase could be translated simply as to till and keep. Yet the language calls us higher. *Avodah*, our sacred service; *Shamrah*, our sacred obligation to be a covenantal guardian.

The impact of humanity on the environment has increased dramatically since the beginning of the industrial revolution. Certainly we have addressed many egregious forms of pollution. However, invisible toxins in our water and air have become an even greater threat. We have nearly reached a point beyond which humanity might not be able to return. May we use this time, during the counting of the Omer, to simplify our complicated relationship to the earth. May we rededicate ourselves to the primary covenant between God and humanity, *l'avda ulshamrah*, as servants and guardians of the earth.

Rabbi Marc