BS”D

Parshas Emor

*There are many great Mitzvos in the Torah. So how come the Midrash attributes so many wonderful things specifically to the Mitzvah of the Omer?*

The Greatest Gift of All

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

The Midrash on our Parsha of Emor (28:51) lists all sorts of wonderful things they happened in the merit of the Omer sacrifice.

“Said Rabbi Yochanan, ‘The Mitzvah of the Omer should not be small in your eyes, for because of the Mitzvah of the Omer, Avraham merited to inherit the land of Canaan… In the merit of the Mitzvah of the Omer, Hashem makes peace between man and wife… The merit of the Omer stood us in good stead in the days of Gideon (in his victory over the Midianites)… It stood in good stead in the days of Chizkiyahu (in the victory over the Assyrians)…. In the days of Yechezkel…. In the days of Haman.’ When Haman approached Mordechai in order to parade him through the streets of Shushan, Mordechai assumed he was coming to kill him. Mordechai told his students to flee for their lives. They refused to abandon him, saying, “We are with you for death or for life.” Mordechai rose to pray, and his students continued to study. Haman arrived and asked the students what they were studying. “We are studying the Mitzvah of the Omer. On this day of the year, the Jewish people would bring the Omer sacrifice in the Beis HaMikdash,” they replied. “Was it gold or silver?” Haman inquired. “It was barley,” they answered. “Was it a huge amount of barley,” he asked further. “It was quite small,” they said. ‘Your small measure of barley overpowered my 10,000 talents of silver,” said Haman.

Now, of course, the Omer sacrifice which is the first offering of the new barley crop on the second day of Pesach was a great Mitzvah. But there are many other great Mitzvos. How come the Midrash attributes so many wonderful things to the Mitzvah of the Omer? To be sure, all of the events that the Midrash mentions either happened on Pesach or had something to do with barley (see details in the Midrash), but still we may ask what is so unusually great about the Omer?

To understand this, let’s go to the beginning of this section of the Midrash (28:1,2, and 3).

The sages wanted to suppress the Book of Koheles. The Torah says (B’Midbar 15:39), “Do not follow your hearts and your eyes [in improper urges].” Koheles, however, says (11:9), “Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes,” that is, give in to your urges. But the sages pointed out the end of the passage, “but know that G-d will judge you for all such things,” that is, Koheles was not sanctioning inappropriate behavior. He was actually warning about the consequences of such behavior.

Another objection to Koheles was the passage (1:3), “What value is there for man in all of his toil that he toils under the sun?” Is Koheles saying there is no value in life? What about the value of Torah?

But the sages said Koheles is rendering valueless *his* toil, that is, toil in human endeavors, but not the toil of Torah. Furthermore, it is the toil *under* the sun that has no value. But the Torah is *above* the sun and has immeasurable value.

Now Rabbi Levi interprets this passage differently. It is as if the passage reads: “What value [i.e., reward] should a man expect from all of the toil (of the Mitzvos he performs)? It is reward enough that G-d makes the sun rise every morning.” In other words, we don’t really deserve additional reward for the good deeds we do. The rising of the sun is the reward. The fact that we are alive, that we breathe, that the sun shines upon us, is itself the greatest reward. (The additional reward in Paradise is a free gift from G-d; he doesn’t owe it to us, but He gives it anyway.)

The Midrash continues: A person has to work very hard to acquire and prepare a piece of meat. But he does not work hard for the necessities of life. He sleeps in his bed. G-d makes the wind blow. He makes the clouds and the rain come. The plants grow. The fruit becomes sweet. G-d does this all for us! All we have to do to thank Him is bring the Omer sacrifice.

What is the Midrash telling us here? Life is G-d’s greatest blessing. The sun rises, the rain falls, the wind blows. We take these things for granted. We can go through life oblivious of the fact that life itself is possible only because G-d made a world such as we live in. A world of water, a world of light. The little Omer sacrifice is our humble acknowledgement of G-d’s gift of life. Thank You for life, oh, G-d. We bring our modest offering of our first grain of the season and present it to You. We acknowledge the blessing of life itself as Your greatest gift.

This is why so many great things happened in the merit of the Omer offering. It is the core of our relationship with G-d. It is our awareness that our very existence is a wondrous , bountiful gift from G-d.