



LIBERATION THROUGH THE MEDIUM OF TIME

The special Pesach emphasis on time continues well beyond Seder Night. The very next night we begin counting the Omer (קפירת הקומר), daily marking each passing day and then every week, as time slowly marches to Shavuot, nearly two months later. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zt"l* exquisitely expressed the deeper meaning embedded in this count:

When the Jews were delivered from the Egyptian oppression and Moshe rose to undertake the almost impossible task of metamorphosing a tribe of slaves into a nation of priests, he was told by G-d that the path leading from the holiday of Pesach to Shavuot, from initial liberation to consummate freedom... leads through the medium of time. The commandment of *sefirah* was entrusted to the Jew; the wondrous test of counting 49 successive days was put to him. These 49 days must be whole. If one day is missed, the act of numeration is invalidated.

A slave who is capable of appreciating each day, of grasping its meaning and worth, of weaving every thread of time into a glorious fabric... is eligible for Torah. He has achieved freedom.

As our ancestors learned at the Exodus, time is not a blank canvas on which we live out our lives but a wash of distinct colors – alternately bold and muted, bright and dark – every moment pregnant with sacred potential. It follows that the importance of the clock for modern Jewish life cannot be overstated. For this reason, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky (1891–1986), one of the greatest luminaries of the previous generation, often chose to gift *bar mitzvah* boys a new watch. On this auspicious day marking a young man's entry into adulthood, he wished to impart that there is nothing more precious in life than time.

G-d took the Jewish people out of Egypt to become His people and observe His Torah. As new masters of their own schedule, the manumitted slaves had to remember there was a Master expecting them not to allow *mitzvot* “to be leavened.” A Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* (2:20) captures this experience of time: “Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short, the task is great, the laborers are lazy, the reward is much, and the Master is insistent.”

This finds clear expression in Halacha as well. As the Rav put it:

A person reads *kriyat Shema* at 9:05 and fulfills the *mitzvah*, but at 9:06 his performance is worthless. What did he miss? It was the same recitation, the same commitment, the same dedication. And yet, he has not fulfilled the *mitzvah* of *kriyat Shema*. Time is of critical importance – not years or months, but seconds and split seconds. Time-awareness and appreciation is the singular gift granted to free man, because time belongs to him; it is his time, and he can utilize it to the utmost or waste it.²

Once sensitized to the preciousness of time, the Jew must maximize it. Wasting time (בטול זמן) is worthy of contempt.

The pricelessness of time can be felt especially acutely when we are faced with our mortality. In 1959, the Rav was diagnosed with cancer and had to undergo a difficult surgery. He shared what was going through his heart and head before entering the operating room:

The night preceding my operation I prayed to G-d and beseeched Him to spare me. I did not ask for too much. All I wanted was that He should make it possible for me to attend my daughter's wedding, which was postponed on account of my illness – a very modest wish in comparison with my insane

claims to life prior to my sickness. The fantastic flights of human foolishness and egocentrism were distant from me that night.³

Being forced to recognize that the days, months, or years we have left are finite, perhaps even countable, we rediscover their potential and value. This requires us to redetermine what we would like to accomplish in the time we have left.⁴ Our goal, therefore, during the 49 days of the *Omer* is to deepen our understanding of ourselves, our relationship with one other, and our attachment to the Almighty.

1 Shapiro, *Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat HaOmer, and Shavuot*, 147.

2 Lustiger (ed.), *Chumash Mesoras HaRav*, 2:86..

3 Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, 254.v.

4 For further thoughts on the “time-experience,” see Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav*, 200.

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