

Rabbi David Brofsky



MOURNING PRACTICES DURING THE OMER

The weeks between Pesach and Shavuot are characterized by excitement and anticipation as the Jewish people count from *Yetziat Mitzrayim* to *Matan Torah*, and by the celebrations of Yom HaAtzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim. However, they are also marked by the observance of *minhagei aveilut*, mourning practices. What are the reasons for these practices, and how does the apparent sadness of the Omer coexist with the festive nature of this period?

The *Geonim* (Sha'arei Teshuva 278) cite an ancient custom of observing certain mourning customs between Pesach and Shavuot. They attribute this custom to the death of 12,000 pairs of Rabbi Akiva's students, who according to the Talmud (Yevamot 62b), "did not treat each other with respect." Other sources (e.g. Kohelet Rabbah) attribute their death to "being stingy with their Torah."

The *Rishonim* attributed other reasons to these practices. Some (*Sefer Abudraham*) ascribe the customs to the precarious state of the Jewish people during this period, as they pray that G-d judges the world favorably. Thus, these practices are intended to arouse *teshuva*, and are not necessarily an expression of mourning. Others attribute them to the destruction of the flourishing Jewish communities of France and Germany during the Crusades (11th and 12th centuries). Similarly, Rav Ya'akov Emden writes in his *Siddur Beit Ya'akov*, "Rabbi Akiva's students died and, due to our many sins, a number of communities were destroyed at the same time of year during the Crusades in Ashkenaz, and in 5408 in Poland." The latter refers to the Chmielnicki massacres, which took place in the spring of 1648. Interestingly, neither Rambam, nor the *Machzor Vitry*, record mourning customs for this period.

Although some have objected to the observance of Yom HaShoah during the festive month of Nissan, these sources may indicate that remembering tragedies that befell the Jewish people specifically during the period of *Sefirat HaOmer* has its precedents.

The *Acharonim* discuss which *minhagei aveilut* are observed during this time period (weddings, haircuts, and according to some, other festive gatherings), as well as which part of the Omer these customs are observed.

Although we are accustomed to view this period as a time of mourning, the Ramban (Vayikra 23:36) asserts that the days between Pesach and Shavuot are actually similar to *Chol HaMoed*. He apparently views Pesach as the first festive day, Shavuot as the last day, and the entire interim period as a quasi-*Chol HaMoed*. These days are thus fundamentally days of excitement, anticipation and happiness leading up to the giving of the Torah on Shavuot.

Based upon this Ramban, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (*Yechave Da'at* 3:30) argues that "G-d forbid, one should not view the days of *Sefira* as days of tragedy," and refrain from reciting the *shehechyanu* blessing or from moving into a new house. Furthermore, since the establishment of the State of Israel and the reunification of Yerushalayim, Yom HaAtzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim are commonly and appropriately observed as festive days within this period.

Does the mourning of the Omer contradict the excitement and anticipation leading up to Shavuot, and the joy we express on Yom HaAtzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim? I would like to suggest that while the mourning customs observed during *Bein HaMetzarim*, before Tisha B'Av, when we lament the destruction of Yerushalayim and

the Temples, is actual mourning, and meant to evoke sadness, the mourning customs of the Omer are quite different. During this period, we observe mourning customs in order to remind us of the behavior that led to the death of Rabbi Akiva's students. This behavior, as described by the Talmud and the Midrashim, was the opposite of the unity the Jewish people displayed before receiving the Torah (see Rashi, Shemot 19:2). Furthermore, it is this unity which is so necessary for the continued success and development of the Jewish State.

Therefore, the mourning customs of the Omer, and the internalization of their messages and values, are wholly consistent with, and even contribute towards, the proper observance of Yom HaAtzmaut, Yom Yerushalayim, and the base upon which we received the Torah on Shavuot.

Rabbi David Brofsky writes a weekly shiur for Yeshivat Har Etzion's Virtual Beit Midrash, teaches in Midreshet Lindenbaum and Midreshet Torah V'Avoda, and is the author of *Hilkhot Moadim* and *Hilkhot Avelut* (Maggid Books).



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