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TZEDAKAH

THIS WEEK'S SEDRA¹ CONTAINS A DESCRIPTION OF ALL THE festivals, and in fact forms the Torah reading in the Synagogue on Passover and Succot. Each festival is explained in turn: Passover, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Succot. Even the Counting of the Omer, in which we are currently involved, is included in the same section.

It is remarkable, however, that right in the middle of a chapter dealing purely with festivals there is a single sentence that has seemingly nothing to do with the festivals. It reads as follows²:

“And when you will cut the harvest of your land do not cut the corners of the field, nor the gleanings of the harvest shall you cut; leave them for the poor and the Levite; I am the L-rd your G-d.”

The Rabbis comment on this unusual interruption in the flow of the passage by declaring: “Anyone who leaves these gifts for the poor is considered as if the Temple is standing in his time, and as if he had brought festive offerings to the Temple.”

There is a clear message here³. It is good and proper to celebrate all the Festivals in the appropriate manner with good food and drink, new clothes for the family, and so on. But at the same time practical help should be given to the needy to ensure that they too have something with which to celebrate.

In the time of the Temple, the sheep or cattle which each family

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brought to be offered on the Altar expressed their personal dedication to G-d. They were taking their own possessions and surrendering them for the Divine. In our time, the act of giving Tzedaka has a similar effect. We take our personal wealth, which we gained through effort, sometimes through immense effort, and we give it away to the needy. Through this all our possessions are elevated and spiritually illuminated⁴.

The Festivals transform the various seasons of the year into opportunities for a sense of contact with the Divine. The act of giving Tzedakah, Charity, helping other people in all kinds of way, has a similar effect, elevating and illuminating our possessions and our lives.

WHO IS RICH?

During the Summer months on Shabbat afternoon there is a longstanding custom to study Ethics of the Fathers. This is part of the Mishnah, compiled some two thousand years ago by the famous Rabbi Judah the Prince. It is found in every Prayerbook.

This week we study Chapter Four. In the first paragraph Ben Zoma redefines some common terms: Who is wise? Who is strong? Who is rich? Who is honoured?

On “Who is rich?” he declares in answer, “one who is satisfied with what he has.” In our era of relentlessly intensive materialism these words are a timely reminder that we may be following the wrong track. A little more true wealth, meaning satisfaction with what we have, could go a long way in creating a more genuine form of happiness and enrichment.

This regards material acquisitions. On the other hand the Sages recommend that in spiritual matters we should never be satisfied with what we have, and should always be seeking to achieve more and climb higher!

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SEDRA EMOR

COUNTDOWN

Benjy felt good. He had just enjoyed his Sedra class, where his teacher, Rabbi Kahn, had spoken about the counting of the Omer. The Torah describes that an Omer measure of barley, about two quarts, should be offered in the Temple, on the second day of Pesach. After that each person should count every day of the 7 weeks between Pesach and Shavuot. Each week has 7 days, so 7 times 7 equalled 49 days. On the 50th day it would be Shavuot. Then an offering of two loaves made of wheat would be brought in the Temple.

In the last lesson before Pesach, Rabbi Kahn had introduced the topic, explaining that every day one was meant to recite a special blessing and then count the day. The first time one counts would be on the second night of Pesach. Rabbi Kahn had challenged the boys to remember to count every single day – for 49 days!

He explained that when you count in the evening, you say the blessing before counting. If you did not count in the evening, but you are counting the next day, you count without a blessing. But the next evening you count again with a blessing. You are still 'in'.

"What happens," asked Rabbi Kahn, "if you completely forgot to count the Omer for the whole evening and the whole day? And now it is nightfall again. Can you go on counting?"

"Yes," said Adam, "but you then cannot say the blessing.

But you do count the days and the weeks of the Omer”.

“Quite right!” said Rabbi Kahn. “Now, let’s see who will still be ‘in’ when we meet again after Pesach. So, boys, have a great Pesach and enjoy the Matza!”

At break in the playground Adam had told his friends he was going to try really hard not to get ‘out’, and that’s when Benjy decided in his mind that he would also make sure to count every day! Sure enough, on the second night of Pesach, at the Seder, Benjy’s father announced that everyone should count the Omer. That was the first day. Benjy really tried hard to remember every evening.

Now in the Sedra class for Sedra Emor, the topic again came up. Rabbi Kahn explained that when the Jewish people left Egypt they were excited that they were going to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai. They were literally ‘counting the days’. They counted 49 days. Then came the Giving of the Torah on the 50th day. The Shavuot festival commemorates the Giving of the Torah.

“Do you know what I am going to ask you?” asked Rabbi Kahn, addressing the boys near the end of the lesson. Some of the boys laughed, how could they possibly know what he would ask them?!

But Adam didn’t laugh. “You are going to ask who is still counting the Omer with a blessing,” he said. “Who is still ‘in’.”

“Quite right!” said Rabbi Kahn. “Anyone...?”

Adam and Benjy put up their hands. They looked round the class. No-one else.

“Okay boys, that’s really good that two of you are still ‘in’. But remember, everyone else, you still have to count the Omer, even without a blessing. So even without saying a blessing, everyone is still ‘in’.”

All the boys in the class felt good. Countdown here we come!

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