



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון
INSTITUTE שלום הרטמן

The Second Festival of Freedom: Why Shavuot May Be More Important Now Than Ever

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A HARVEST PILGRIMAGE, TO A PILGRIMAGE OF/DELAYED BY WEEKS, TO "ATZERET"

1. Exodus 23:16

וְחַג הַקָּצִיר בְּכוֹרֵי מַעֲשֵׂיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּזְרַע בַּשָּׂדֶה...

And the pilgrimage of the harvest, when the first of what you have planted in the field comes in...

2. Exodus 34:22, 24

וְחַג שָׁבֻעֹת תַעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ בְּכוֹרֵי קָצִיר חֲטִיִּם...

And you shall make a pilgrimage of weeks as the first of the wheat harvest comes in...

כִּי אֹרִישׁ גּוֹיִם מִפְּנֵיךָ וְהִרְחַבְתִּי אֶת גְּבֻלְךָ וְלֹא יַחְמֹד אִישׁ אֶת אֶרֶצְךָ בְּעֵלְתֶּךָ לְרֵאוֹת אֶת פְּנֵי ה' אֶל-לִהְיֶיךָ שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה.

For I will dispossess nations before you, and widen your borders; yet no one will covet your land at the times at which you go up to the Presence of the Lord your God three times a year.

3. Deuteronomy 16:9

שִׁבְעָה שָׁבֻעֹת תִּסְפֹּר לָךְ מִהַחֵל חֲרֹמֶשׁ בְּקַמָּה תַחֵל לִסְפֹּר שִׁבְעָה שָׁבֻעֹת.

You shall count off seven weeks; start to count the seven weeks when the sickle is first put to the standing grain.

4. H.L. Ginsberg, *The Israelian Heritage of Judaism*, 1982, p. 59

The centralization of the cult created a problem of logistics. With the reaping, the busiest season in the year begins for the farmer. Between the demands of his work and the midday heat, it must have been hard enough for him to travel to and from one of the not too distant sanctuaries in the days when more than one were permitted; the centralization of the cult made it simply unfeasible for all but those who lived reasonably near the one legitimate temple. That is why the seven week delay — it's much easier once all the grain is on the threshing floor.....Since the day on which the first grain becomes ripe for the sickle varies from year to year and from place to place, perhaps the intention is that the day of the start of the count-off shall be determined for every village...But it is not impossible that each man is guided by the day on which his own grain ripened.

5. Leviticus 23:15

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמִּחְרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שֶׁבַע שַׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה עַד מִמִּחְרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם...

You shall count off — from the day after the holy day, from the day on which you offer the *Omer* that is waved — seven weeks; they shall be full weeks. You shall count fifty days until the day after the seven weeks...

COUNTING DOWN OR COUNTING UP? ANTICIPATING OR TREASURING?

6. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed* III:43

The Festival of Weeks is the day of the giving of the Torah. In order to glorify and exalt that day, the days are counted from the first of the festivals up to it, as is done by one who waits for the coming of the human being he loves best and counts the days and the hours. This is the reason for the counting of the Omer from the day when they first left Egypt till the day of the giving of the Torah, which was the purpose and end of their leaving: וְאָבִיא אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי — “And I brought you to Me” (Exodus 19:4).

7. Rabbi Avraham Mordecai of Ger [Poland, 20th Century], brought in *Likkutei Yehudah*, Parashat Emor

אבי [השפת אמת] ע"ה אמר, כי ימי הספירה המה ימים גבוהים וכתבי בין המועדות בין פסח לעצרת והם כמו חול המועד, שיש להם קדושה לפנייהם ולאחריהם, וצריכין להחזיק באלו הימים. ובכתבי האריז"ל איתא שכמו שגידול הפירות הם באלו שני החדשים, כן גידול הנפש.

ועל אלו הימים נאמר [ירמיהו ב:ב] "זכרתי לך חסד נעורֶיךָ וגו'", כי זה היה באלו הימים עד שקבלו בני ישראל התורה, כי הרי אח"כ חטאו (ימי הספירה היו קודם החטא, שהחטא היה אחרי קבלת התורה, ואף שישראל קלקלו, עם כל זה נשאר לעולם משהו מקודם החטא). ועל ידי זה נמשך כח על להבא, שיכולין לאחוז תמיד באלו הימים; כמו שכתב האריז"ל: "כל עיקר חיותו וכח שיש באדם בכל שבעים שנות חייו הוא רק מאלו הימים" — מימי הנעורים שלא טעם טעם חטא (שנאמר: "זכרתי לך חסד נעורֶיךָ וגו'"). הגם שאחר החטא נופל אדם ממדרגותיו, אך יש בכל איש משהו מקודם החטא שיכול לאחוז בו.... כל איש ישראל אף שח"ו קלקל לא ייאש את עצמו, כי ביכולתו לעורר המשהו שנשאר מקודם החטא.

ואיתא בזוהר הקדוש כששומרים ימי הספירה כראוי אין צריכים להדינים בראש השנה ויוה"כ, כי המה גבוהים יותר מר"ה ויוה"כ.

My father [the Sefas Emes], peace be upon him, said that the days of the Counting of the Omer are lofty days. They are written about among the holy days, between Pesah and Atzeret [Shavuot], and thus they are like Hol Hamoed, having holiness before them and after them. One needs to hold on to these days. And [in] Rabbi Isaac Luria's writings it is stated that just as the growth of the grain happens in these two months, so is it with the growth of the soul.

It is concerning these days that it is written (Jeremiah 2:2): "I remember the faithfulness of your youth." For these days of the Omer preceded the Israelites' receiving the Torah. And it was only *after* that that they sinned. Thus, the days that we count are the days that **precede** sin, which came only after the receiving of the Torah. Now even though Israel eventually sinned, there already was, despite that, a residue in each person of that which existed prior to the sin. It is that residue that provides strength for everyone's future, since we are always able to draw on those innocent days. In fact, the holy Rabbi Isaac Luria said that whatever power a person has in his or her allotted years on earth comes **only** from these precious days, i.e. from the days of youthful innocence, before there was any taste of sin. So even though every person is destined to fall from that pedestal of innocence, there is yet in every person something from before the sinning, on which he or she can draw.....Therefore, a person should never, God forbid, lose hope in himself/herself, for there is always the possibility of reawakening that residue, which always remains from his/her prior days.

Now we understand why the Zohar states that when one observes the days of counting of the Omer properly, one has no real need for the judgments of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, for these days ultimately represent a higher spiritual plane than Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

MATURITY: IF IT CAN BE DONE, MUST IT BE DONE?

8. Bill McKibben, *Falter*, 2018, pp. 187–8

Michael West, who organized the first effort to isolate human cells for cloning purposes, was once asked whether immortality wouldn't lead to overpopulation. Sure, he said, but "why put the burden on people now living, people enjoying the process of breathing, people living and being loved. The answer is clearly to limit new entrants to the human race, not to promote the death of those enjoying the gift of life today"

It's that level of self-absorption that should be the clue to what a bad idea this all really is....Though the technologists at some level value individual humans too much — no one can be allowed to die — they value humanness far too little. They don't understand that some sadness and loss is not just bearable; it's essential. There is an everyday heroism, if you think about it, in bringing up your children fully aware that they will supplant you. That's what human civilization is. If it weren't — if your children were just going to be other beings who perpetually trailed you through infinity by twenty or thirty years — then the most powerful of human connections would in effect be severed.

A world without death is a world without time, and that in turn is a world without meaning, at least human meaning. Go far enough down this path and the game is up.

9. Mishnah Avot 4:1

בְּן זֹמָא אָמַר.....אֵיזָהוּ גִבּוֹר? הַכּוֹבֵשׁ אֶת יְצָרוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "טוֹב.....מִשֶּׁל בְּרוּחוֹ מְלַכְד עִיר."

Ben Zoma liked to say.....Who is mighty? One who can overcome one's inclinations, as it is said: ".....one who rules over one's own spirit is better off than one who conquers a city" (Proverbs 16:32).

10. Bahya ibn Pakuda, *Duties of the Heart*, Gate 5 (Devotion), Chapter 5

אמרו על חסיד שפגע אנשים שבים ממלחמת אויבים, ושללו שלל אחר מלחמה חזקה. אמר להם: "שבתם מן המלחמה הקטנה שוללים שלל; התעתדו למלחמה הגדולה." אמרו לו: "ומה היא המלחמה הגדולה?" אמר להם: "מלחמת היצר וחייליו."

It is said of a pious man who met some men returning from a war against enemies, and they brought spoils after a raging battle. He said to them: "you returned from the small war with spoils; now prepare for the big war!" They asked: "which big war?" He answered: "the war of the *yetzer* and his legions."

11. Bill McKibben, *Falter*, 2018, pp. 226–8

In our current culture, we find the idea of maturing less exciting than the idea of growth because, I think, in our own lives, maturation is bittersweet. When we were young and growing, we could do and choose anything; no options had been foreclosed. Maturity.....means making choices: to commit to one person, one career, one community.....If we admire individuals for those traits, it's possible we can learn to admire societies for the same things.

Societies are measured not just by the things they build, but also by the things they can bring themselves to leave alone: whales, bright-plumed birds, mountains, children kept safe from Dickensian labor.

The most curious of all...lives are the human ones, because *we can destroy, but also because we can decide not to destroy*. The turtle does what she does, and magnificently. She can't not do it, though, any more than the beaver can decide to take a break from building dams or the bee from making honey. But if the bird's special gift is flight, ours is the possibility of restraint. We're the only creature who can decide *not* to do something we're capable of doing. That's our superpower, even if we exercise it too rarely.



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