

We have arrived in the 5<sup>th</sup> week of Omer counting, slightly more than halfway from Egyptian bondage to receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai.

Because this time of counting days is linked to the potential for inner growth, our sages associated each week and each day with one of the seven lower sefirot on the Kabbalistic “Tree of Life.” We are now in the week of *Hod*, the attribute of majesty and splendor, humility and service. The sephirah Hod is connected to Aaron, who, clothed in his splendid, holy and highly symbolic garments, was deployed to enter the Holy of Holies to serve the Almighty in the name of the people, and to pass this mantle of service to his sons and their progeny. Yes, splendor and majesty in service to the One Who IS splendor and majesty, and Who gives us an earthly portion of this glory to use for our benefit. Because we appreciate this gift, we serve in gratitude and humility, knowing how bountifully we receive.

The first part of our Torah portion deals with the sacrificial offerings that are to be presented once the Israelites have arrived in the Promised Land and have reaped their first harvest. It sharply and explicitly delineates the sacred from the everyday, especially as it pertains to the Kohanim and Levites. These boundaries encompass not only space and time, but also the offerings themselves, as well as those who enact them.

The notion of offering animals and products of the harvest is difficult for us to understand today, but if we realize that *korban*, the word for sacrifice, implies *approaching*, *coming close*, as well as *interior* and *innards*, we can catch a glimpse of what this act must have meant to our ancestors. And when we also remember that these offerings were the sole sustenance of the Levites, who had no land, we begin to appreciate the deep significance of all the rules concerning them and those who presented them. Nothing but the very best may be offered, and only those men who are completely free of moral as well as physical blemish may bring the offerings before God. Today we may find these explicit restrictions for people who are less than physically perfect shocking and outrageously discriminatory: Blindness, lameness, a broken bone, cataracts, and physical deformities that even include long eyebrows are not fit for service to HaShem! But in the minds of our ancestors, who equated God with perfection, and infirmity with sin, a blemished priest would be as much an affront to God as a blemished offering. And it would also imply that God’s work is not completely perfect, which would be an additional affront.

But how can we understand perfection today? How do we serve our Creator in the spirit of our ancestors when our religious rituals are so far removed from theirs? Rabbinic Judaism recognized that ancient laws needed to be reinterpreted for the times and the conditions. *Halacha*, which comes from the word meaning to walk, or go, outlines principles for a lifestyle that emphasizes moral excellence, not physical perfection. We humans are far from perfect, but we can always strive to be the best we can be without setting unrealistic goals for ourselves that end up doing more harm than good. Healthy growth depends on respecting both our potential and our limitations and acting conscientiously within those parameters.

On Shabbat Evening we begin the Omer counting day of *Gevurah* within *Hod* – Splendor and majesty, humility and service imbued with the sephirah of judgement, boundaries, and discernment. What a wonderful light in which to read Parashah Emor and gain new understanding of ancient laws and customs. May it influence the spirit in which we serve God, inspiring our service through deep appreciation for the splendor and majesty of God’s creation and tempering it with the understanding that perfection in human terms is not about physical attributes, but rather, about maintaining our moral compass and doing the very best we can with what is available to us, wherever we are.

Shabbat shalom!