

We are living in the semi-sacred time between Pesach and Shavuot, the seven weeks of the daily Omer count. Nearing the end of the fifth week, we are slightly more than halfway between the narrow confinement of slavery and the wide vista of opportunity that is ours when we receive the Torah on Shavuot. The *sephirah* of this week is *Hod*, a small word with a multiplicity of meaning: majesty and splendor, praising, honoring, and adorning, and related to words for humility and serving. *Hod* is a magnificent arc reaching from majesty to unpretentiousness, from splendor to service. These seemingly opposing ideas contain a powerful teaching, and they also define us as Jews. When I was growing up, an often quoted watchword in my family was “Pretty is as pretty does,” which meant that appearance means nothing if it is not accompanied by good behavior. For our ancestors, the opulent splendor of the *mishkan* and of the priests’ clothing had to be matched by exemplary behavior. Position and the outward trappings that accompany it do not in themselves come with special privileges. On the contrary, *noblesse oblige* – behavior must conform to position and privileges.

The overarching theme of this parashah is *kadosh* – a word that appears in many different forms hundreds of times in our scriptures and can actually be seen as the quintessential Jewish leitmotif. Depending on context, the Hebrew root *קדש* stands for something or someone set aside or designated as holy – as an expression of our deep awe and respect for HaShem. Because the priests were the link between HaShem and the people, they and their families were held to the highest possible standards. Every aspect of their lives, from their interactions with others to their clothing and appearance, was strictly controlled in an effort to render them as perfect as a human being is able to be. These high standards were also applied to the offerings and to how, when, and where they were to be eaten. Nothing but the very best was to be deemed *kadosh*, i.e. fit to serve, or be presented to HaShem, and nothing was left to chance. Today this is reflected in how we dress and behave on Shabbat and holidays, how we decorate our places of worship to fit the occasion, and in our beautiful Torah mantles, crowns, and pointers. It is also expressed in the respectful way we treat our Torah and our holy books, as well as in how we don our tallit and tefillin and behave while wearing them. These are all *kadosh*, separated out of our everyday lives and designated holy, as our connection to HaShem and our covenant.

This separation of the sacred from the everyday is also reflected in how we measure time. Our parashah instructs us to set aside holy time once a week for Shabbat, and once every year for Yom Kippur, and for the three pilgrimage festivals Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. In addition, we are to strictly observe the seven-week Omer counting period from the second day of Pesach to Shavuot – the time between the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest. So important was this, that although cutting is one of the activities that is prohibited on Shabbat, cutting the daily sheaf of barley for the Omer offering was required. Barley was the first grain to ripen, and it was considered particularly valuable. It was forbidden to reap from any newly grown crop of the five species of grain (barley, wheat, oats, rye, and spelt) before the harvesting of the Omer. The sheaves were cut with great ceremony, especially on Shabbat, and offered with heartfelt prayer for a successful wheat crop. The Talmud (Pesachim 3b) informs us that barley was considered food for horses and donkeys, while wheat was the grain for humans. The survival of humanity is contingent upon the survival of our animals, hence the importance of the barley crop. At the end of the Omer discussion, the Torah instructs us to leave a portion of our fields unharvested and also leave the rest of the gleanings so that the poor and the stranger may be able to find nourishment. Once again, our good fortune obligates us to help ensure the survival of the less fortunate.

Space, person, and time are the three aspects of *kadosh*. Our holy spaces include our places of worship, our homes, and especially our tables, and also any place in which we are moved to feel awe for HaShem – from museums and other cultural sites to the splendid variety of beauty in our natural world. Just seeing a tiny flower poking through asphalt or snow can evoke a feeling of being in a holy place. There are no more priests presiding over sacrificial offerings, but anyone called to Torah, may take on an aspect of holiness which can be felt for many hours. And our sacred times and seasons have the power to renew our strength as well as our resolve to be the best we can possibly be.

Happy spring! This week’s *sephirah Hod* is the perfect expression of the glorious opulence of springtime balanced by its powerful call to accept the responsibility of planting and nurturing so that we may be blessed with HaShem’s bounty for another year. The magnificent arc uniting splendor and obligation enlightens our everyday world with holiness.

Shabbat shalom!