



A PRICELESS GIFT

פרשת אמור



Our *Sedra* details the counting of seven complete weeks, beginning from the second day of Pesach, when the *Karbon Omer* was brought, until *Shavuous*. What could be the possible rationale behind this mitzvah? The *Sefer Hachinuch* writes that the *Sefira* (counting) reflects our enthusiasm and yearning to arrive at *Shavuous* - the time when we received the Torah. After all, the *Chinuch* continues, the entire purpose of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* (exodus from Egypt) was to receive this eternal, sacred gift.

But how is the Yom Tov of *Shavuous* to be actively celebrated? Regarding Pesach and Succos there is a disagreement between Rebbi Eliezer and Rebbi Yehoshua (Pesachim 68b)

whether one needs to partake of a meal or can one just learn and daven all day? When it comes to *Shavuous*, however, they both agree that one also needs to eat and drink; there must be a physical component as well. The *gemara* explains that this is so, since on *Shavuous* we received the Torah. The obvious question is why does this compel us to have a tangible component? The reverse should really be true! Since this is the day we received the Torah, we should focus exclusively on our spirituality and ignore our physical needs.

Rav Eliyahu Lopian, זצ"ל, explains that the answer to this question sets us apart from all other people and philosophies. Torah and mitzvos are to be used as a vehicle to elevate the physical, not to deny it. Rav Lopian cites the Vilna Gaon who writes that Hashem created us with a *Yetzer Hara* (evil inclination) so that we have a desire to eat and drink and to satisfy our bodily urges. All these need to be **channeled** and **elevated** by the Jew. This is what *Chazal* mean when they say that we are to serve Hashem both with our *Yetzer Hatov* and with our *Yetzer Hara* (בשני יצרך - "בכל לבבך").

Rav Shimon Schwab, זצ"ל, writes that the *Korban Omer* itself relays the same message. This *Korban* consisted of barley, which the *gemara* says is an animal food (מאכל בהמה). We begin the Omer count by specifically placing this on the *mizbeach*, symbolizing our ability to elevate the mundane through *kedusha* (holiness).

On *Shavuous* we recognize the unparalleled, distinctive character of our *Torah Hakedosha*. Through it we elevate our physical needs, transforming them into tools for spiritual growth.

Torah was, is, and always will be the life blood of the Jewish people. From time immemorial our enemies have tried to deny this from us. I witnessed first hand what length our fellow Jews will go to preserve this most precious gift on a trip that we took from Los Angeles to Communist Russia in 1988. There I met a *yid* who received permission to emigrate to *Eretz Yisroel* but was refused permission to take along his *seforim*. Since these *seforim* were printed in Russia, the regime considered them to be Soviet property. He wanted me to sneak them out of the country and then to mail them to him in Israel. I naively took his word that I, as an

American citizen, would not be subject to any harsh punishment even if I would be caught, - I would merely be sent home. Since he feared the KGB (Communist Secret Police), he asked me to meet him at night in a park opposite our hotel. I walked nervously into a dark area with the silhouette of a seated person highlighted by a single overhanging light. I sat next to him but he kept staring straight ahead when he mumbled, "Shalom." I responded the same. He didn't budge as he told me that inside the briefcase, which was between his legs, were the *seforim*. He asked me to exit the park only after he left so that no covert KGB agent would

associate the two of us. I followed these orders and I brought the briefcase to my hotel room. Upon examining the *seforim*, I realized that some of them were over one hundred years old.

A few days later found our group in the St. Petersburg airport, loading our luggage onto the conveyer belt for exit inspection. Through this screening the Soviet regime hoped to prevent "contraband" from leaving the country. As our baggage passed through the x-ray machine, I prayed that the briefcase I was carrying would not be noticed. But it was. The operator ordered me to place it on the belt as she carefully scrutinized all the items on the screen. All of a sudden she stopped the conveyer belt and sounded the alarm. This immediately summoned two huge soldiers dressed in full military regalia. I froze with fear as I tried to remain innocently poised. They signaled me to empty the contents of my case, which I did. They thumbed through the *seforim*, glanced at me and said, "Moscovia?" I understood that they were accusing me of smuggling out Russian property. I quickly responded, "No, Los Angeles." In a stroke of Divine intervention, they looked at each other and walked away, allowing me to take home the *seforim*. I can only imagine the joy that this *yid* felt when he received his priceless *seforim* a few weeks later, unaware of the trauma that I experienced.

Since we eat to live and we don't live to eat, The Torah is here to elevate each and every treat.

Point of Discussion

What menial act can be raised through noble intentions?