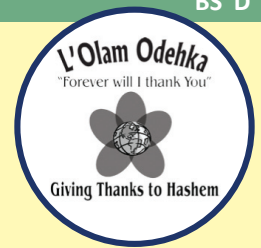


KOL TODA

Gateways to Gratitude: Giving Thanks to Hashem



COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

The days of the Omer today are not just days for simply counting, a string of numbers to be recited every evening from Pesach until Shavuot. Nor are they a simple commemoration of the counting that the Jewish people made after leaving the land of bondage to make their spiritual ascent towards *kabalas haTorah*, receiving the Torah. Let's consider the first counting, which *Am Yisrael* began the day after our actual exit from Egypt. Why was our Egyptian slavery and receiving the Torah linked by the counting of the Omer? Our slavery in Egypt and receiving the Torah seem unrelated at first. What is the relationship between our Egyptian exile, *kabalas Torah* (Shavuot), and the counting of the Omer in between?

The Jewish people were a downtrodden nation of slaves in Egypt. We had fallen to a frightening spiritual low, one level short of ever being redeemed by Hashem. Yet, specifically because we were in the depths of despair, we came to be able to connect to Hashem in a very deep way, to reach another level of commitment to Him not otherwise found, as we cried out in our pain for His salvation. Upon exiting Egypt we counted the days until receiving the Torah – counting our way out of our spiritual decline and humiliating feelings of worthlessness, growing closer and closer to Hashem, to finally become the "*Am Segula*," the Chosen Nation.

The Midrash tells us about a gentile leader, one of Pharaoh's advisors, who later became Moshe *Rabbenu's* esteemed father-in-law. Yisro, through his intellectual seeking of the truth, came to realize that the legacy of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov was the only truth that existed and he went out to the Wilderness to embrace it. He appeared at *Am Yisrael's* camp before the giving of the Torah to join the nation. Yet according to one *midrash* (*Pesikta D'Rav Kahana, Parashas Yisro, piska 12*), before the time came for *Matan Torah*, he left his new nation and returned home. He was not present at that most earth-shattering event in world history. The *midrash* gives a reason for this: "Hashem said: 'My children were enslaved with mortar and mud – they can receive the Torah. Yisro who sat in his home in peace, could he come to see the joy of [the giving of the] Torah together with my children?' Therefore, 'Moshe sent his father-in-law off (*Shemos 18:27*).'"

Yisro sat at home comfortably, he did not go through the pain and wretched suffering

that the Jewish people experienced. He did not feel the total despair and obliteration of mind-numbing slave labor. To him, taking upon himself the Jewish religion was an act of truth, but without the preparation of Egypt it could not reach the required depth for receiving the Torah. An intellectual realization is not strong enough to pass the flame of *emuna*, faith in Hashem, down the line through history. It is only *Am Yisrael*, who by means of their terrible pain and suffering had acquired complete and unwavering faith in Hashem, who was able to receive the Torah and pass it on.



In the depth of the Egyptian exile, seeing our children thrown into the Nile and slaving endlessly in mortar and bricks, when reality could get no worse – that was when we called out to Hashem, when we reached out for Him: "*Va-nitzak el Hashem, And we cried out to Hashem... (Devarim 26:7)*." It was precisely at that point that Redemption, the *Geula*, began. *Geula* was born in the darkest, deepest point.

Being able to see Hashem's kindnesses, and connecting with Hashem in the darkest of places, is a form of *geula*. This form becomes accessible to us once we've reached rock-bottom. When there is no more energy, no

strength to go on – that's where the *geula* will come – "*Az yibaka kashachar orecha, then will your light shine forth like the dawn... (Yeshaya 58:8)*." After the darkest part of night, morning can shine forth and "all the morning stars sing together (*Iyov 38:7*)."

When life is not easy, when pain and suffering are frequent companions and any light seems like a far-off dream – that is where *geula* is born. Another look will reveal Hashem, the All-Compassionate Source of infinite kindnesses. Expressing this realization in praise and thanks to Hashem carries the power to open up the Gates of Salvation.

Rav Pinkus, *ztz"l*, in his book "*She'arim B'Tefilla*" (*sha'ar Tefilla*), quotes a *pasuk* that appears paradoxical: "*Kumi, roni va-laila... al nefesh olalayich ha-atufim b'ra'av...*, Arise, sing in the night...pour out your heart like water before the presence of Hashem; lift up your hands towards Him [and pray] for the life of your young children, who faint because of hunger... (*Eicha 2:19*)." Why does the phrase begin with the word "*roni, sing*"? *Rina*, song, is prayer that praises Hashem through happiness. Are there no better words than "song" to describe prayer for the most heart-wrenching pain of watching children die of hunger?

Yes, indeed. There is no better way to open up the Gates of Blessing, of Redemption, and of Salvation than through song. Specifically when the Gates of Blessing are closed, song and praise to Hashem have the power to open these gates and to turn the most painful of suffering into the greatest song of redemption.

Days in the Jewish calendar carry the same inherent power and energy year after year. The inherent power of the days that were conducive to our physical and spiritual redemption from *Mitzrayim* is present and available to us also today. The days of the Omer, too, carry the same energy that they did when the event first occurred, and the counting itself had and still has the power to purify, sanctify, and elevate the Jewish people to become fit to receive the Torah, the reason for Creation.

May we merit counting on, counting our blessings and thanking Hashem for each of them as we walk ourselves out of exile to stand at the foothills of Har Sinai. Let us sing a song of praise and thanks, tap into the energies of *geula*, and "borrow some joy from the future" so the future becomes the present.

A WORD OF GRATITUDE

"Many people praise themselves and make demands on Hashem. We must be the opposite – praise Hashem and make demands on ourselves..." (Baal Shem Tov)

The Shidduch / based on a true story

I was a pretty good boy. Or maybe more than that. My name is Shimon and I was born after six girls and many prayers, so naturally, my parents and sisters all doted on me. There was nothing I could do wrong. When I was three I got the biggest *upsheerin* in the neighborhood, and when I was five I was sent to the best school in the city. My parents were in constant contact with my rebbes, and I gave them the *nachas* they wanted. I was the best boy in class, I always knew everything. Since my father learned with me every night I always was ahead of my class. I knew all the answers and the rebbes could not stop singing my praises. My parents and sisters were elated and I was proud.



In the material sense I also lacked nothing. My parents were well off, and all I had to do was express a desire for a toy, and later suit or hat, and I got it. My clothing was the finest in the market and my hats were always, well, over the top.

As the best boy in class, I exuded a self-assurance and that got me into everything. If I felt like expressing my displeasure over something, my posture and self confidence got my word in, and my position was accepted. I was a natural leader.

Since my path was paved with gold, I was accepted to the high school of my choice and then to the beis medrash that I wanted. Everywhere I went I was received and honored. Indeed, the school or yeshiva felt it was their honor to count me as their student. I was on top of the world.

From time to time I could overhear my sisters talking on the phone: "Shimon? He's amazing. Such a special guy. Just wait till he'll be in *shidduchim*. I think my mother has a list already. It must be ten miles long." One *bein ha-zemanim*, when I walked in after *shacharis*, I lifted up the phone to call a friend when I overheard my mother talking to her sister. "You want to suggest Rochel's daughter to my Shimon? She's nothing special."

After learning a few years in yeshiva in Eretz Yisrael, I came home to a list of potential girls.

I set out on my first date proud as a peacock, sure the girl would kiss the dust of my feet just for the honor of meeting me. But boy was I in for a shaking! She turned me down after the first time. I was devastated! How could she not have seen the tremendously great guy I was, the potential *gadol ha-dor* my mother was always reminding me I was? Something must have been wrong with her.

The next girl was totally, NOT for me. And so was the third. I started turning them down one after the other. And when one girl seemed to fit the bill – she would turn me down after three or four dates. I was devastated. When two years had passed after already being home from Eretz Yisrael and I saw the first of my class pushing a baby

carriage to the babysitter before going off to kollel, I realized I had a problem. I tried to make the most of my time. I learned like never before, three periods a day, and another in between. I celebrated *siyum* after *siyum* myself. Well, with my loving parents and sisters, but no wife.

Around that time, I began attending the *mussar* talks of a renowned *mashgiach*. His words really spoke to me and lifted up my spirits, which had begun to sag a bit. One evening, he was speaking about thanking Hashem. "How can we thank Hashem enough?" he asked. "Hashem does so much for us! Each and every breath of life is a kindness! How is it even possible to thank Hashem sufficiently for such a tremendous gift as a breath? And the food we eat? And the ability to hear and speak? And our health and happiness and our family?" And he continued on, how a person needs to thank Hashem for everything. That Hashem bestows only goodness and kindness upon us our whole lives. Even the pain and difficulties are for our great good. And how can we reply to Hashem for all His kindnesses? Only with profound thanks from the depths of our heart.

His words really spoke to me. I realized that I had been a "tad" blind, thinking that all the goodness in my life was coming to me, and just for the reason that I was me. I took upon myself to spend two minutes every day to thank Hashem. I even bought a little notebook and began recording all the kind things Hashem had done for me. I did this every day, and it was an eye-opener for me. I began realizing how ungrateful I had been, so full and sure of myself. I began seeing how dependent I am on Hashem and His infinite kindnesses. My little notebook became a therapy session and I kept it up every day, writing and thanking. After a while I found it

so helpful that I began adding minutes to my daily ritual. Soon I was thanking Hashem for a full fifteen minutes a day, adding a little jig of gratitude to the mix. It was exhilarating, uplifting and very liberating. I finally felt myself real. And guess what? A few months later, one of the *shadchanim* for a girl I had turned down "just because," got in touch again. This time we went out. And this time I was a humbler, open person. I was able to look at the girl for who she was, not just in comparison to me. And I liked what I saw.

Baruch Hashem we are happily married today, and with two little children, and I thank Hashem for them every single day.

If you would like to publicize your own personal story about giving thanks to Hashem and to mechazek et harabbim, please send it with your name and phone number to Email:

KolToda.Eng@gmail.com , or Fax: 02-580-8137.

TZADDIKIM THANK HASHEM

The *gaon* Rabbi Shmuel Greineman, *ztz"l*, used to retell the following story:

Many of the regulars in the Chofetz Chaim's house were privy to a most personal and moving scene. Many times in the middle of the night, when the Chofetz Chaim thought he was the only one awake, he would go into his room and lock the door behind him. He wouldn't let anyone in and would not even light a lantern. Sometimes, though, close disciples would stand behind the door to listen how the holy Chofetz Chaim would pour out his heart before Hashem.

He would begin by praising and thanking Hashem for all of the kindnesses that Hashem had done for him since his early childhood. He would detail every event in his life and give praise and thanks to Hashem for each of His kindnesses. He would give special thanks to Hashem for helping him in childhood when he was orphaned, for helping him learn Torah and publish *sefarim*, and for giving him good sons-in-law, and continued on and on.

The *gaon* Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky, *ztz"l*, told that once in his younger years, he was sleeping in a hotel room and awoke in the morning surprised to hear the sound of the prayer *Nishmas Kol Chai*, with the Yiddish translation, being sweetly recited on the other side of the wall. The person was enunciating each and every word, all the praises and thanks to Hashem for each of His acts of kindnesses. He prayed with fervor and tears until completely shaken. The following day Rabbi Abramsky found out that the Chofetz Chaim had been residing in that room, and he had been thanking Hashem as he usually did every single night.