Understanding the Mitsva of the Omer

THE OMER OFFERING

In the days of the Bet haMiqdash (Temple of Jerusalem), on the 16th of Nisan, the second day of Pesach, the representatives of the Jewish Court (*sheluche Bet Din*) would select fresh stalks of barley, pick them, roast the grains and grind them into flour. That flour, prepared in a special way, would be offered in the Temple's altar the next morning. The Cohen would present for this offering an *'omer* of barley flour. After this offering was performed it would be permitted for everyone to consume the crops of the new harvest (*tebu-a chadasha* or *chadash*). "*'omer*" is a Biblical unit of measurement, approximately one gallon, and by extension it became the name of that offering (□□□□□ □□□□).

COUNTING THE DAYS…

The offering of the *'omer* also initiates a period of seven weeks, or forty-nine days, from Pesach until the holiday of Shabu'ot (Lev. 23:15-16). Sefirat ha'omer is the Mitsva of counting these 49 days. Thus, the Holiday of Pesach, which celebrates our physical and political freedom, is connected with Shabu'ot, when we achieve our mental, cultural and spiritual freedom by receiving the Tora from HaShem. The Rabbi Shibole haLeqet explains the relationship between Pesah, Shabu'ot and Sefirat ha'omer: Once the Jewish people came out of Egypt, Moshe revealed to them that in fifty days they will receive the Tora. The Jews were so enthusiastic to receive the Tora that they prepare themselves and counted the days, eager for the great occasion.

FREEDOM FROM MENTAL SLAVERY

I heard from my dear friend and colleague Rabbi Yedidia Ezrachian, Shelita, that this period of 49 days should be considered like a very long Hol-haMoed, an extension of

Pesach, reaching out to Shabu'ot. How so? Unlike physical freedom, mental freedom cannot happen overnight. It is a long process of deprograming. In the case of the people of Israel it consisted, among other things, of getting rid of all the values and gods of Egyptian society and their own habits of a slave-mentality that they absorbed for more than 100 years of slavery (116 or 140 according to Maimonides). Imagine how much time it takes for a fifth or sixth generation slave to learn that he has to take charge of himself, or to identify and leave behind the pagan and immoral practices of the idol-worshipping Egyptian society (*tum-a*). We got out of Egypt fast, □□□□□□, and now we also had to get Egypt out of our system, which we did over a period of 49 days, in preparation for receiving the Tora and establishing a covenant (berit) with HaShem at Mount Sinai.

The counting of the Omer takes place at night and it is preceded by the blessing: … *asher qiddeshanu bemitsvotav vetsivanu 'al sefirat ha'omer*. Then we proceed to count the days and the weeks.