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Counting the Omer

A famous parable describes how a poor man, desperate to find the means to support his family, sets sail to foreign shores. Tragically, his **ship is sunk** in the stormy sea, but he somehow makes it to a tropical island. Much to his amazement, when he steps ashore he sees that the island is literally **covered with diamonds.** There are diamonds on the beach, diamonds on the side of the road, diamonds everywhere.

Determined to return home, he finds a shipbuilder on the island and offers to pay him in diamonds to build a boat. The shipbuilder laughs and then says, "But what am I going to do with **worthless diamonds?!"**

The hapless stranger soon learns that the currency of value on the island is **meat gristle.** Working very hard over a number of years, he earns enough meat gristle not only to pay for the building of a boat, but also to have plenty to bring back with him. When his boat is finished, the hapless traveler **loads it up with meat gristle** and heads home.

When he arrives home, his family is overjoyed to see him. Proudly, he announces, **"We are now rich!"** He opens the hatch of the boat and shows them... meat gristle! A **ghastly silence** hangs in the air. The poor man realizes his tragic mistake, and begins to cry.

Each of us is, to some extent, the poor man in this story. Brought into this world to accomplish certain tasks and uphold certain values, we often **lose our way** in the frantic pace of modern life. Too often, whether it be choosing career over family, or the tradeoff between expediency and values, we find ourselves trading diamonds for meat gristle. Tragically, we can never regain that lost time.

How do we combat this confusion?

One of the most powerful tools Judaism offers is Shabbat. On Shabbat, a Jew frees himself from the frantic, all-absorbing activities of the week - in order to step back and focus on the **truly important elements** in life. On Shabbat, we spend more time at home with our family, and in synagogue with our God. We take walks, review the accomplishments of the week, and contemplate the direction of our life.

Judaism says there are two other particularly **powerful times** to work on evaluating one's actions: the High Holidays, and the period between Passover and Shavuot. This latter period, described in this week's Torah portion, Emor, is known as the time of **"Counting the Omer."** Beginning on the second day of

Passover, the Torah commands us to count 49 days leading up to Shavuot, the celebration of our receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai.

According to many commentaries, the purpose of this count is to bridge the holiday of Passover to the holiday of Shavuot. While it is true that the Jewish people received their **physical freedom** on Passover, that freedom was essentially **without purpose** until they were given the Torah on Mount Sinai on Shavuot. Thus Shavuot is the ultimate purpose of the Passover saga. Our counting the days as we move towards Shavuot reminds us to **focus on meaningful goals,** as symbolized by the Torah and Mount Sinai.

Other sources (Nachmanides and the Abarbanel) note the association between the counting of the Omer and the **harvest seasons.** The word *"Omer"* itself denotes a dry measurement and refers to the amount of barley flour that was brought as an offering to the Temple on the second day of Passover. This offering came at the time of the barley harvest and was an expression of thanks to God. At the end of the 49 days of counting, at the time of the wheat harvest, an offering of wheat flour was also brought.

According to the Abarbanel, with all their involvement in farming activities, the agrarian population of Israel could become too **absorbed in their work** and forget the significance of the period. The counting of the Omer served to act as a brake on such self-absorption, and refocus them on the values represented by the Shavuot holiday.

During these weeks, when Jews around the world are counting of the Omer, it has become another modern-day reminder to focus on the **diamonds** in our lives... and not the gristle.

On Being a Kiddush Hashem

This week's Torah portion, Emor, formulates this calling as a specific mitzvah: "…do not desecrate My holy name. And I shall be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel. I am Hashem who sanctifies you." (Vayikra 22:33) This is known as the mitzvah of kiddush Hashem – sanctifying God's name.

How do we go about it? We live in a world of confusion and spiritual darkness. The light of truth is hidden, God's presence concealed. In this murky existence, how do we promote God's name and God's Torah in the world?

One way is by what we say. Proclaiming God's greatness in a public forum – through communal prayer, for example. Indeed, our prayer services are structured in such a way as to facilitate this. We have the Kedusha, the special prayer recited loudly and responsively in the repetition of the Amidah, evoking the exalted dialogue of the angels and their praise of the Creator of the universe.

We also have Kaddish, a highly impassioned declaration of God's greatness, recited at various high points in the service. Kaddish is recited by the one who leads the service, but also by mourners. It's an extraordinary thing.

People who have lost loved ones, and whose world has become empty as a result of their bereavement, fill the world with – and find solace in – a declaration of God's greatness. Crucially, both the Kedusha and Kaddish are only recited in public, in the presence of a minyan, a quorum of 10 men.

It's important to note that our responsibility to declare the presence of God in the world begins with our families. Every Friday night when we say Kiddush, we proclaim loudly and publicly that God created the world and that He took us out of Egypt and He gave us His Torah as a guide to life. Similarly, each of the festivals is a testimony to God's miracles throughout history: Pesach is about the miracles of the Exodus; Shavuot is about the miraculous revelation at Mount Sinai; and Sukkot is about the miracles that sustained us in the desert.

We also spread a positive message about Hashem and His Torah through our words of teaching Torah. The Rambam explains the mitzvah of learning Torah extends to teaching Torah. As the Mishna in Pirkei Avot says, there is an obligation to "establish many students". The Tiferet Yisrael, in his commentary on that Mishna, says this applies not only to "professional" teachers and rabbis, but to every Jew. We are all called on to spread the light of Torah to as many people as possible. The verse in Proverbs says: "For the mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light." The Gemara in Sotah says this world can be compared to a dark forest. As we walk through it, we are confronted with obstacles and confusion, our every step fraught with danger and uncertainty. But, it is the light of Torah that illuminates the path. And we have a responsibility to spread that light.

The mitzvah of kiddush Hashem goes beyond what we say. Even more important is what we do, how we behave. We don't just believe in God, or preach God, we live His values and principles. The Gemara (Yoma 86a) puts it succinctly: "Make the name of Heaven beloved through you." In other words, we are called on to bring the people we encounter to an appreciation of, and ultimately, a closeness to, God, through our living example.

The Gemara goes on to explain what this means – a person who is associated with Torah living, displays unimpeachable integrity in his dealings with others, and speaks gently to everyone at all times. Says the Gemara, when we behave in ways that inspire others, we fulfil the verse: "Through you, I will be glorified." The Gemara adds a remarkable caveat regarding a person who is learned in Torah but does not behave with integrity and does not speak gently to people: such a person brings God's reputation into disrepute. From this Gemara, it emerges that the most powerful way to promote the name of

God in the world is through the example of our own behaviour.

This idea – that we are charged with carrying the name of Hashem in the world through the way we live our lives – places a solemn responsibility on all of us. And it makes us partners with our Creator in a very real sense. Any partnership is defined by two parties working together to serve a common interest, a common set of objectives. God wants to spread truth and light in the world, and calls on us to be His partners in this endeavour. We carry out this sacred charge by being living examples of the goodness and the decency and the uprightness

and the inspiration that accompanies a Torah life, thereby ensuring people have a favourable impression of God and His Torah.

Abraham is our standard bearer in this regard. He spread the light of Godliness in a world of pagan idolatry, and influenced countless people. He did so through his kindness and his resolute uprightness, demonstrated through so many examples in his life. He went out to battle to save his nephew Lot and others who had been captured in war, but refused to take any of the spoils of the war. He kept his tent open on all sides, welcoming wayfarers no matter who they were and where they came from. He was a pillar of light and compassion. He was unerringly straight and ethical in his business dealings. And as his children, we are called on to live in the same way.

So far, we have looked at public declarations and living by example as the means to fulfil the mitzvah of kiddush Hashem. There is a third way we can bring about kiddush Hashem in the world, and that is through self-sacrifice.

The Rambam, based on the Talmud, says the mitzvah of kiddush Hashem is fulfilled when a person is placed in a situation where they have to give up their life for the sake of God. We know there is the sacrosanct Torah principle of pikuach nefesh, which means in order to save a life virtually all of the commandments are set aside. But there are exceptions. If one of the three "cardinal" sins – idolatry, murder and sexual immorality – is involved, then a person must give up their life rather than transgress them. And, actually, during a period in which the Jewish people and the Jewish way of life is under systemised attack, it is a great mitzvah to give one's life for the cause, even under other circumstances. In fact, this is the ultimate expression of kiddush Hashem; a brave declaration of total dedication, love and trust, a visceral demonstration that there is nothing more important than living in accordance with God's values and with our ultimate purpose in life.

In every respect the mitzvah of kiddush Hashem is deeply transformational. It transforms us into people who look to promote truth and values and goodness in the world, who embrace responsibility for spreading light and the love of God in the world. And, by cultivating a consciousness for how we are perceived by others, we learn to moderate our behaviour and ensure our conduct always meets the highest ethical standards. It transforms us into people who are conscious and aware of how we are perceived by others. This involves empathy to understand how others perceive us and to realise that every action we perform is being judged, and not only are we being judged, but Hashem and His Torah are being judged. Of course, living with an awareness of what our priorities are in life, and being prepared to sacrifice for our highest values, also changes us in profound ways.

The ultimate vision of kiddush Hashem finds its expression in the attainment of the Divine promise for the climax of history, of a world incandescent with God's light, saturated with the knowledge of His presence, which will one day be fulfilled with the coming of the Mashiach. As the prophet Isaiah says: "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of Hashem like the waters that cover it." This Final Redemption for the world is described by the Rambam as a time with "no famine, no wars, no jealousy and competition", a time in which

"goodness will be abundant and all of the delicacies will be available as the dust, and the only occupation in the world will be to know Hashem". In other words – a world in a constant state of kiddush Hashem.

Ultimately, kiddush Hashem is about bringing the world closer to this vision of a world filled with God's light and love and values, saturated with the closeness of His presence.

Righteousness vs. Self-Righteousness

In its description of the priests, the Torah discusses their unique status, one that differentiates them from ordinary people. In order to sanctify their particular role, limitations are placed on their appearance and on their participation in certain aspects of the Jewish life cycle such as marriage and burial. Only two chapters before this, the entire Jewish nation is also ennobled with the task of being holy, in this case without any limitations: 'Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy' (*Lev.* 19:2). Here, the Jewish people are clearly instructed to be holy, and to emulate the holiness of God, which is by definition limitless.

It is therefore strange that just two chapters later the Torah presents the priests with a subtly different message: 'They shall be holy to their God and they shall not desecrate the name of their God; for the fire offerings of God, the food of their God they offer, so they must remain holy' (*Lev.* 21:6). This unique command to the priests alone contains the additional requirement of directing their holiness 'to God' and predicates the command on their Temple service. What is different about this command and the one that the entire nation received?

Every individual deserves to be treated with dignity. As it says in Tractate *Avot*, 'Who is considered to be respectful? He who respects all the creations' (Mishna, Tractate *Avot* 4:1). Beyond this elementary level of respect, however, individuals in certain roles are treated with additional levels of deference. One can be worthy of respect, for example, if born into a position of nobility or royalty, or one can earn esteem through noteworthy achievements.

While the Jewish people are inherently holy and are commanded to behave in a manner that reflects being created in the image of God, the priests hold an elevated status, which is suggested by the restrictions placed upon their behaviour. They play the unique role of the ambassadors of God to the Jewish people, and the ambassadors of the Jewish people to God. Therefore, they are not only afforded a higher level of respect and commanded to behave accordingly, but the manner in which they receive this command is distinct from the previous generic command of holiness communicated to the nation as a whole.

However, since this command and its details are designed to make the Jewish people view the priests as distinct and special, the Torah is wary that the priests will begin to think too highly of

themselves. According to the Netziv, the stipulation 'to God' is added to remind the priests that their greatness derives from God and exists in a specific context, and therefore they should not let it make them arrogant (*Ha'Emek Davar* and *Harchev Davar* on *Leviticus* 21:6). Their greatness is a responsibility, not a privilege. It is a duty that comes with their position and should not cause them to think of themselves as better than the rest of the people, but rather should simply be expressed through their different role.

Many of us, at some point in our lives, find ourselves in some type of position of authority that legitimately commands extra respect, whether it is as a youth counsellor, a manager in the professional context, a parent or a communal leader. The manner in which the obligation of holiness is communicated to the priests is a constant reminder to us that when placed in a position of authority, one should utilise this role to better the situations of those around us, to support them and promote them, rather than to feed one's own ego. We should constantly endeavour to balance the source and purpose of the respect that we receive, and to carry authority with humility.

As the 'chosen people' (*Deut.* 14:2), Jews are sometimes accused of thinking that they are superior to others. Like the priests, who need to be aware that their holiness is specifically directed towards God and the Temple service, we too must realise that we are a 'nation of priest-teachers – a holy nation' (Ibid.; *Ex.* 19:6). Charged by the source of holiness, God Himself, our task is to redeem the fractured world that we live in by being a 'light unto the nations' (*Isaiah* 49:6) through living and breathing moral righteousness without ever letting ourselves fall into the trap of self-righteousness.

The Jewish Example

In this week's portion, we find the commandment to sanctify God's name - Kiddush Hashem. In essence, this entails living in such a way that others recognize Godliness in our actions and feel drawn to act similarly.

Specifically, Maimonides talks about someone who is scrupulously honest in his business dealings, speaks softly and kindly with people, greets people with a smile, and honors even those who put him down. These are just examples. The principle of Kiddush Hashem is that of wishing to set an example that others might follow.

And it is the essence of what Judaism is about. Sanctifying God's name is one of the rare commands that one is required to give one's life for (in extreme circumstances). God talks about the idea with Abraham. At Mount Sinai, God tells the Jewish people that it is their national purpose. It is discussed all through the prophets. It is the end goal of all of Judaism - that its adherents should act in such a way that others understand the concepts of ethical monotheism simply by being around them.

Both Christianity and Islam converted by the

sword. And in an age where that is no longer acceptable, active missionizing is still part and parcel of their world view.

But Judaism believes differently. A religion must speak its truth only through the actions of those who live by it. If our example alone does not inspire others, then our religion is not worth sharing.

It seems to me that the emphasis of Judaism has shifted away from this in recent times. If Judaism is to attract a generation of disaffiliated young Jews, it must return to its roots. If those who kept Judaism were clearly Godly, spiritual, enlightened, honest and decent human beings, I believe that people would come flocking to find out what they were doing right. This is the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem, and Judaism is very much in need of its practitioners.

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