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## U'Sfartem Lachem: Sefiras HaOmer - Introduction

From the teachings of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi; adapted by Eli Touger

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Section I

The Divine service of *Sefiras HaOmer*, the Counting of the *Omer*, bridges the gap between Pesach and Shavuos. On Pesach, “the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, was revealed” The Pesach *Haggadah*. to the Jewish people. They, however, were not able to internalize the revelation for they were still sullied by the impurity that had become attached to them through the years of Egyptian exile. As our Rabbis say: “It took G-d one moment to take the Jews out of Egypt, but forty years to take Egypt out of the Jews.”

Moreover, in a complete sense, “taking Egypt out of the Jews” — i.e., the personal refinement the Jews must undergo — must come from their own efforts and not from a revelation from Above. This defines the nature of the Divine service prescribed for *Sefiras HaOmer* (the Counting of the *Omer*): to refine and elevate our personalities.

*Chassidus* sets out an entirely new set of parameters for this task. Not only must we abandon our undesirable character traits and polish the positive ones, we must focus on conquering our fundamental self-concern, the dimension of our personalities labeled as *yeshus*. At that point, our emotions no longer focus on “what I want” and “what I feel,” but they become aligned with the *middos Elyonus*, G-d’s emotional qualities, and reflect them. That is the inner meaning of the term *sefirah*, to shine forth G-dly light, as do the *Sefiros* above.

### Cosmic Patterns

To explain the above in a historical context: Pesach commemorates the exodus from Egypt; Shavuos, the Giving of the Torah. The seven weeks of the Counting of the *Omer* represent an intermediate phase, preparing the Jews to receive the Torah.

The phases of this sequence follow the kabbalistic motifs:

- a) *ratzo*, seeking to rise above the limitations of material existence and yearning to bond with G-d, and
- b) *shov*, returning one’s focus to material existence and seeking to make it a medium for the expression of G-d’s will. Pesach is identified with *ratzo*, while Shavuos is identified with *shov*.

These are not merely stages in our people's spiritual history, but ongoing patterns guiding our daily Divine service. Prayer, and particularly the recitation of the *Shema*, represents the thrust of *ratzo*. Afterwards, the soul's yearning for connection with G-d is satisfied through the observance of the Torah and its *mitzvos*, the theme of *shov*.

## Internalizing Awareness

Our spiritual personalities are twofold, comprising the G-dly soul and the animal soul.<sup>1</sup> The above dynamic of *ratzo* and *shov* affects our G-dly souls, but for it to bring about a lasting change, it must also be integrated within the animal soul, the element of our personalities that seeks material satisfaction. The improvement of this aspect of our being is alluded to by the *omer* offering, for the *omer* is brought from barley which is primarily used as animal fodder.<sup>2</sup>

In particular, the process of refinement alluded to by this offering is twofold, including:

- a) Waving the *omer*; i.e., elevating the animal soul to its source in holiness and revealing the sublime G-dly energies that give it vitality and power, and
- b) Counting the *Omer*; i.e., drawing down G-dly light that enables the self-focused qualities of the animal soul to be transformed and directed to holiness.

## One With G-d

This Divine service, though truly lofty, is merely a preliminary stage, leading to the ultimate bond with G-d which is forged through Torah study. When a person loves G-d, he appreciates that his own self-fulfillment comes in going beyond himself and devoting himself to Him. Thus his own identity is not entirely effaced, for in a love relationship, the one who loves always retains a certain consciousness of self.

Through Torah study, by contrast, one steps beyond all personal consciousness. His entire thrust is to align his mind with G-d's thoughts and to utter G-d's word. There is no sense of who I am and what I want. His own "I" has become identified with the Torah.<sup>3</sup> For that reason, the Counting of the *Omer* is merely a preparatory step for the Giving of the Torah that is commemorated on the Shavuot holiday.

Nevertheless, the unity with G-d realized through Torah study cannot be achieved without the preparatory work of self-refinement. Otherwise, the person will remain self-concerned and focused on his own satisfaction. For Torah study (which is associated with the Giving of the Torah and the holiday of Shavuot) to bond him with G-d, he must first experience a yearning for G-d (the spiritual parallel to the Exodus and

Pesach) and refine his personal characteristics (the spiritual parallel to the Counting of the Omer).

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## FOOTNOTES

1. See *Tanya*, chs. 1 and 2.
2. See *Pesachim* 3b.
3. *Ibid.*, chs. 5 and 23.

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### FROM THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI SCHNEUR ZALMAN OF LIADI; ADAPTED BY ELI TOUGER

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Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (18 Elul 1745-24 Tevet 1812), known as "the Alter Rebbe," was one of the main disciples of the Maggid of Mezritch, and the founder of the Chabad Chassidism. He is the author of *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* and *Tanya* as well as many other major works in both Jewish law and the mystical teachings.

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