



## A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

by Mendy Portnoy

### **SEFIRAT HA'OMER, THE TORAH WORLD & TOLERANCE**



There is a famous *Gemara* in *Shabbat* (33b) which tells of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (Rashbi) who was forced into hiding from the Romans, who wanted to kill him for talking about them in a denigrating way. After twelve years of hiding in a cave, Eliyahu Hanavi appeared at the entrance and informed Rashbi and his son that it was safe to leave, as Caesar had died and the decree had been annulled.

The *Gemara* continues that after leaving the cave, Rashbi saw people sowing and planting a field - simply going about their days` work. This angered him greatly. He declared "These people are neglecting the world to come, and instead concerning themselves with this physical world." From this point onwards, anything Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai or his son would look at would immediately be incinerated. A heavenly voice then sent them back into the cave for another year.

Elsewhere in *Shabbat* (11a) there is a halachic discussion regarding *teffila*. The *Gemara* states that a group of people learning together should stop in order to recite the *Shema*. However, they should not stop for *teffila* (*Halachically* speaking, this refers to the *Amida*). R' Yochanan, however, states that this rule only applies to people such as Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. The reason is because for these people "*Toratan Umanutan*" - *Torah* learning is these peoples` lives – it`s who they are and what they do. R' Yochanan is clearly referring to unique and clearly gifted individuals.

In *Vayikra* 23, *Hashem* commands the Jewish people to count the *Omer*. They are commanded on the second day of *Pesach* to bring the *Omer* offering which consisted of barley, and after 7 weeks, to bring the "*Mincha Chadasha*" - a new meal offering. It was given its name because it was the first of the wheat offerings.

Barley doesn't take as long to mature as wheat. It is not as fine as wheat. What's striking here is that the *Torah* doesn't command the Jewish people to only bring the original barley offering, but also the wheat offering - why not just one or the other at the beginning or at the end of the 7 week period? In fact surely it would make sense to bring the finer wheat only at the end of the counting?

Like so many other things in the *Torah*, there are many crucial lessons to be learnt from this. Let's say that barley represents Jews with a lack of Jewish education, or not (yet) observant Jews, whilst wheat represents those with strong beliefs in their Jewish heritage, and try to the best of their ability to adhere to the code of life the *Torah* sets out.

We are all G-d's children. He loves us all wherever we stand on the "religious" spectrum, and it is the duty of every Jewish person to reach out and make sure that every single one of our brothers and sisters feels the warmth of our special family - and that they know of their importance.

Introspection is a huge part of Judaism - and that's why we were instructed to bring the wheat offering as well. We can't just say "I'm happy where I am - I don't need to grow anymore." Judaism teaches that we must constantly strive to be finer, better people.

Now whilst there is a place for unique and inspiring individuals (wheat) in Judaism, we shouldn't look at them and say "That's it - I'm going to start acting and living like this immediately!" Nor should those specially gifted look down upon those different from them. This is what *Lag Ba'Omer* represents (Rashbi's *yarhtzeit!*), and what Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai had to learn in his stay in the cave. We shouldn't be the "barley from *Pesach*" or in fact the "wheat from *Shavuot*" - we should be "*Sefiras Ha'omer*" people. Life should be a constant process of growth and striving to be a "finer" person, with a realization that neither being static nor getting too far ahead of ourselves is the answer.

When *Hashem* saw Rashbi burning things that he didn't see fit, *Hashem* said "Why are you destroying my world" and told him to return to the cave. There is an interesting lesson to learn from both this story, and from the commandment to bring two separate offerings. It is one of tolerance. Even if we see ourselves as being in a certain place, or representing something - however great this "something" may be - we cannot just go around burning everything else.

Living in Israel, it's not unusual to hear heated debates about the Yeshiva world, employment and the army. I don't think anyone will argue that there are individuals today in the *Torah* world who are simply brilliant - this is what they are here to do. In fact, if an Israeli chooses to learn instead of doing the army, he is classified as "*Toratan Umanutan*". There are many people for whom *Torah* is their life! Without *Torah* learning and communities of people dedicated to ensuring that this continues for generations, who knows how much longer we would have a Jewish state.

However, there also has to be an appreciation for the fact that without an economy, without an army with which to defend itself, there would be no

country for this *Torah* life to continue. People must realise that *Hashem* instilled every single person with his own unique duty and purpose. We're a family. We all have our "chores"; it's only when everyone does their part that everything comes together.

If there's one thing that I've started to realise in the run up to *Lag Ba'Omer*, it is that there has to be more appreciation, acceptance, and most importantly – tolerance, regardless of what your point of view is.

On *Simchat Torah*, we dance with the *Torah* we received on *Shavuot*. We dance around the *Bima* in a circle. We can all see the *Torah* scroll. We all see it from a different point of view. But what's beautiful about this is that as we go around, we see it from the point of view from the person next to us.

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*Mendy graduated from Jewish Grammar, Manchester, England. Planning on staying in Israel next year. Favorite aspect at Orayta is the living in the Old City.*