

Emor

Shabbat Holidays, Fear, and Religious Illuminations

In the *Torah* portion *Emor* we learn about all the Jewish holidays. The first Jewish holiday listed is *Shabbat*. It is hard to understand why *Shabbat* should be listed among holidays since *Shabbat* is unique among all the Jewish holidays. It occurs irrespective of whether or not we declare it. *Shabbat* is a day which celebrates G-d's power. All the other holidays talk about man's encounter with G-d in history. We learn, for example, about *Pesach*. *Pesach* speaks about the Jewish people's encounter with G-d, who liberated us from Egypt. Even *Yom Kippur* celebrates a historical event. That is the day when we were forgiven for the sin of the golden calf. *Rosh Hashona*, too celebrates a historical event, the day on which Adam was created and, also, the day upon which he sinned and was forgiven. That's why the *Torah* gives the rabbis the power to determine when the holidays can occur. Because the holidays don't primarily celebrate G-d's power, they commemorate man's encounter with G-d.

Since the Jewish year is based on the lunar year corrected by the solar year, the rabbis can vary the holidays by almost a month. Some years can be as little as 353 days and some as many as 384 days. The lunar yearly cycle loses 11 days a year against the solar cycle, which means that we must add 7 leap years every 19 years. The lunar monthly cycle is 29.5 days, which means that some months must be 29 days and some months 30 days. Because the rabbis declare when the holidays occur, they have arranged it so that *Yom Kippur* never comes out on a Friday or a Sunday. It would be too hard to have two *Shabbat*-like days together. Also, if the past winter had been severe, making it as hard for pilgrims to come to Jerusalem, they could delay *Pesach* for a whole month by throwing in a leap year. *Shabbat*, though, is inflexible. It can never change. It must always be on the seventh day. It celebrates G-d's awesome power.

Also in this *Torah* portion we learn about the counting of the *Omer*. It says, "And you shall count on the morrow of the Sabbath." Because the *Torah* uses the word Sabbath, on the morrow of the Sabbath, there was a big argument between the rabbis and the Saducees. The Saducees said that whenever the Sabbath occurred in *Pesach*, then on *Motzai Shabbat* you should start counting the *Omer*. The rabbis said, no, we must always start

counting the *Omer* on the second night of Passover. It seems from the text that the Saducees were right. The text says, "on the morrow of the Sabbath." The answer is that the word "Sabbath" in Hebrew has four meanings. It means not only the weekly *Shabbat* but it also means a holiday, a Sabbatical year, or the Jubilee Year. The rabbis said that in this verse the Sabbath means the night after the first day of *Pesach*. Sabbath here means a holiday. But the question remains, why did the *Torah* use such an ambiguous word? Why didn't it just say that we should count the *Omer* on the second night of *Pesach*?

Finally, after we learn about the holidays, we learn about the menorah, about how we are to take pure olive oil pressed for the light. Why should we learn about the *menorah* here? We learned about the *menorah* earlier in *Shmos* 27. Why do we have to learn about it again, and why immediately after we learn about the *menorah* do we learn about the showbread? It seems to be that the *Torah* is teaching us here something very important, and that is how we are to conceive of religion. To the pagan all religion was based on fear. Morality had no part to play in religion. Religion was basically a payoff to the gods. Unless you gave the gods this present or that present, then the gods would take away your house or your land or your family or your health, etc. The gods were looked at in those days like we look at the IRS today. If you did not pay up, they were going to take things away from you. The whole basis of religion was the awesome power of the gods. This Judaism says is wrong. It is true that G-d has awesome power, but G-d is not a Mafia figure Who demands a cut from everything we have in order to let us prosper. G-d only uses His awesome power against us if we act immorally. G-d has never promised us that if we do good, He will give us the strength to overcome our problems. Religion is not an insurance policy. Religion is meant to illuminate and elevate our lives.

That's why we learn about the *menorah* after we learn about the holidays, because this is also the purpose of the holidays. It is meant to illuminate and elevate our lives so that we can enjoy even the physical things of life better. That's why we learn how the *menorah* illuminated the showbread which stands for the physical things of life. Yes, we recognize that G-d has awesome power. That's why we celebrate the *Shabbat*, but the

main reason that we are Jews is because we know that if we practice Judaism, it gives us a better life. It elevates our lives. It allows us to have better marriages, better relationships with our children, a better understanding of ourselves and allows us to spiritually develop ourselves. Jews throughout the ages were able to withstand all sorts of persecution because they knew that they had a wonderful inner life, and they did not want to give up this wonderful inner life.

That's why it says, "and you shall count on the morrow of the Sabbath." The word Sabbath here has two meanings. It means the first day of *Pesach*, and it also refers to G-d's power. The Jews were slaves in Egypt. They approached religion as the Egyptians did, only through fear. In order for them to get ready to accept the *Torah*, they had to go beyond thinking of religion as only an insurance policy and of G-d as some sort of a head of a protection racket. They had to realize that by accepting the *Torah*, they were going to elevate their lives. They were going to gain more spiritual insight. True, G-d would use this power against them if they acted immorally, but mainly G-d's power would be used to help them lead richer and better inner lives. It was only after the morrow of the *Shabbat*, after they realized that religion was more than fear, that they could become ready to accept the *Torah* 50 days later.

I am reminded of the story they tell about an insurance agent who tried all night to convince a young couple to buy an insurance policy. After two hours, he finally got up and said, "Now, I don't want to frighten you into buying this insurance policy, so, please sleep on it and if you get up tomorrow morning, give me a call." Religion to Jews cannot be based on fear. If it were, we would not have so many backsliding Jews now. Religion must be based on more than fear. It must be based on the belief that by practicing Judaism, you enhance your life and gain spirituality and wisdom. Let us hope and pray that all Jews will realize this soon so that the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.