

A Patchwork of Time

Michael Lev

Introduction

Contained within the Torah is a unique understanding of two fundamental concepts, that we tend to define quantitatively, and with little relation between them: that is, the concept of “wholeness” and that of “time.”

- We usually understand the word “wholeness” (*tamim*), as implying a state of perfection. However, is this a mathematical perfection, or a qualitative one?
- Likewise, when we speak of units of time, is it a specific duration of time that we have in mind, or rather, a quality of time that defines its worth?
- Furthermore, can we find a connection between these two concepts?

My hope in the following essay, dear reader, is to arouse your intellectual curiosity, as we seek to answer this question.

As I was contemplating the mitzvah of Sefirat HaOmer in an attempt to find fresh insights, my attention was drawn to the phrase, “seven whole weeks.” I considered these words over and over, not knowing exactly where my thoughts would lead me, and found myself making associative connections between the various examples of “wholeness,” found in the Torah. The natural inclination to discover a unifying principle within all these examples raised a question in my mind as to the meaning of “seven *whole* weeks.” In attempting to answer this question, I concluded that the Torah appoints a value to time beyond its mere length, but also, to the synthesis of comparable moments that form a period of time that is more beneficial, and therefore “higher.” I would like to share with you the thought-

processes of my investigation, leading, ultimately, to an understanding of the Torah's message for our lives; and the practical conclusions that we can deduce that will help us better ourselves on this earth.

Sefirat HaOmer

The Torah commands us: "You shall count for yourselves, from the day after the Sabbath, from the day you bring the Omer offering, seven whole weeks." Rashi comments on this: "The day after the Sabbath [means] the day after the Holiday (Passover)." This follows the accepted opinion of the Pharisees, as opposed to that of the Sadducees. The latter explained the words "from the day after the Sabbath," as referring to the historical Sabbath; that is, the Omer is first counted on *motzoi Shabbat*, at the onset of the first day of the week.

Rashi continues: "'Seven whole weeks' – meaning that you begin to count in the evening; for if not, they are not whole." Thus, it is the custom in our synagogues to pray the evening service as early as possible on the night following the first day of Passover, and to delay the evening prayers of the night of Shavuot, in order to guarantee that we have counted seven full weeks.

The Concept of Wholeness

Before we begin to examine the subject of Sefirat HaOmer, we must first examine the Torah's understanding of "wholeness." Does wholeness always imply one hundred percent perfection, or perhaps ninety-eight percent can be called "whole," if no other choices are available. Or, perhaps, one hundred percent, minus a little, can be called "whole," even in an ideal situation?

First Example

In the Torah portion “Hukat,” we find the words: “a wholly red heifer.” Rashi explains that the cow must be completely red, “so that if even two hairs are black, she is invalid.” The Siftei Hachamim explains that if only the words “a red heifer” were written in the Torah, we would assume that even *one* black hair invalidates the cow. However, by adding the word “wholly,” the Torah uses a hermeneutic device known as *miyut aher miyut* – one qualification following another: whole and red. In such a case, the Torah actually intends to *add* something; that is, if two black hairs are present, the cow is invalid, but if only one black hair is present, it remains kosher.

We see from this that, remarkably, even a cow which is not 100% red can still be called “whole” in its redness.

Second Example

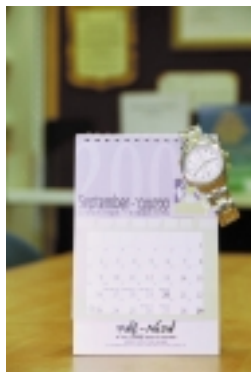
The Torah portion “Noach” begins with the words: “These are the generations of Noach, Noach was a righteous man, perfect (*tamim*) in his generation. G-d walked with Noach.”

It is well known that even though the Torah refers to Noach as “perfect,” the Midrashim do not hesitate to delimit this description. “He was perfect in his generation,” says Rashi, “however, had he lived in the generation of Avraham, he would not have been noteworthy at all.” Rashi further explains: “‘G-d walked *with* Noach,’ as opposed to Avraham who said, ‘G-d, whom I walked *before*.’ Noach needed G-d’s support, whereas Avraham was able to progress in the merit of his own righteousness alone.”

Third Example

In the Torah portion "Toldot," we find a description of Yaakov as "a simple man (*ish tam*), who dwelled in tents." Here, the word *tam* implies a sense of wholeness and naiveté. Yet, these words preface several episodes that reveal Yaakov's remarkable shrewdness and deceitfulness – from the purchasing of the metaphysical status of the "firstborn" (who would have imagined that such a thing could be bought?), to the stealing of Esau's blessing from Yitzchak: "Your brother came with deceit and stole your blessing," and the episode of the next portion, "And Yaakov stole the heart of Lavan the Arami, in not telling him that he had fled."

Certainly, Yaakov had reasons for his actions, and it is even possible that in his heart, he was naïve, and only forced into acting as he did. Nevertheless, had not the Torah itself done so, we would never have dared to adjoin the description of Yaakov as "a simple man," with the subsequent episodes of trickery, perpetrated against some of the greatest deceivers in history, with great success!



Fourth Example

In the portion of "Lech Lecha," G-d prefaces His command to Avraham to circumcise himself with the words, "walk before me and be whole (*tamim*)."

That is, as long as Avraham was one hundred percent complete in his body, he was actually not whole. It took a certain *lack* to transform him into a *whole* human being...

Conclusion Concerning the Concept of Wholeness (*Tamim*)

Just as the Kotzker Rebbe said, “there is nothing as whole as a broken heart,” so too, there is nothing as complete as a person who recognizes his own imperfection – much more than someone who has no faults whatsoever. Let us recall a Midrash: “Why did Saul’s kingship not continue (for generations)? Because he had no faults.” Likewise: “In the place where the *ba’alei teshuva* stand, even the perfectly righteous cannot stand.”

In our case, as well, we have a similar paradox. On the one hand, the term “whole” - *tam* - conveys a much richer sense than the dry mathematical term “complete,” for it suggests perfection in both value and amount. On the other hand, we see that the concept of “wholeness,” in the Torah, always implies a degree of imperfection. How do we reconcile this?

I suggest that in the eyes of the Torah, a lack of perfection is preferable to a ready-made state of perfection, when the imperfection leads to humility, and the willingness to strive forward. For that which is gained only after much effort is much more precious than that which is gained easily. If the struggle to improve were not engaged, if there were no need to make an effort, then there would be nothing ever to be proud of. Though a man is born into this world weak and helpless, he can rise above the animals, who are born with a natural inclination for survival, yet make no progress in life. Or, like the advantage of a human mind over a computer, our ability to learn makes us far superior to perfection and immobility. The measurement of “wholeness” is not merely quantitative, but also qualitative, based upon our efforts and our advances. The very effort made to validate a heifer with one black hair is precisely what makes her “completely”

red. Yaakov, who surely regretted having to deny his nature and use the tools of the crafty, is suddenly and surprisingly called “whole.” And Avraham, who is “whole” before G-d, only becomes so when it is known that he will never be complete again.

Sefirat HaOmer

Applying these concepts to the mitzvah of Sefirat HaOmer, we can now ask, how does this concept of “wholeness” apply? By praying the evening ceremony early on the first night of Sefirat HaOmer, and late on the last night, we certainly have forty-nine full days. Yet, according to our present definition of “wholeness,” we should expect something to be lacking. What could it be?

The answer, to my mind, lies in the debate between the Sadducees and the Pharisees:

According to the Sadducees, the words, “from the day after the Sabbath,” means from the day after the historical Sabbath; i.e. the first counting of the Omer always occurs *motzoi Shabbat*. In that case, there are actually seven full weeks between Passover and Shavuot. There is nothing lacking at all.

However, according to the position of the Pharisees, which is the accepted opinion in Judaism, “from the day after the Sabbath,” means, “from the day after Passover.” In this case, during most years in which Passover does not fall out on Sabbath, Sefirat HaOmer begins in the middle of the week and extends over an eight week period – six full weeks in the middle, and a partial week at the beginning and at the end. In this case, we have only six weeks, and not seven - for the word “Sabbath” can refer to the seventh day, or

alternatively, to a period of days; an entire week, from Sunday until Sabbath is also referred to as a "Sabbath." In such a case, the forty-nine days between Passover and Shavuot constitute only six whole "Sabbaths," with a few days tacked on at the beginning and the end – this is quite a lack in "wholeness."

Too great a lack?

According to all that we have said, that the word "whole" alludes to a minor lack, isn't the discrepancy we have identified too great?

A Possible Answer

I would like to suggest that the Torah is teaching us that since, from the first night of the Omer, we are already giving these solitary days a special value, and counting them together with the full weeks, without excluding a moment, we are therefore able to uplift and incorporate these seven scattered days into one unit of time that is higher and more complete – a "week" of seven days. (Despite the time-span of six weeks that divides them, and the fact that they belong to entirely different weeks.)

The word "whole" that describes the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot alludes to a lack, but one which is given to us to work on and fix. It reflects the ability of a human being to work on deficiencies, on imperfections, and grasp something higher than could be produced by nature – to turn a few scattered days into a "week" and to forge something more whole than if had been complete from the beginning. "Seven *whole* weeks" is a more exalted term than "seven weeks" alone.

Implications for Life

In the term, “Seven whole weeks,” the Torah alludes to an important principle. So often, our dreams of achieving lofty goals are pushed aside for reasons of “lack of time.” Yet, every single person is unique. No one is like another. And each one has something special to contribute to the world. Many times, we have in mind to begin some special project, whether for the good of society, (such as writing a book, a poem, or creating a work of art), or for our personal betterment (such as learning a certain subject). However, the daily struggle for livelihood, the needs of the family, and other obstacles, demand so much of our energy and time, that we are left with nothing but a few scattered hours and minutes, that seem insufficient to begin the long-term projects we have in mind.

However, each person is a world unto himself. It is unreasonable to think that one’s entire existence should be dedicated merely to survival, and the continuation of the species, or even the task of educating one’s children. The Torah is teaching us to “pick up from the floor” all these small moments, more precious than pearls. If we arrange our schedules from the outset to recover all these small moments for the sake of a worthy goal, and not condemn them to the dustbin, we will be able to unite even the small and dispersed moments of our lives, to “patch” them together, and weave and create “something from nothing” – tracts of time in which to accomplish the most lofty goals, above the daily struggle for existence that is forced upon us. We will fulfill the well-known dictate: “The lazy have no time for anything, but the diligent, who are always busy, find time for everything.”