

Sins of the Scholars

Rabbi Reuven Mann

The period of time between Passover and Shavuot is generally referred to as the *Omer*. There are two distinct religious practices in effect at this time. Starting from the second night of Passover, we initiate a count of the 49 days and 7 weeks that take us to the holiday of Shavuot.

In the days of the Temple, when sacrifices were brought, this count was a Biblical commandment. According to most commentators, it is—in the absence of the Temple—no longer a Torah requirement.

Nevertheless, the Rabbis mandated that we do this as a remembrance of the Sanctuary. That is why, after reciting the count, we utter this short but meaningful prayer: “May the Merciful One restore the Temple service to its place, Amen.”

Many customs have been established to ensure that we will remember the destruction of the Temple. This does not simply mean that we should recall it as an historical occurrence. Every Jew is aware that we once had the Holy Temple and, due to our sins, no longer have it. There is no danger that this piece of information will be lost. Rather, the point is that we should be cognizant of the enormous spiritual loss we have endured and cultivate a yearning for a return to *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel) and the rebuilding of the Temple.

Thus, we put ashes above the forehead of the groom, and he smashes a glass at the conclusion of the marriage ceremony. This is accompanied by the recitation of the relevant verse from Psalms that implores us to place the remembrance of Jerusalem above our most significant joy.

In my opinion, these practices imply that a Jew should always retain a sense of discomfiture with the fact that he is in Exile. Admittedly, this is not easy in America, where—from every material and political vantage point—we “have it made.” To long for the restoration of Zion in our current condition requires a great sensitivity to the spiritual beauty that we miss in our separation from Yerushalayim.

There is an additional feature that marks the time of the *Omer*, the custom to observe a period of mourning for 33 days. According to our classical sources, a terrible plague—which took the lives of 24,000 students of one of the greatest Sages in history, Rabbi Akiva—took place during the *Omer* period.

The Rabbis explain that this was not an ordinary disaster brought about by purely natural forces. Rather, this calamity was a manifestation of Divine punishment. These great Torah scholars were afflicted because they failed to display the proper respect to one another.

At first glance, this is difficult to comprehend. How is it possible that the choicest scholars who had the privilege of learning under one of the greatest teachers could lack so elemental a virtue as *Derech Eretz* (decent manners)?

The study of Torah is the most spiritual activity anyone can be involved in. It can, however, be a double-edged sword. It can purify the personality and create a sense of humility and a sublime appreciation for the supreme wisdom of the Giver of the Torah.

Conversely, nothing arouses man's ego more than the attainment of knowledge. Jewish life is dominated by great respect for the *Talmid Chacham* (accomplished student). We put our Sages on a pedestal and look up to them with the greatest reverence. Thus, some may be attracted to Torah study precisely because they crave the honor that goes with it. The pursuit of recognition and prestige can lead to disrespect and disdain for one's fellow students and colleagues.

We learn from this that the goal of Torah study is not just the attainment of knowledge, but the refinement of the personality and perfection of the soul. We must also deduce from this calamity that Torah scholars are held to higher standards and judged more severely than "ordinary" people.

While it is wrong for anyone to be disrespectful, when that behavior is committed by someone who is not a Torah scholar, he will not necessarily meet with such harsh punishment.

Rabbi Soloveitchik asked that, since we must assume these scholars did *Teshuvah* (repented), why wasn't that sufficient to annul the evil decree? He answered by citing the Rambam, who says that repentance attains forgiveness for all sins, with one exception. When a person desecrates the name of G-d in the course of his transgression, he does not receive pardon until death, and thus must bear the consequences of the sin in this world.

Disrespect would not be a capital offense for an ordinary person, but, when committed by a Torah scholar, it desecrates the name of Hashem and His Torah.

It is appropriate that the national mourning take place during the time we perform the *Mitzvah* (commandment) of Counting the *Omer*. We do so to remember the tragic destruction of the Holy Temple, a major cause of which was baseless hatred. The seriousness of this sin is illustrated by the tragedy of Rabbi Akiva's students.

As we anticipate the great day of the Revelation at Sinai, let us remember that Hashem gave us the Torah so we could perfect our nature and thus sanctify His name in the world. May we always remain dedicated to that goal.

Chag Sameiach.