

The Omer is a Time for Congregational Learning

This time of year - during the counting of the *Omer* - it is in a specially auspicious time for engaging in a small amount of routine Torah study as often as possible - ideally each day. From Passover, the time the freedom, to Shavuot, when we received Torah at Sinai, we are a people on the move, taking steps toward Sinai. And there is a spring our step because we are moving from slavery to freedom. In our communities, we prepare each day, by studying a small piece of the ethical teachings of the Sages, namely *Pirkei Avot*. You can find *Pirkei Avot* on page 641 to 683 of your gray weekday Siddur (i.e. the Koren Sacks). By counting the *Omer* each day and studying devotionally a small piece of *Avot*, we put ourselves in the best possible frame of mind to receive Torah on *Shavuot* (the evening of June 20). Last year at this time, I suggested reading *Pirkei Avot* 6:6 (pg 679), which focusses on the qualities through which one acquires Torah study. Many people have a tradition of studying one Mishnah from *Pirkei Avot* each day. This year I am proposing a slightly altered program of congregational learning. Lets keep the focus that reading a single Mishnah provides. But let's also have breadth, by learning another piece of *Pirkei Avot* chapter 6 each day. Please think of questions to ask me; let's have a conversation about what you're learning.

This year I am proposing that we read *Pirkei Avot* 6:1 each day - together with one other Mishnah from the same chapter - your choice which one. That way we will be learning two things each day. Two weeks ago, I shared from *Shir ha Shirim Rabbah* 5:11.2 that taught that it is good to learn two pieces of Torah each day. Some of you have asked, 'well what do you mean by "Torah study?" I mean, I come to the service and listen to the scroll being read in Hebrew, but I don't know what it means. What do you want me to do?' So let me be more precise about the process of study that I envision. The kind of Torah study we do on the Omer is special. It takes a small piece of text, but it moves slowly. You might think of it as Reading closely, or some of you may even think of it as "Going real slow"! That's fine. As we revisit our Mishnah each day, read it slowly, in a contemplative mode. Allow yourself to stop and notice new things that emerge from this text. It is a rich teaching that rewards re-reading, and each new - hopefully deeper - contemplation may yield new insight. The text, traditionally called the *Baraita of Rabbi Meir* is the first in an entire chapter dealing with the acquisition of Torah. Since "acquisition" might strike as odd regarding something other than property, a more helpful contemporary translation might be the internalization of Torah. The *Baraita* says:

"Rabbi Meir said: Whoever engages in Torah study for its own sake merits many things; moreover, the whole world is worthwhile for his sake alone.

He is called friend, beloved, a lover of God and a lover of mankind.

The Torah clothes him with humility and reverence.

It prepares him to be righteous pious upright and faithful.

It keeps him far from sin and near to virtue.

People benefit from his advice and wisdom, understanding and courage, as it is said "Mine are counsel and wisdom; I am understanding, courage is mine." (Proverbs 8:14)

It gives him sovereignty, dominion, and discerning judgement.

To him the secrets of the Torah are revealed.

He becomes like a never-failing fountain, like a river that never runs dry.

He becomes modest and patient.

He forgives insults.

It makes him great, exalting him above all things."

I want to highlight the first set of attributes that the *Baraita* highlights. After stating the extraordinary value of someone who learns Torah for its own sake, the *baraita* says, "He is called friend, beloved, a lover of God and a lover of mankind." Wow, this is deep stuff. The first thing we learn about someone who learns Torah *lishmah*, is that they are a *friend of God*. The standard translation of the Hebrew word - *Re'a* - means neighbor. But the word *Re'a* in *Shir ha Shirim* - which many read on each *Erev Shabbat* and on the the Shabbat of Passover - means beloved. The Sacks translation "friend" does a fine job. But it is worth seeing the full range of meanings of this word. A *Re'a* is someone with whom we have a relationship. And hopefully its a positive one :). And much more intensely, it is someone whom we love and long for. That is how God feels about us when we learn Torah. And that love is mutual. We read next that this person is *Ohev et HaMakom* - he or she loves God. So its reciprocal. God loves us. And we love God. Then the next thing this line teaches is that this love overflows to others *Ohev et haBriot* - this person loves other creatures. That's because love is generative. When we love others, its not like we have less love afterwards, but more love. And we can share that love with still others.

So the process of Torah study begins in love. Why do you think that love is so important that it comes first in the Baraita? I think every teacher would tell you that if your students love their subject they will learn much much more. But its not just about quantity. Its about the quality of the Torah study. If we study Torah because we love God, then we will be drawn back to Torah study again and again. We will sneak it in on our lunch break, and make it a fixed part of our daily schedule. That's the kind of thing that the Baraita is talking about. There is simply no comparing study that begins with love and study that begins without it.

So let's carry this teaching with us this May as we count the Omer. The first step is love. The first step is developing a generative relationship with the source of Torah, God. The spring time is the time for the awakening of love. It is also a time when the whole world, as it were, opens up to display its love for God. As the Psalms declare and as we see at this time, every tree, and grass and blossom lifts its head up to say, "I love you." If we can see the world this way, this spring we will have made a start. "Rabbi Jassa taught" in *Shir ha Shirim Rabbah* 5.2.2 "The Holy One Blessed be He, said to Israel: My sons, present to me an opening of repentance no bigger than the eye of a needle and I will widen it into opening through which wagons and carriages can pass." If we open - even slightly to God - in love, or hope, then like a seed poking its leafy green head through the earth, something can grow of great size.

May we feel the blessing of God's love.

May that love prompt a desire that cultivates the discipline for daily study.

May we each merit to experience personal and communal growth and the blessing it brings.