

# PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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## Keep Your Eyes Wide Open

By Yossi Katz

IT'S BEEN A while now. Night after night we count the Omer until we will have finally completed counting seven weeks, and then we will celebrate Shavuot. The name of this holiday, which literally means “Weeks,” seems to hint to its connection to the weeks of counting preceding it. We also know that the number of days before Shavuot parallels the number of qualities necessary to properly receive the Torah. But what is the significance of counting the days from the offering of a measure of grain, and preparing to receive the Torah?

The process of bringing the Omer-offering included waving it in all four directions, as well as up and down. This demonstrated that everything in creation is connected directly to God and under His complete supervision. Similarly, when we say in the *Shema*, “*Hashem Echad* – God is One,” we should meditate on the idea that God’s dominion extends to all six directions (*Berakhot* 13b).

While it’s easy to believe that the universe and the heavens are under the dominion of God, it’s more challenging to believe that every detail of our lives on Planet Earth falls under His direct supervision. Therefore we emphasize this idea every morning and night as we cover our eyes and focus our vision above, beyond, and mainly below. This is also the central idea behind every mitzvah. By fulfilling a mitzvah with a human action, we connect mundane human life to the Divine. By fulfilling His commandment, I am recognizing that my human actions are pleasing and desirable to Him. In doing this, I am demonstrating my faith in God’s involvement in human life and His Oneness with every part of creation. King David therefore said, “All your mitzvot are faith” (*Psalms* 119:86).

To the human mind, the concept of God being interested in the details of our lives is difficult to fathom. Therefore the Omer-offering was brought from barley – animal food – because the only way we can accept this idea is if we are willing to think like an animal, which acts only out of instinct and without understanding. The animal instinctively knows that God will take interest even in him and provide for him, and continues about his life.

The Omer is a measure of grain. The reason we count from a measurement is because it’s not enough to take a wide-angle look at God’s awesomeness. We must zero in on the fact that He cares about every detail of our lives. When we wave a measured amount in all directions, we reinforce the notion that even when there are other measurements like time and place, still, the Infinite God cares to minimize His greatness and involve Himself with us.

On the first Shavuot morning, the Jewish People overslept. When we sleep, our eyes are closed and we are disconnected from the spiritual realities that are above us. Life’s harsh events then make us feel cut off from deeper purpose. The Torah also seems cold and irrelevant.

To rectify the mistake of many years ago, and the many times when we, too, failed to see beyond, we stay awake on Shavuot night. We force our eyes wide open to focus on God’s involvement and are filled with the faith to see beyond our restrictions and lacks. By seeing God’s providence, everything now becomes purposeful and liberating. With our newfound Omer-counting ability to experience God’s Oneness in every constriction of our lives, we can now focus on studying the Torah, so we can receive a Torah where every mitzvah is appreciated as another opportunity to connect our mundanity to His Oneness. This is the true essence and purpose of the Torah, and only by first experiencing and appreciating God’s interest in us can we properly receive it.

*Based on Likutey Halakhot, Ma'aseh U'Matan 4*

# Shavuot in Egypt

By Chaim Kramer

*Today Rebbe Nachman's teachings are known far and wide, but in the early nineteenth century his sphere of influence was limited to Eastern Europe. Reb Noson began introducing the Rebbe's books to Jews in other lands during his pilgrimage to Eretz Yisrael in 1822.*

In Alexandria Reb Noson was directed to the home of the *chazan* of the synagogue. There he met Reb Aharon, a visitor from Salonika, who asked him if he had any new books. "I told him right away that I had a new book that no one in that country had seen yet: *Likutey Moharan*," Reb Noson later wrote. "There I was in exile in Egypt, in Alexandria – a place I never in my life thought I would ever visit – and I had the privilege of mentioning the Rebbe's holy book. If this was the only reason I had come there, it was enough, especially as I now saw that I would be able to sell some books, as indeed I did."

In Alexandria Reb Noson was introduced to the unique customs of the Sephardim. He sat on straw mats with his hosts, eating noodles and cheese with his fingers, as they did. He listened as a number of young men came in to read the weekly Torah reading of *Bamidbar* in the Sephardic cantillation.

On Shavuot, Reb Noson and his companion stayed up the entire night, which was nearly twice as long as a Ukrainian summer night. They recited the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* and joined the Sephardim in songs and praises to God. "All over the world, Jews are singing to God and praising Him," thought Reb Noson. One of his greatest joys was that he was able to develop some original thoughts about the Giving of the Torah.

As soon as Yom Tov was over, Reb Noson asked the Rav of Alexandria for help in collecting funds to cover his expenses for the final leg of his journey to Eretz Yisrael. The Rav agreed, and he also bought a number of books, including *Likutey Moharan* and *The Aleph-Bet Book*. Reb Aharon bought the same books to take back to Salonika, where there were even more Jews than in Istanbul.

What brought Reb Noson the greatest joy of all was the fact that Rebbe Nachman's teachings were beginning to spread far beyond the Ukraine to the Jewish world at large.

*From "Through Fire and Water: The Life of Reb Noson of Breslov"*

*Dedicated in the Memory of (L'Ilui Nishmat) Yehudis bat Shimon*

## SIDEPATH

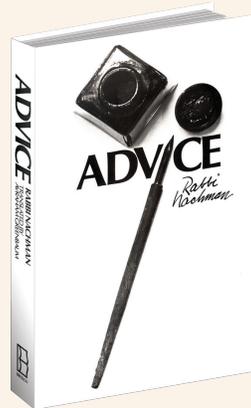
Advice (*Likutey Etzot*) translated by Avraham Greenbaum

**MODESTY.** 4. Shame and embarrassment are the basic qualities that help us to return to God. The merest sin one may have committed should give one a deep sense of shame, because in reality every Jew ought to be far removed from sin. The soul of the Jew is rooted in a source so exalted that in essence he is completely detached from sin. For a Jew to sin in any way at all is totally unbecoming.

Even when he wants to perform a mitzvah, a positive action, he should also feel a sense of shame and embarrassment. What right does he have to perform this mitzvah? How does he dare to enter the court of the King and perform the mitzvah when he considers the greatness of the One before whom he does it?

... To acquire a sense of shame one should examine oneself in comparison with the Tzaddik. This will move him to repent and attain true humility, the humility of Moses (*Likutey Moharan* II, 72).

**CLOTHES.** 1. You should be very particular about your clothes. Never treat them carelessly, and make sure they are not stained or dirty. A person's clothes become his judges if he does not show them the respect they deserve. The greater the man, the more care he must take over his garments, because the higher one's level, the more scrupulously one is judged (*ibid.* I, 29:3).



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*The photo on the front is a close-up of Rebbe Nachman's chair, which is displayed in the main Breslov synagogue in Jerusalem.*