

Can You Handle The Downs?

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Let's review what we wrote last week about the *Omer*-offering. Yes, it's that important. The offering consisted of barley, an archetypical animal food. On the second day of Pesach, an *omer* (a measure equal to approximately 2 quarts/1.9 liter) of barley was waved in the six directions of space (up, down and to the four winds). We asked: Why wave barley? Why not wave wheat, human food?

Here's an answer we didn't give last week. Barley, because it is animal food, represents animal-like thinking. For your average cow, nothing could be better than being put out to pasture or munching on fresh hay. That's what life is about—pampering the body. Animals don't think too much about the purpose of life and rarely spend time contemplating the kindness and greatness of the Creator.

Unfortunately, the same is true of some human beings most of the time, and all of us some of the time. When we sin,* it's because our brain has slipped down into animal mode. Bad enough if that's a result of our having consumed too much "barley." It's far worse when we make a foolish conscious decision to remove our human awareness in order to make like a monkey or do like a donkey.

But—THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS DESPAIR! When the Kohen waved the *Omer*-offering in the Beit HaMikdash, he was doing something extraordinary. His silent waving was sending a powerful message to every human being across the globe: THE WORLD IS FILLED WITH GOD'S GLORY! There is no place—physical location or spiritual situation—that is empty of God's presence. This is why "there is no such thing as despair." No matter how unsacred or anti-holy the place you find yourself, no matter how many unsacred or anti-holy decisions you've made in life (even just a few minutes ago), God is right there with you, filling that space with His glory.

And this is when a Jew's mettle is tested. Will he throw in the towel, accept his current debauched state, and continue moving away from God and His Torah? Or will he endure whatever comes his way in order to maintain his Jewish successes to date, and continue to yearn and cry out to God to allow him to come closer and closer still? A Jew who hides his face from God because of his failures not only will not succeed at being a good Jew, but will deteriorate, God forbid. As a Jew, you always have to bear that in mind: It doesn't matter how filthy it is, God is here. I can and will come back.

This is why we have the *Omer*-count. We're human. We make mistakes. We let our physical side induce us into animal dumbness. So it is necessary to count, count and count some more, to ingrain into our brains and minds as deeply as possible that it is absolutely true that God's glory is present everywhere; that anyone can return to God no matter what type of spiritual contamination he has to overcome. You

need to know this in your *kishkes* (guts) if you want to keep the Torah. Why?

Because when you see the Torah and study it, the angelic side of you gets excited by its beauty, its genius and its mystery. It wants to swallow *right now* everything the Torah has to offer. But you can't do it. It's impossible—and unhealthy—to zoom straight to the top of the mountain. The Torah's advice to those who want to purify themselves: Go slow, even very slow. It takes time to transform an ex-slave into a holy Yid. While that's happening, a lot is going to take place in your life, not all of it pleasant. That presents you with two types of challenge.

The first is to maintain self-control and not give into temptation. The second is to not become discouraged and give up if you stumble and fall. This is especially true if you've tried and tried and tried. Our animal-side is looking for an excuse to wiggle away from the Torah. "What's the use?" and "I'll never make it" are among its favorite excuses. Counting the *Omer*, remembering that God is present even in the most animal parts of life, undercuts those arguments and enables us to grow Jewishly.

This is why the mitzvah tells us, "Count for *yourselves*" (Leviticus 23:15). You have *your* Jewishness to attain. Don't let your setbacks discourage you. Don't let other people's successes discourage you. Just because they've already succeeded doesn't mean you never will. At a certain point, no amount of outside encouragement is going to help you. In your "career" as a Jew, you will be in situations where you and only you can provide the necessary encouragement to reach into yourself and keep on going in your quest to be the holiest Yid you can possibly be—and you will be. Amen.

* What is a sin? Doing something you know you shouldn't, or not doing something you know you should.

a gutn Shabbos!

Shabbat Shalom!

(Based on *Likutey Halakhot, Pesach* 9:20–22)