

Why should we be concerned about others? – Parshat Emor

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We often busy ourselves making comparisons. We compare ourselves to our friends – we see their accomplishments and feel as if we lost out. Sometimes we even *fargin* (bear no grudge against) others and attribute other people's success to the fact that they are simply "successful types", and thus we squelch our own abilities and achievements. But from a realistic perspective: What do other people's achievements have to do with us? We should focus on our own abilities and accomplishments, and then we will see that in fact we can actually be quite successful.

This week's *parsha* is *parshat Emor*. It is also known as "the portion of the festivals" because all the festivals are mentioned in it. We also read about the *mitzvah* of Counting

the Omer, and this occurs exactly during the days of the Counting of the Omer as a preparation for the holiday of *Shavuot*.

The Zohar compares the Counting of the Omer to the counting that a woman makes for ritual purity. The goal of both types of counting is to become purified and connected—a woman with her husband and the Nation of Israel with the Creator. When the Torah commands us about the Counting of Omer, it emphasizes the personal side: “Count for yourselves (*l’chem*) from the day after Shabbat...” (Leviticus 23:15.) Every letter in the Torah is absolutely precise, so there must be a specific reason that the Torah that has added the word “*l’chem*” (“to you”). Why does the Torah emphasize the personal dimension in the *mitzvah* of *Sefirat HaOmer*?

Let’s take a step back for a minute. The Counting of the Omer begins on the day after Passover and is meant to purify us in preparation for a reunion with the Creator with the receiving the Torah on the holiday of *Shavuot*. This is similar to the reunion of a woman with her husband when she completes the days of her counting, just as we brought from the Zohar.

The Counting of the Omer is therefore the spiritual path that we follow from the day after Passover until the holiday of *Shavuot*. On Seder Night, each and every one of us received a personal heavenly enlightenment, and on the day after Passover all the “*mochin*” (the spiritual awakenings) that were received on Seder Night disappear. Then there are 50 days ahead of us in which we have to work to reach the same enlightenment we received as a gift, but now through our own efforts. This was explained in the lesson about the holiday of Passover.

Who can be so sure about what his spiritual source is and what his spiritual path is that he would be in a position to complain about it? Maybe his own actions caused him to be unsuccessful. Rabbi Natan sums it up simply: “No person is similar in any way to his friend.”

Now we can understand the reason for emphasizing the personal dimension of “count for yourselves” in the *mitzvah* of the Counting of the Omer. The counting is intended to be the path for purification and reconnecting in purity. The Torah emphasizes that the most correct and efficient way is the personal path, each person with his own individual spiritual work. Every person must count for himself, at his own pace, and according to his own abilities.

Rabbi Natan explains the practical application of this:

It often happens that we want to advance spiritually, to feel a certain closeness to God. But when we notice that some of our peers are succeeding and advancing spiritually while we are being “left behind,” we can feel like our spiritual aspirations are being squashed, and we can completely lose our motivation to grow spiritually.

Rabbi Natan explains that the reason for this is that we are preoccupied with making comparisons. We compare ourselves to our friends, and when we see that we have been surpassed on the right and the left, we suddenly lose the sense of self-worth we had in our spiritual work. We no longer find value in our personal achievements on their own without any comparisons to other people.

Moreover, sometimes a person will *fargin* (to treat with equanimity and not be jealous of) others for their spiritual accomplishments. He will explain to himself in all “humility” that: “They are really successful and wise and therefore they can accomplish more than I can. But I—what can I do—I cannot succeed like they can, and I am unable to achieve such spiritual levels.” Do you understand? His “humility” is what is stopping him from growing spiritually.

Rabbi Natan exposes these thoughts of “humility” for what they really are with simple common sense:

Underneath this “humility,” there are some hidden

condescending thoughts saying that it is not comfortable for him and it is not honorable for him to serve the Creator under conditions where he feels he is being ranked. His friends, it seems, have accepted these conditions so that they could be successful, but he...It is as if he were making an accounting with the Creator that He should give him conditions that do not require him to make a lot of effort for his spiritual growth, so that he can serve the Creator in a way that he is actually capable of. And therefore, he does nothing! Can we seriously call this condescending attitude "humility"?

In addition, the fact that he feels that there is discrimination against him—as if other people were given conditions that enabled them to be more spiritually successful—is false. Who can be so sure about what his spiritual source is and what his spiritual path is that he would be in a position to complain about it? Maybe his own actions caused him to be unsuccessful. Rabbi Natan sums it up simply: "No person is similar in any way to his friend."

This is why the Torah commands us in the Counting of the Omer: "Count for yourselves." Each and every person is commanded to count for himself. Do not look at your friend—neither at his achievements nor his failures. Certainly, it is a positive thing to learn from one's friends' good deeds and to develop and not remain static, but one needs to know how to use discretion: When is it fitting to be inspired by his friends and when does a person need to look inwards and focus only on his own process of growth?

How can we focus only on ourselves and completely disconnect ourselves from the tendency to make comparisons? What is the whole idea behind the Counting of the Omer that enables a person to focus inwardly on himself?

In between the two parts of *Likutei Moharan* there is a short lesson called, "Avraham was one." In this lesson, Rebbe Nachman teaches that when serving G-d a person need not be

impressed nor admire those around him. He should know how to go against the flow, as was explained in detail in the lesson on [parshat Lech Lecha](#).

Similarly, Rabbi Natan explains, we must learn to ignore and not be influenced by our own inner voices of opposition that cause us to compare ourselves with others around us. We need to act as if we are the only ones in the world and do what we feel we need to do according to our abilities and our particular situation without comparing ourselves to others. Everyone is a complete creation in his own right! His work in this world is not the same as anyone else's. What is asked of one person is not the same as that which is required from another—each person is required to perform according to his own specific abilities.



“Avraham was one” – Everyone is a complete creation in his own right!

Rabbi Natan connects this idea with the story of the “The Sophisticate and the Simpleton” (The 9th story in Rebbe Nachman’s Stories), one of the most famous stories that Rabbi Nachman told:

There were two friends: one was sophisticated and the other was simple. The sophisticate completed academic degrees in philosophy, etc., and became a certified doctor, goldsmith, and more. Everything he learned he understood quickly and even surpassed his teachers in wisdom. The Simpleton, on the other hand, was a simple-minded person (Rebbe Nachman emphasizes that he was not lacking in intelligence, but rather that he had a humble approach without any sophistication) and he learned a simple trade: that of a shoemaker. He had to study for a long time, and even when he had finished, he had not completely mastered his trade. He was always under pressure to earn his livelihood, and when he would fix or make a pair of shoes, they were usually triangular in shape. Nevertheless, he was always full of joy, and he got great satisfaction from his work. He would speak very highly of it, deriving much enjoyment from his handiwork.

One day his wife asked him, "What are you so happy about? If your shoes are as wonderful as you describe them, then why do all the other shoemakers get three gold coins for their work while you only get a one and a half? The Simpleton answered her, "What does that have to do with me? After all, 'That is their work, and this is my work.' Also, why must we speak about others?! What do I care? After all, if I calculate the expenses, the leather cost me so much, and the glue and thread so much. So, we see that I earn altogether 10 groshen on a pair of shoes. As long as I make such a clear profit, What do I care?" Rabbi Nachman concludes: "And he was always filled with joy and happiness."

After Rebbe Nachman told the story, he said, "And when one's prayer is like a crooked shoe with three sides...", meaning, you can still be happy despite everything. From this, Rabbi Natan learns out an important foundation in serving G-d, A person should focus on himself, and think to himself: without any comparison to others, how much effort do I want to make, and how hard do I want to try. I will not compare myself to

others, not regarding their efforts and not regarding their accomplishments.

We should all try to do our very best, whatever we are able to do, and so, with G-d's help, we will be able to meet our goals, and we will always be full of joy and happiness!

(Based on *Likutei Halachot, Pesach 9:22*)

Now I will reveal to you a personal secret: this lesson was also a great encouragement for me. It was written during the course of a long flight. If I had been watching and comparing myself to what everybody else was doing, I probably would have thought to myself, "Why am I even trying to write under such conditions?" So, thank G-d, I was able to put in the effort and the necessary concentration. Why should I compare myself to others? Even if this lesson came out with "three sides," I myself am very satisfied with it, because I am not comparing myself to anyone else, but only focusing on my own diligence and exertion. Thank You G-d!