



ברית משולשת Covenant in Triplicate

Individual Covenant (Brit Milah)
National Covenant (Pesach sacrifice)
Land Covenant (Omer offering)

■ The Omer: The First of the Grain Harvest

A very puzzling teaching by R. Yochanan appears in the Medrash (Vayikra Rabba 28,6):

Let not the Omer sacrifice be lowly in your eyes, for it was because of this commandment that Avraham Avinu merited to inherit the Land of Canaan. G-d told him, *“I will give you and your descendants after you the land of your residency - the entire Land of Canaan - as an eternal heritage”* (B'reshit 17,8) – and the next verse states, *“And you - My covenant you shall uphold.”*

R. Yochanan identifies the Divine covenant of this verse as the mitzvah of the Omer. But - the very next verse in the passage shows clearly that the reference is to the Covenant of Brit Milah (ritual circumcision)! The verse states, *“This is the covenant that you shall keep... circumcise all your males.”* Should not R. Yochanan have said that it was in the merit of Brit Milah that Avraham received the Land?

Let us backtrack a bit. The nightly mitzvah of Counting the Omer, from the second night of Pesach all the way until Shavuot, is quite familiar to us. The Omer sacrifice, on the other hand, is a relatively little-known commandment. It took place in the Beit HaMikdash on the second day of Passover, and until it was offered, no one was permitted to eat of the year's new crop of grain. The offering of the *Korban HaOmer* thus signals

immediate permission to partake of the new crop. Nowadays, when we have no Holy Temple and therefore no sacrifices, “new grain” can be eaten only after the second day of Passover, the 16th day of Nissan.

The Omer sacrifice was made of about 2.5 kilograms of flour from the new barley crop, mixed together with oil to form a cake. The priest would then take the Omer flour mixture and dramatically wave it back and forth, then up and down, before placing a fistful of it on the altar to be burnt. The remainder would be a gift for the priests. The act of waving, or *tnufah*, was considered so important that the Torah actually calls this sacrifice the *Omer HaTnufah*, the Omer of Waving (Vayikra 23,15). We will soon see why waving the Omer is so important.

In light of our question on R. Yochanan above, could there be a connection between Brit Milah and the Omer sacrifice that we do not yet know?

■ Conquest of the Land

Let us return to the period when Bnei Yisrael, under the leadership of Moshe's loyal protégé Yehoshua bin Nun, first entered the Land of Israel. After forty years of wandering in the desert, they crossed over the Jordan River on the 10th day of the month of Nissan, at a place called Gilgal:

וְהָעָם עָלוּ מִן הַיַּרְדֵּן בְּעֶשְׂרֵי לַחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּגִלְגָּל בְּקֶצֶה מִזְרַח יְרִיחוֹ.

*The nation ascended from the Jordan on the tenth day
of the first month, and they encamped at Gilgal,
at the edge of eastern Jericho.* (Joshua 4,19)

Once in the Land, the first Divine command Yehoshua fulfilled was to perform the Brit Milah Covenant and circumcise every Jewish male; all those who were born during the forty years in the desert were not yet circumcised because of the dangers involved. To rectify this situation, “*Yehoshua fashioned swords of rocks, and he circumcised the sons of Israel.*” (5,3)

It took three days for them to recover from the circumcision operation, and they were then ready for the next mitzvah: the Pesach sacrificial offering on the 14th of Nissan:

וַיַּחֲנוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגִלְגָּל וַיַּעֲשׂוּ אֶת הַפֶּסַח בְּאַרְבַּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם
לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּעָרֵב בְּעֶרְבוֹת יְרִיחוֹ.

*The Children of Israel encamped at Gilgal,
and they brought the Pesach sacrifice on the 14th
day of the month ...in the plains of Jericho.* (5,10)

Two days later, on the 16th of Nissan, they brought the Omer sacrifice, from the very first grains they harvested in the Land of Israel. This allowed them to eat of the Land's grains:

וַיֹּאכְלוּ מֵעֵבוֹר הָאָרֶץ מִמַּחֲרַת הַפֶּסַח, מִצֹּת וְקִלּוֹי בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.
*And they ate of the grain of the land on the day after Passover -
 matzahs and roasted grain, on this very day.* (5,11)

Incidentally, Maimonides explains that this verse helps resolve a major dispute between believing Jews and those who do not accept the Oral Law. The latter group falsely taught that when the Torah instructed us to count the Omer beginning on *“the day after the Sabbath”* (Vayikra 23,15), it was referring literally to the Sabbath day that occurred during the Pesach holiday. This would mean that the seven weeks of counting from Passover to Shavuot would always end on Sabbath, leaving the Shavuot holiday to always occur on a Sunday.

However, the Sages taught that *“the day after the Sabbath”* means “the day after the first day of Passover” - because *“Sabbath”* in this case means “holiday.” There are many proofs showing that this is the correct understanding, and one of them is the above verse. It shows that Bnei Yisrael waited to eat from the new grain until the day of the Omer offering – *“the day after [the first day of] Passover,”* as the Sages taught – and not until the day after the Sabbath.

Let us summarize as follows: Three Torah commandments, one after the other, accompanied the Children of Israel as they entered the Land of Israel. They were:

1. Brit Milah - the covenant of ritual circumcision
2. The Pesach sacrifice
3. The Omer sacrifice

All three of these different Torah commandments are layers of the same Divine covenant, as we will now see.

■ The Individual, the Nation, and the Land

1. Brit Milah: The Covenant of the Individual

We begin with the commandment of the Brit Milah covenant, which is actually the formation of a link between every individual Jewish male and

Hashem. This is the basic connection, the “first floor” atop which a stronger “second floor” will be built.

This connection with G-d is enabled by ridding ourselves of the foreskin. Though it is a physical layer of covering skin, it actually impedes spiritually the revelation of each Jew’s relationship with G-d. Our Patriarch Avraham was the first to fulfill this command/covenant and institute this spiritual link with Hashem.

2. The Pesach Sacrifice: The Covenant of the Nation

The second floor of our covenant with G-d is that of the Pesach sacrifice, which united Israel into one people with one national identity. This is why one of the main directives in this sacrifice is that Gentiles may not eat of it (Sh'mot 12,43). In addition, the blood of the Pesach sacrifice, sprinkled on the doorposts of the Jewish homes in Egypt, was the decisive mark differentiating between the Israelites and the Egyptians – and enabled the Jewish first-borns to remain alive while those of the Egyptians were killed.

Furthermore: For Bnei Yisrael to forge strong bonds with their G-d, they had to separate themselves from the Egyptians and their gods. The very slaughter of the Pesach lamb, the sheep god of the Egyptians, precisely during Nissan, the month whose sign is Aries/lamb, meant the invalidation of the Egyptian divinity.

The Exodus from Egypt was thus like a Brit Milah for the entire nation, removing the “foreskin” impairing Israel’s spiritual ties with G-d. The process began with the physical departure from Egypt, and ended with the miracle of the Splitting of the Red Sea in which the Egyptians drowned, thus finalizing Israel’s separation from them.

The Paschal sacrifice can thus be known as the “Covenant of the Nation.”

3. The Mitzvah of Omer: The Covenant of the Land

The third and top floor of G-d’s Covenant with Israel is that of the Land of Israel. The detachment of the Land from its Canaanite rule could not occur until the People of Israel arrived, under the leadership of Yehoshua bin Nun. By offering the Omer barley sacrifice on the 16th of Nissan and bringing the wheat meal-offering sacrifice 50 days later on Shavuot, the Nation of Israel began the process of detaching the Land’s produce from the Canaanites, who had sacrificed it to their gods. This is thus known as the Covenant of the Land.

The triplicate G-d-Israel covenant is therefore this:

1. The covenant of the individual,
2. the covenant of the nation, and
3. the covenant of the land.

In the words of the Prophet Isaiah:

כֹּה אָמַר ה' בְּעֵת רְצוֹן עֲנִיתִיךָ וּבַיּוֹם יְשׁוּעָה עֲזַרְתִּיךָ וְאֶצְרְךָ
וְאַתְּנֶנּוּ לְבְרִית עִם לְהַקִּים אֶרֶץ לְהִנְחִיל נַחְלוֹת שְׂמִמּוֹת.

So said G-d: "At a time of favor I answered you, and on a day of salvation I aided you; I will watch over you and you will be My covenantal people, to inherit desolate lots." (Yeshayahu 49,8)

■ Each Layer is Critical

These three components are layered, one atop the other, like a three-story building. One cannot climb to the top floor if the lower floors are not intact. Let us discuss, for instance, the second floor: The Covenant of the Nation. It cannot be reached without the first level, i.e., the circumcision of every Jewish male. Brit Milah is a basic pre-condition for eating the all-important Pesach sacrifice on the night of the Exodus, and likely for leaving Egypt as well. As the Torah tells us:

וְכִי יִגּוּר אֶתְךָ גֵר וְעָשָׂה פֶסַח לֵה, הַמּוֹל לוֹ כָּל זָכָר וְאִזּוּ יִקְרַב לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ...

If a foreigner resides with you and makes a Pesach for Hashem, you must circumcise all his males, and then he may come near to make the Pesach. (Sh'mot 12,48)

This principle explains why the Torah publicized an unusual incident that happened to Moshe on his way to Egypt on G-d's mission:

וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בְּמִלּוֹן וַיִּפְגְּשֶׁהוּ ה' וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ.
וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֹר וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת עֶרְלַת בְּנָהּ...

G-d met [Moshe] and sought to put him to death; [Tziporah] took a sharp stone and severed her son's foreskin... (Sh'mot 4,24-25)

Moshe's wife saved his life by performing an emergency Brit Milah on their son. This incident proves, more than anything else, how important it is to maintain the Brit (covenant) of the **individual**, even before the individuals come together as a national entity that will forge a **national** covenant with G-d.

Gradually, via the Ten Plagues that hit the Egyptians but not the Jews, Israel began to join together as a nation on its own. Closing themselves off in their homes, slaughtering and eating the Pesach sacrifice - the lamb worshiped by the Egyptians - they prepared themselves for the final detachment from Egypt. The Pesach sacrifice thus represents the Jewish Nation's separation and disengagement from the "foreskin of Egypt." This was a "circumcision" on a national scale, as can be seen by G-d's praise of Joshua for the mass-circumcision:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵל יְהוֹשֻׁעַ הַיּוֹם גָּלוּתִי אֶת חֲרַפַּת מִצְרַיִם מֵעַלְיֵכֶם...

G-d said to Joshua: "I have today removed the disgrace of Egypt from you..." (Yehoshua 5,9)

A similar concept is expressed by the sons of Yaakov Avinu when they explained to Shechem and Chamor why circumcision was so important:

לֹא נוּכָל לַעֲשׂוֹת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה לְתַת אֶת אֲחֵינוּ לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לוֹ עֶרְלָה, כִּי חֲרָפָה הוּא לָנוּ.

This we cannot do, to give our sister to one who is not circumcised, for it is a disgrace for us. (B'reshit 34,14)

And just as the first level is a prerequisite for this second floor, the second floor must be present in order to support the next stage up: the covenant of the Land of Israel. The nation arrives in Eretz Yisrael on the tenth day of Nissan, but the conquest cannot begin until the first and second floors have been built. And so, Yehoshua circumcises the men, and prepares the nation for the timely offering of the Pesach sacrifice. Once these individual and national covenants have been carried out, the time is ripe for the Covenant of the Land – in which the Land and its holy produce take leave of its "foreskin" of Canaanite rule, and make way for Israel to bond with it.

This covenantal bond between the Land of Israel and the Nation of Israel started via the harvest and offering of the Omer barley, and was completed with the wheat offering on Shavuot. The 16th of Nissan following Israel's 40 years in the desert was the first time in history that the produce of Eretz Yisrael was offered up to G-d; until then, the Canaanites sacrificed the land's produce to their idols. This was a permanent detachment of the Land's produce from the pagan Canaanite disgrace – a removal of the Land's "foreskin" in a "Brit Milah" for the Land of Israel.

We now understand the above-quoted R. Yochanan, who likened Brit Milah to the mitzvah of the Omer, and explained that it was via the Omer that Avraham merited to inherit Eretz Yisrael.

■ Accepting the Torah

Fifty days after the Exodus, the People of Israel stood at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. Similarly, 40 years later, after they entered the Land of Israel and brought the Pesach and Omer offerings, the time came to ratify their acceptance of the Torah. It happened after two short wars, the War of Jericho and the Battle of Ai.

As the Book of Joshua recounts (8,30-35), the ratification of the acceptance of the Torah takes place as follows: Joshua builds an altar on Mount Eval, near Shechem, and writes the entire Mishneh Torah (Book of Deuteronomy) on large rocks. The nation stands on the sides of Mounts Gerizim and Eval, with the Priests holding the Ark of the Covenant in the valley below, hearing the blessings for those who would observe the Torah and the curses for those who would violate it.

Let us review the three-stage development of the complete spiritual structure of the Nation of Israel, and we will make a remarkable discovery:

The first stage: Avraham Avinu is circumcised, together with his household, and then hears from G-d the ways of Divine justice in the world, regarding the punishment meted out to the evil city of S'dom.

The second stage: The Children of Israel are circumcised, bring the Pesach sacrifice for the first time, leave Egypt, and hear G-d's word at Mount Sinai.

The third stage: Israel crosses the Jordan River into the Land of Israel. They are all circumcised, bring the Pesach and Omer sacrifices, and hear once again the laws and principles of the entire Torah at Mounts Grizim and Eval.

Each stage includes the one before it and adds to it. In the first stage, Avraham is circumcised; in the second, all of Israel undergo a Brit Milah and also bring the Pesach sacrifice; and in the third stage, as they enter the Land, they are circumcised, bring the Pesach offering, and also bring the Omer offering. After each stage, they also receive Torah.

■ The Omer of Waving

Let us now understand the concept of waving the Omer. The Torah commands us to count the 49 days of the Omer period between Passover and Shavuot:

כִּי תֵבֹאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ... וְקִצְרְתֶם אֶת קִצְרֹתֶיהָ וְהֵבֵאתֶם אֶת עֹמֶר רֵאשִׁית קִצְרֹתֶיכֶם...

*When you arrive in the Land... and harvest its grain,
you shall bring the Omer of the first of your harvest...* (Vayikra 23,10)

The Torah is emphasizing that the *first time* in history that this mitzvah will be fulfilled, it will accompany the conquest of Eretz Yisrael and the growth of the first Israelite barley grain. Afterwards, of course, it will be fulfilled regularly for all generations. By the same token, this will be the first time that the special Shavuot Mincha offering is offered – not from barley, but from the first wheat grown by Israel in Eretz Yisrael. This is how we are to understand the words 'מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לָהּ, *a new [wheat] offering to G-d*. (Vayikra 23,16)

Whenever we take something that is profane or secular, and make it into something holy – we wave it up and down and in all directions. We thus show that we are raising it upwards to the status of “sacred,” and in every direction to separate it from the secular. The Levites, for instance, when they were consecrated to the service of G-d in the Mishkan, were actually physically raised up and waved. The same was done for the contributions to the Mishkan of gold and copper, as well as for the Omer and the first-fruits brought on Shavuot.

The Omer-measure of barley, generally used as food for animals, was waved upwards to enable it to be that which connects the Land of Israel with the People of Israel. This is why it was called *Omer HaTnufah*, the Omer of Waving. (Vayikra 23,15)

■ The Day After the Sabbath

As mentioned above, the Tzedukim refused to accept the Sages' traditional understanding of the time for the Counting and Offering of the Omer. The Torah says the counting must begin on “*the day after the Sabbath*” (verse 15). The Tzedukim understood this literally to mean the regular, weekly Sabbath – whenever it happened to occur during the week of Pesach – such that Shavuot would always fall on a Sunday, seven weeks later. But the Oral Law teaches that the verse means to say that the Omer must be counted from “*the day after*” the first day of the *Sabbath-like* festival of Pesach. The Talmud in Tractate Menachot provides many proofs of the truth of our tradition. However, these do not explain *why* the word “Sabbath” was used to refer to Passover.

Let us review the order of events in the first chapters of the Book of Joshua, some of which we saw above:

1. The 9th of Nissan: Yehoshua announces dramatically that the people must sanctify themselves, *“for tomorrow, G-d will perform great wonders in your midst”* (Joshua 3,5). The reference is to the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River, which was to take place the next day.
2. The 10th of Nissan: Bnei Yisrael cross the Jordan River, with one side of the waters becoming a wall so that they could cross on dry land. *“And the people ascended from the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month.”* (4,19)
3. The 11th of Nissan: Yehoshua circumcises Bnei Yisrael: *“Joshua made for himself sharp knives, and circumcised the children of Israel.”* (5,3)
4. The 11th through 13th of Nissan: Israel’s three days of recovery from the circumcision: *“And when the circumcisions of the entire nation were completed, they remained in their camp until they recovered.”* (5,8)
5. The 14th of Nissan: Bnei Yisrael slaughter and sacrifice the Paschal lamb: *“They made the Pesach on the 14th day of the month... in the plains of Jericho.”* (verse 10)
6. The 15th of Nissan: The Pesach holiday.
7. The 16th of Nissan: They sacrifice the Omer offering and eat from the new wheat crop: *“They ate from the grain of the land the day after the Pesach, unleavened cakes and parched grain this very day.”* (verse 11)

As we see, the Children of Israel had a very busy, dramatic and significant week – the seven days from the 9th of Nissan through the 15th. The word “Sabbath” often means “week” – and when the Torah says to bring the Omer sacrifice on *“the day after the Sabbath,”* it means, “the day after this **very important and significant week.**”

Let us return to the verses in Parashat Emor.

כִּי תְּבֹאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ... וְהֵבֵאתֶם אֶת עֹמֶר רְאִשִׁית קְצִירְכֶם אֶל הַכֹּהֵן.

*When you arrive in the Land... and you harvest its crops
and bring the Omer of the first
of your harvest to the Cohen.* (Vayikra 23,10)

The reference is to the first national arrival in the Land, and the first-ever offering of the first Omer of the harvest. What are we to do on this occasion? The Torah continues:

וְהִנִּיף אֶת הָעֹמֶר לִפְנֵי ה' לְרִצְוֹנְכֶם מִמִּחֶרֶת הַשַּׁבָּת יִנִּיֶּנּוּ הַכֹּהֲנִים.

*He must wave the Omer before G-d...
on the day after the Sabbath he will wave it.* (verse 11)

Again: “Sabbath” in the Torah means “week,” and “*the day after the Sabbath*” means “*the day after the week*” – that very active and full week that Bnei Yisrael just underwent before and after their first arrival in the Land of Israel. The day after it, of course, is none other than the 16th day of Nissan – precisely according to Jewish tradition and the Sages’ teaching.

Proof that the word *Sabbath* here means “week” is found a few verses later:

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמִּחֶרֶת הַשַּׁבָּת, מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה
שִׁבְעַת שַׁבָּתוֹת תְּהִינָה.

*Count from the day after the Sabbath,
from the day you bring the Omer HaTnufah;
seven complete Sabbaths they will be.* (verse 15)

When the Torah emphasizes that the “*Sabbaths*” of a 50-day period must be complete, it clearly cannot be referring to the Sabbath *day*, about which the word “complete” is not applicable in this context. The verse therefore means that we must continue counting for seven complete *weeks*. Until when? The next verse tells us: “*Until the morrow of the seventh Sabbath [=week], count 50 days.*” (verse 16)

We must count until the day after the seventh week, and Shavuot will be on the 50th day. Verse 16 then concludes: “*You shall sacrifice a new offering to Hashem.*” This means a “truly new offering,” something that was never offered before – for this is the first time that Bnei Yisrael are in the Land of Israel and can offer it.

Verse 14 states: “*This is an eternal statute throughout your generations*” – Just as you are now fulfilling it, for the first time, you will continue to do so year after year for an eternal statute.

In our generation, the cult of Tzedukim is barely remembered, while the tradition of the Sages of Israel is accepted as that of the entire Jewish People.

