

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

THE THIRD TIME'S A CHARM: COUNTING THE OMER

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Now that we are in the part of the year when we count the omer, we have an opportunity to look at a ceremonial event that relates to the gathering of the omer (M. Menachot 10:3). This ceremony has a great deal in common with other important rites described in the Mishnah: (1) the preparation of the red heifer's ashes used for purification (M. Parah 3:10), (2) the process of divorce (M. Gittin 7:1) and (3) how to give the half-shekel to the Temple by which all Israelites participated in the daily sacrifices (M. Shekalim 3:3). In each of these rituals the proper action is identified, in speech, not once but thrice, the only such cases in the Mishnah.

How did they do [the harvesting of the omer]? Representatives of the court would go out on the festival eve and tie [the stalks of grain] into bunches while it was still growing in the field so that it would be pleasant to harvest. And all [the people of] the cities of that vicinity would gather there and make a great ceremony out of the harvest. When darkness [had fallen] he would say to them:

Has the sun set? They would say: Yes. Has the sun set? They would say: Yes.

[He then asked if he should begin the harvest with] this sickle? They would say: Yes. With this sickle? They would say: Yes.

[He would then ask if he should use] this basket? They would say: Yes. With this basket? They would say: Yes.

On Shabbat he would say to them: On this Shabbat? They would say: Yes. On this Shabbat? They would say: Yes.

Shall I cut? They would say: Cut. Shall I cut? They would say: Cut.

Three times for each and every thing they would say to him: Yes, yes, yes. And why all this [complicated procedure]? Because the Baitusi said that the reaping of the omer is not done on the evening after the first festival day [of Pesach]. (M. Menachot 10:3)

We may ask along with the Mishnah, "Why do we need all this confirmation?" As with so many strenuously held customs it has a political component in it. The Baitusi held that the correct interpretation of Leviticus 23:11 and 15 was that the harvesting of the omer should begin on Saturday night, not the night after Passover's first holiday.

In each of the cases where such elaborate rituals are prescribed, we find that people would want gold-plated assurances (or FDIC!) that the ritual was being carried out correctly. In the case of the omer, it is transforming a standing crop to an offering to be waved before God. In the ritual of the red heifer, the cedar, hyssop and scarlet wool that are added to the red heifer's ashes had to be exactly right. These ashes, which took away the impurity of death, were very important for the entire community. Likewise, people wanted to be sure that the half-shekel they contributed to the communal sacrifices was going to be used for that purpose and that purpose alone. (They wanted no part of a Temple "slush fund"!) And, of course, being very clear to identify the correct parties and intentions in a divorce proceeding are critical to this very day.

Discussion Questions:

1. Who do you think was made to feel safe by the repetition and affirmation of the correctness of the actions described above? To put it another way, who was the audience or who were the auditors?
2. What other situations can you name in which it is important to verify explicitly and repeatedly, what is happening and that it is being done in exactly the right manner?
3. In each of the four cases, one thing is being swiftly removed from another: the grain from the ground, the woman from the man, the red heifer from its recognizable animal form and the half shekel from a person's hand. We still define moments today by these acts of separation. For example, when does a fetus cease to be a fetus and is considered a child? When the umbilical cord is cut. Why is it important to draw lines of separation around our cultural constructs?