

## A Sheaf of Firstfruits (ראשית)

וְהִנִּיף אֶת־הָעֹמֶר לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לְרִצְוֹנְכֶם מִמִּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת יְנִיפְנוּ הַכֹּהֵן

<sup>9</sup>ADONAI said to Moshe, <sup>10</sup>“Tell the people of Isra'el, ‘After you enter the land I am giving you and harvest its ripe crops, you are to bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the cohen. <sup>11</sup>He is to wave the sheaf before ADONAI, so that you will be accepted; the cohen is to wave it on the day after the Shabbat. <sup>12</sup>On the day that you wave the sheaf, you are to offer a male lamb without defect, in its first year, as a burnt offering for ADONAI. <sup>13</sup>Its grain offering is to be one gallon of fine flour mixed with olive oil, an offering made by fire to ADONAI as a fragrant aroma; its drink offering is to be of wine, one quart. <sup>14</sup>You are not to eat bread, dried grain or fresh grain until the day you bring the offering for your G-d; this is a permanent regulation through all your generations, no matter where you live.’” <sup>15</sup>“From the day after the day of rest – that is, from the day you bring the sheaf for waving – you are to count seven full weeks...” (Lev 23:9-14)

### Significance to Israel

In the midst of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (*Chag HaMatzot*) comes an oft neglected, or should we say, disguised *moed* in which the first fruits of the barley harvest is offered to the L-rd, chaff with the grain. It is a *reishit*, or *bikkurim* or firstfruits offering. Later, after 49 days are counted there will be another first fruits offering, the offering of the wheat harvest. In light of that, we can refer to this one offered during Passover week as the "*First of the First Fruits Offering*." This is what we read above in Leviticus 23:12-11.

As straightforward as this sounds, this offering is shrouded in controversy. The problems stem from two sources. First, there is great difference of opinion about when this offering is to take place. Second, there is difference of opinion about the nature of the word usually translated “sheaf.” We need to address these two difficulties before we can sort out the meaning of this *moed* and its possible applications for today.

### When it is Observed

Let us first address the time of its observance. Reading Leviticus 23:12-14, we are told that the grain offering was to be brought ‘to the *cohen*’ (verse 12), waved ‘before the L-rd’ (verse 11), and accompanied with a blood sacrifice (verse 12). This passage implies that when this *moed* is observed, a tabernacle or temple needs to be in operation in Jerusalem. Accordingly, we read accounts that when the Temple was still standing in Jerusalem, the pilgrims would linger in the city after the night of Passover and ‘*Sometime during the week they would begin to wave before G-d's altar an omer of the earliest-ripened barley, starting the count of 49 days of awaiting the crop from different fields throughout the land of Israel as the barley ripened count that itself would ripen on the festival of Shavuot. And after the seventh day they would return to their homes.*’

The main controversy before us stems from the words, “on the day after the Shabbat” in chapter 23:11. To which Sabbath during the Passover week is the text referring? Historically, during the Second Temple period, Arthur Waskow summarized the historical development nicely when he says, “*The priestly faction, the Sadducees, insisted the Shabbat in question was the Shabbat during Pesach. The Pharisees, forerunners of the rabbis, insisted that in this context Shabbat meant the day of rest, not literally Shabbat, and that the day of rest intended was the festival day of Pesach.*” (Waskow, *Seasons of Our Joy*, pp. 166) Thus, according to the Sadducees, the offering was always made on the morrow (Sunday) following the Shabbat of Passover week, which is not a fixed date (it can be from Aviv 16 to Aviv 22). According to the Pharisees, the offering was always made on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of Passover, that is, Aviv 16.

The controversy, however, did not remain with just the Sadducees and Pharisees. The Karaites, a Jewish splinter group during the Middle Ages who rejected rabbinic authority, agreed with the Sadducees. The majority of Jews however, remained faithful to the tradition of the Pharisees, and do so to this day. We should note, however, that others also had their opinions.

From all of this we can see that while most rabbinical-oriented Jews today would have us believe that the matter is settled and their opinion is without question; there are, nevertheless, other ways of looking at the issue. The specific date, therefore, on which the first of the First Fruits was offered remains in question until we have further light on the subject. The best popular and critical treatment of this date controversy of which we are aware of is found in Danny Litvies work entitled, *Pentecost is Jewish*.

The day that is chosen on which to offer this new grain will greatly affect when the next major *mo'ed* is celebrated, which is Shavuot. The reason is because the text informs us that the day on which the new grain is offered is also the same date which begins a counting period, numbering 49 days to Shavuot. For this reason, there are at least two or three possible dates on which to observe Shavuot. From our study of the text, we at Kol Simcha have chosen to celebrate First Fruits on the Sunday after the seventh day Shabbat of the Week of Unleavened Bread. However, we recognize that there is room for others to differ.

### **The Omer**

The second problem associated with the first First Fruits is concerned with what specifically was offered to the L-rd. This is not as big an issue as the previous one, but there is a degree of difference, nonetheless. The problem stems from the meaning of the Hebrew word used in Leviticus 23:12, *omer*. According to Michael Strassfeld, the word "*omer*" literally means "a measure." However, if we examine the four other times *omer* is used in the *Tanakh*, it is apparent that its primary meaning seems to be "*sheaf*," as indeed, it is usually rendered. Thus, the amount of grain that was offered on this first of the First Fruits was one sheaf of barley, freshly plucked from the field. If this understanding is correct, then we can easily see that for the ancient people of Israel, this first of the First Fruits, offered sometime during the week of Unleavened Bread, was the assurance that there would be a barley harvest in its due time and season.

### **Messianic Significance**

The Messianic significance of the celebration of the first of the First Fruits is difficult to ascertain because of the uncertainty of the time issue. It is evident that the first of the First Fruits was meant to coincide with the resurrection of *Yeshua*.

### **Doctrinal/Worship Significance**

There is a special feature about this particular offering that distinguishes it from the second of the First Fruits offering made on Shavuot, which we will discuss shortly. The text in Leviticus 23:11 informs us, "*He is to wave the sheaf before ADONAI, so that you will be accepted; the cohen is to wave it on the day after the Shabbat.*" Since the whole sheaf is waved before the L-rd, this would mean that the whole grain—chaff and grain—were both offered before the L-rd, "*so that you will be accepted before the L-rd.*"

This Torah picture provides the healthy element of knowing ourselves as *accepted* in Messiah. We are new creations in Messiah with a veil of flesh. The "grain" is the new creation, the "chaff" is the veil of flesh. As we are involved in our sanctification process, especially dealing with sin in our lives, our immediate need is to be reminded of G-d's unconditional acceptance of us, just the way G-d accepted the offering of the whole sheaf. The celebrating of the *moed* in this way will enable us to be free to deal honestly with our "chaff." The way in which we deal with our sin will bring great glory to G-d.

Although this *mo'ed* cannot be completely observed apart from the Temple or tabernacle operating in Jerusalem, nonetheless we are told in Leviticus 23:14 that "*this is a permanent regulation through all your generations, no matter where you live.*" Thus, when the whole community is involved in observing this *moed*, it affords us a wonderful time to discuss G-d's unconditional love for us, being a new creation, and sanctification. The Scripture assures us that "*There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Messiah Yeshua*" (Romans 8:1). Keeping this truth in mind, our participation in our own process of sanctification will always result in vibrant corporate worship. What joy, as well as emotional and spiritual health, there is in the knowledge that

we are accepted in our personal process of dealing with our "chaff" We are a new creation in Messiah and our "chaff" is circumcised from us (Colossians 2:11-13).

### **The Counting of the Omer**

On the very same day that the first fruits of the new barley crop are offered to the L-rd, we are told in Leviticus 23:15-16 that, "From the day after the day of rest - that is, from the day you bring the sheaf for waving - you are to count seven full weeks, until the day after the seventh week; you are to count fifty days; and then you are to present a new grain offering to ADONAI" Thus, Israel was instructed to embark on a season of counting the days.

### **Its Significance to Israel**

This period of counting meant that the Israelites were to look at the fields of barley and observe the ripening of the crop each day and noting the new sheaves ready for harvesting. As the sheaves ripened, "the harvesting was continued throughout the omer period and was brought to a climax at Shavuot with the offering of the two loaves of bread." (Strassfield, *The Jewish Holidays*, pp. 48) As this quote implies, this period of counting has come to be known as the "Counting of the Omer." To understand this title, we need to remember that the word 'omer' means "sheaf." Thus, it is during this period of exactly 49 days, that the omer, or sheaf, of ripening grain was observed and the days were counted.

In addition to the ripening barley crop, the Israelites would also have noticed the daily maturation of the new wheat crop. When the 49 days were completed, the first fruits of this wheat crop were to be offered unto the L-rd. It is interesting to note that there are no breaks between the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. While the barley is being harvested, the wheat is growing and is ready for harvest at the end of the barley harvesting. This reminds us of G-d's continuous provision. In today's Jewish world, the counting of the omer has taken on a completely new significance, totally extraneous to its original biblical setting.

### **What did the Cohen Do?**

A sheaf (*Omer*) from the standing *Aviv* Barley Harvest is brought to the Cohen, and the Cohen would wave it before the L-RD in His house. This was done on the day after the Sabbath. The three festivals of Israel all had to do with harvests: Pesach – Firstfruits of Barley; Shavuot – Firstfruits of Wheat; Sukkot – Ingathering of the Fruit Harvest. Harvest represents the souls that become believers in Y'shua. Thus, the Feast of the *Reishit* represents a firstfruit of souls to G-d.

### **What are first fruits?**

First fruits are the first grains to mature out of an entire crop. To a lesser degree they also represent "choicest", "foremost", "best", "the preeminent of all that was to follow." One thing for sure, they are always Holy unto the L-rd. First fruits are the "firstborn" of plants in nature, thus, the concept also finds a parallel in the "firstborn" of man and beast in the Scripture. The first fruits belong to G-d, and they were to be redeemed!

1. The firstborn of man and beast was presented to the L-rd. (Ex. 13:2; 22:29)
2. The first fruits of the earth were presented to the L-rd at His altar. (Deut. 26:1-11)

### **What happened from the Sixteenth to the Twenty Second of Nissan?**

1. Israel crosses the Red Sea (Ex. 14)
2. Israel eats the first fruits of the promised land (Joshua 5:10-12)
3. Haman is defeated (Esther 3:1-6)
4. Y'shua is Resurrected (John 12:24; 1 Cor. 15:16-20; Matthew 27:52-53)

### **Y'shua is a First Fruit Person - the Omer of G-d**

1. Firstborn of Miryam (Matthew 1:23-25)
2. First begotten of the Father (Hebrews 1:6)

3. Firstborn of every creature (Col. 1:15)
4. First-begotten from the dead (Rev. 1:5)
5. Firstborn of many brethren (Ro. 8:29)
6. First fruit of the resurrected ones (1 Cor 15:20,23)
7. The beginning of the creation of G-d (Rev. 3:14)
8. Preeminent one (Col. 1:18)

### **First fruits Points to the Resurrection of Messiah**

Y'shua Himself prophesied that He would rise 3 days and 3 nights after He was slain on the tree (see Matt. 12:38-40; 16:21; Luke 24:44-46). The typology of this is found in the *Tanach* in Gen. 22:1-6; Ex. 3:18; 5:3; 8:27; Esther 4:15-17; Jonah 1:7; 2:1-2). He was slain on the tree on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nissan, the day of Passover, and rose again after the conclusion (between the eves) of the 17<sup>th</sup> of Nissan, that is after the 18<sup>th</sup> is about to happen (18 means life in Hebrew, that is, *Chai*). On the week of Passover, this would be the day after the weekly Sabbath.

*And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun. And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre? And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great. And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted. And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted: Ye seek Y'shua of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you. And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid. Now when Y'shua was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. (Mark 16:1-9)*

### **Should We Observe First Fruits?**

You bet! It is a forever feast! It is observed during the week of Pesach, in conjunction with Pesach, in remembrance of Messiah.

1. The Natural is before the spiritual (1 Cor. 15:46)
2. Israel is G-d's firstborn (Ex. 4:22)
3. To the Jew first
4. Seek the kingdom of G-d first
5. Y'shua rose on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the week
6. Y'shua is the first to resurrect from the dead
7. The early Messianic Congregations are a kind of first fruit. So are we.
8. Others that resurrected with Y'shua became first fruits of the resurrection
9. Y'shua is our first love, because He first loved us
10. Y'shua is Alef-Tav

### **Therefore, Let us Keep the Feast**

G-d is a Pesach G-d, who asked for and expects *reishit/bikkurim* from us. Christianity puts great emphasis in the resurrection because it is "proof" of G-d's power in Messiah and Rav *Sha'ul* tells us that the same power is available to us today. Whereas Christianity has made the Waving of the *Omer* which was fulfilled in the Resurrection greater than the *Pesach* (and this is not supported by the *Tanak*), it is also a shame that Messianic Jews have put the resurrection in the back burner. You see, the stove has multiple front burners and *Pesach* includes all three: *Pesach* day (the 14<sup>th</sup> of *Aviv*), *Chag HaMatzot* (from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> of *Aviv*) and *Yom HaBikkurim* (on the morning after the weekly Sabbath during the week encompassing the 15<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> of *Aviv*) Therefore let us keep the Feast (in its entirety) with the *Matzah* of sincerity and truth.