

## Firstfruits Reshit (ראשית) and Shavuot

<sup>4</sup> “These are the appointed feasts of Adonai, holy convocations which you are to proclaim in their appointed season... I am Adonai your God.” (Lev. 23:4-22, TLV)

During the Feast of Unleavened Bread (*Chag HaMatzot*) we have a disguised *moed* in which the first fruits of the barley harvest was offered to the Lord, the chaff with the grain. It is a *reishit* or a 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 this week as the “*First of the First Fruits Offering*.”

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 a difference of opinion about the nature of the word usually translated “sheaf.” Let me address these two difficulties so we can sort out the meaning of this Feast Day (*moed*) and check out its relevancy for today.

### When it is Observed

We are told that the grain offering was to be brought ‘to the kohen’ (Vv. 10), waved ‘before the Lord’ (Vv. 11), and accompanied with a blood sacrifice (Vv. 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 ‘*Some-time during the week they would begin to wave before God'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 stems from the words, ‘on the morrow after the Shabbat’ in Leviticus 23:11. To which ‘Shabbat’ during the Passover week is the text referring? A nice summary of the activities during the Second Temple period is: ‘*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). According to the Sadducees, the offering was always made on the morrow (a Sunday) following the Shabbat of the Chag HaMatzot week, which is not a fixed date (it can be from Aviv/Nisan 16-21). According to the Pharisees, the offering was always made on Aviv/Nisan 16, the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Pesach.

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. 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 the Lord reveals 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 *Shavuot* (the second Festival) is celebrated. The reason is because the text informs us that the day on which the new grain is offered is also the same day, which begins a counting period, numbering 49 days to *Shavuot*. For this reason, there are at least two possible dates on which to observe this Feast. {Rabbi Hylan Slobodkin from Beit Tikvah in Seattle Washington wrote on 3/6/18 at 4:04am: ‘We follow the Sadducaic counting. You might say, “That’s sad you see,” but my simple reading of Leviticus 23 leads me to this conclusion. The first time Shabbat is mentioned in Lev 23, it refers to the 7th day, a day of complete rest. The next time it is mentioned is in regard to first fruits. Verse 11 says, “the day after the Sabbath.” My simple reading says that is the day after the 7th day, or the first

day of the week. Why would Shabbat mean the 7th day in verse 3, and the day after Passover in verse 11? Doesn't make sense to me. I'm just a simple guy'}. From our study of the text, we at KS (like Rabbi Slobodkin) have chosen to celebrate *Shavuot* on the Sunday after the seventh completed Shabbat after the Shabbat of the Week of Unleavened Bread. However, we recognize that there is room for others in the movement to differ.

### **The Omer**

The second problem associated with the '*First of the Firstfruits*' is concerned with what specifically was offered to the Lord. 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 Firstfruits* 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 Firstfruits*, offered sometime during the week of Unleavened Bread, was the assurance that there would be a barley harvest in its due time and season.

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, yet it is evident that the *First of the First Fruits* was meant to coincide with the resurrection of *Yeshua*. There is a special feature about this particular offering that distinguishes it from the '*Second of the First Fruits*' offering made on *Shavuot*. The text in Leviticus 23:11 tells us that since the whole sheaf is waved before the Lord the whole grain (chaff and grain) were both offered before the Lord, "*to be accepted*".

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 God's unconditional acceptance of us, just the way God 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 God.

Although this *mo'ed* cannot be completely observed apart from the Temple or tabernacle operating in Jerusalem, nonetheless we are told: "*It is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings*". Thus, when the whole community is involved in observing this *moed*, it affords us a wonderful time to discuss God'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*).

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

Our God is a Pesach God, who asked for and expects *reishit/bikkurim* from us. Christianity puts great emphasis in the resurrection because it is "proof" of God's power in Messiah and the apostle Paul tells us that the same power is available to us today. Whereas Christianity has made the Resurrection greater than the *Pesach*, it is also a shame that Messianic Jews have generally put the resurrection a back burner. But the stove has multiple front burners and *Pesach* includes all three: the day of *Pesach* (the 14<sup>th</sup> of *Aviv*), *Chag HaMatzot* (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.*