

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Pesach

In the book of Exodus, the Torah describes at length the story of the redemption from Egypt and the various mitzvot associated with it, including the details of the holiday of Pesach. The book then goes on to relate the giving of the Torah, the sin of the golden calf, and the building of the mishkan. Immediately after forgiving the Jewish people for the sin of the golden calf and instructing Moshe to carve out a second set of tablets, G-d warns that when the Jews enter the land of Israel, they must be especially vigilant not to worship other gods.

Nachmanides explains the commandment not to make molten gods follows the sin of the golden calf, because G-d wants the Jewish people to guard themselves not to repeat their earlier mistake of making a molten image and worshipping it. But immediately following this passage about idol worship, G-d instructs Moshe that the Jews should observe three pilgrimage festivals. Why does the Torah insert this short description of the three pilgrimage festivals at this juncture, given that it describes the festivals and their related laws in several other places?

Sforno (15th century) explains sometimes a person may worship other gods because he hopes those other gods will bless him with material success. Therefore, immediately following the sin of worshipping the golden calf, the Torah tells us mitzvot which involve using the physical world to serve Hashem and which bring blessing to the one who fulfills them. Eating matzot on Pesach, offering the firstborn animal as a sacrifice, and keeping Shabbos are all mitzvot which will bring us more material success.

Furthermore, the Torah calls Shavuot the holiday of harvesting (Exodus 23:16) and calls Sukkot the holiday of the ingathering to emphasize that when one recognizes his agricultural success comes from Hashem, Hashem will bless him with more. In describing the three pilgrimage festivals, the Torah says (Deuteronomy 16:17) one should bring sacrifices “according to the blessing Hashem gave him.” Sforno understands this also means that in the merit of bringing sacrifices during these festivals, G-d will bless the owner with even more material success.

Similarly, Nachmanides says (Exodus 23) the Torah describes the three pilgrimage festivals as the holidays of the spring, harvesting, and ingathering because it wants a person to thank Hashem for all of his material success. By timing the holidays during seasons of agricultural growth and prosperity, the Torah reminds a person that he depends on his master to provide his needs and cannot accomplish anything on his own. For this reason, the Torah refers to G-d as “the master” (34:23) specifically in the context of the Jew going to Jerusalem three times a year to offer the pilgrimage sacrifices. The juxtaposition of the the festivals to idol worship suggests further that the festivals will strengthen us in our belief in G-d.

Meshech Chochma (20th century) adds that when the Jewish farmer would make the pilgrimage from his small town and experience the festivals three times a year with throngs of other Jews from around the world, the inspiration he received from this would last beyond the festival itself. Knowing that he connected to G-d in an elevated way with the larger community of Israel, he could recharge his spiritual battery even months later. So even when he would be involved in a mundane activity in a distant city throughout the year, the memory of his festival experience in Jerusalem would help him strengthen his faith in G-d.



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On a metaphoric level, Maharal says that by describing the three festivals by the agricultural process, the Torah teaches us that our unique relationship with G-d contains three dimensions. The first stage in our relationship with G-d is knowing that we exist as his nation because he removed us from the pagan culture of Egypt to serve him. The blossoming spring fruits symbolize the beginning of our growth not simply as individuals, but as a nation.

Our relationship with G-d reaches its completion and fullness when we receive the Torah, G-d's instructions for life, on Shavuot. Just as grain cannot reach its potential to sustain people and animals until it is detached from the ground, so too the harvesting season represents when growth reaches its fullness and potential. By accepting the Torah and its laws, the Jewish people formed a deeper relationship with Hashem, one which would enable them to reach their completion and potential.

Every relationship must be constantly strengthened and preserved, because it can either turn stale or become weakened by outside influences. On Sukkot, G-d protected us from outside threats and showed his great love for us by encircling us with the clouds of glory. Similarly, a person could have all of his grain harvested, but if he does not store it during the rainy winter months, the rain could ruin and waste it. Gathering it and storing it represents doing what we can to return to G-d and re-ignite our relationship with him.

During the intermediate days of Pesach, we read the passage from Ki Tisa about Moshe receiving the second set of tablets, indicating G-d's forgiving the Jewish people for the sin of worshipping the golden calf. The reading then continues with G-d instructing the Jews not to put themselves in a situation in which they might be drawn after idol worship, and to keep the three festivals every year. On the surface, it would seem that we really want to read about the three festivals, except that we start with the story of the second tablets and idolatry because we do not want to start in the middle of a topic.

But on a deeper level, the three festivals are meant to help us strengthen our relationship with G-d and indirectly divert us from the draw of idol worship and the pursuit of vanity. Ultimately, as Maharal teaches, we should not view the holiday of Pesach in a vacuum as a celebration of freedom. We should see it as one part of a three-part process of growth in our spiritual quest to relate to G-d in the fullest way. We should view the three festivals in the context of a Jew's struggles against all the things that distract him from service of G-d. If so, we will not only grow from them during the holidays themselves; they will also energize us in our service of Hashem throughout the year.

Shabbat Shalom!

