

בס"ד

Shluchim Sermons



Emor

# Don't Keep Your Torah To Yourself

*Why did China fall behind the West?*

## Why Did We Fall Behind

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, recounts the story of Chinese scientists who were tasked with unraveling the mystery of how China and the Far East had once led the civilized world for centuries, only to be overtaken by the West in the last 500 years. These researchers were puzzled as to how a nation that had invented so many ground-breaking innovations like the compass, paper, printing, porcelain, gunpowder, and more, could have regressed so dramatically. Their inquiry led them to ponder how the West managed to emerge as the world's superpower.

Initially, the researchers hypothesized that the West's superiority was due to their possession of superior weapons, namely more advanced guns. However, they later shifted their focus to the possibility that the Western model of governance was more effective. Lastly, they considered the notion that the West's economic policy was more successful than that of China and the Far East.

But upon further investigation, the Chinese scientists concluded that the Western civilization's success is not simply due to their advanced weaponry, superior government or economic policies, but rather rooted in their culture, specifically the Tanach, or the Bible. The philosophy of capitalism, democracy, human dignity, freedom, and above all, responsibility for the poor, that are integral to the Western

civilization's success, all have their basis in the teachings of the Bible. It is this foundation that underpins a successful and healthy society in the West.

For instance, the Tanach teaches that poverty should not be considered a natural occurrence and that it is our duty to do everything possible to assist those who are less fortunate, whether by helping them find employment or providing other forms of aid. This compassion and sense of obligation towards the pauper, stranger, orphan, and widow is what creates a healthy and prosperous society.

## **Sefiras Haomer**

The concept of helping others is not only present in the Tanach, but also in Sefiras HaOmer, which is currently being observed. During this period, Jews count the days between the Omer sacrifice, which was offered on the second day of Passover and consisted of one omer of barley flour, and the holiday of Shavuos (Pentecost), when the Shte HaLechem offering, consisting of two loaves of bread made from an omer of wheat flour, was brought.

What's the difference between wheat and barley? The Rebbe says that this is something that even little kids know—"wheat is people food and barley is animal food."

Now, there is a concept called "all fat for G-d," that we should give our best and most valuable possessions to serve and honor G-d. This idea can be traced back to the story of Cain and Abel in the Bible. When they both brought offerings to G-d, Abel brought the best and most precious items he had, while Cain did not. As a result, G-d accepted Abel's offering but not Cain's. In the same way, when animal sacrifices were brought to the Temple, the fat was burned on the altar as the best part of the sacrifice, signifying that we should always strive to give our best to G-d.

So, the Rebbe raises a question: why would the Omer sacrifice, which is brought to the Beis Hamikdash on Pesach, consist of barley, an animal food? Doesn't it go against the idea of bringing the best to G-d?

The Rebbe explains that barley represents the animal soul, the nefesh habahamis, that exists within every person. The purpose of the Counting of the Omer is to refine and elevate the animal within us, and to transform us from animal-like beings to more spiritual, human beings who are in touch with our G-dly soul, the nefesh elokis. This transformation is symbolized by the Shte HaLechem, the offering of two loaves of bread made of wheat flour that is brought on Shavuot, representing human food. (Hisvaduyos 5748 Vol. III pg. 85.)

## **Humans and Animals**

Now, what distinguishes humans from animals? There are many differences. For instance, animals walk on all fours, while humans walk on two legs. Animals cannot talk, but humans can. However, when we delve a little deeper, we realize that a fundamental difference is that, as a general rule, animals are primarily concerned with themselves. Their entire goal and mission are to survive and take care of themselves, their offspring, and sometimes other members of their species.

I don't intend to disparage animals, G-d forbid, especially not dogs, who are renowned for their loyalty to their owners, sometimes even putting themselves in harm's way to protect them. We've all heard stories of heroic dogs like Lassie who saved their owners from danger. However, upon closer inspection, we see that these brave dogs were ultimately helping themselves by protecting their source of care and affection.

In contrast, the idea of feeling an ethical obligation to aid someone who is a complete stranger, based solely on a desire to help others, is

a uniquely human trait. Consider, for example, the act of donating to aid victims of a natural disaster in a foreign land, with no expectation of ever meeting them or receiving recognition for the assistance. This kind of altruistic behavior is something only a human is capable of.

The defining difference between human beings and animals is that while animals only care about themselves, humans have the ability to forget about themselves and help others. This is because humans are created in the image of G-d, and just as G-d gives to His creations, humans have a natural tendency to give to others.

Therefore, during the Sefiras Haomer, it is important to control our animalistic tendencies and remind ourselves that there are others in the world who need our help. We must elevate ourselves from the level of the beasts within us and strive to be more in touch with our G-dly soul.

## **Spreading Forth**

Now, during the period of Sefiras HaOmer, we take on the customs of aveilus, mourning. We don't schedule weddings, we don't get haircuts, and more. Why? Because during this time, thousands of years ago, something terrible happened: the disciples of Rabbi Akiva perished.

Rabbi Akiva lived in the Roman era, about 2,000 years ago. He had 24,000 students, and tragically, they all died during a short period between Pesach and Shavuos. So during this time, we mourn their loss and reflect on the tragedy that befell the Jewish people.

The question is often asked: what exactly led to the sudden and tragic demise of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students during the period between Pesach and Shavuos? According to the Talmud (Tractate Yevamos 62b), their deaths were a result of a lack of respect for one another. However, this explanation begs the question: what was so egregious about their behavior that it warranted such a severe punishment?

Perhaps the answer can be found in the same story, in the format in which it's brought down in the Midrash:

“Rabbi Akiva says, ‘I had thousands of students from Givat to Antiporos, and they all died in my lifetime between Pesach and Shavuos, and ultimately there stood seven students for me, and these are: Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Nechemya, etc.’ I said to them, ‘The first died only because their eyes were constrained in Torah to one another—[but] you shall not be so.’ They immediately stood, and the whole Land of Israel was filled with Torah.”

In other words, despite their extensive Torah knowledge, the students of Rabbi Akiva kept it to themselves, unwilling to share with others. Even in Torah scholarship, one can behave in a way that is contrary to being human. If a person learns Torah only for themselves and begrudges others from benefiting from it, they have not yet achieved the level of being truly human. Rabbi Akiva's instruction to his new students, “You shall not be so,” immediately prompted a change, and the whole Land of Israel was filled with Torah.

Rabbi Akiva's new students were the Rebbe's shluchim. They understood that it was forbidden to keep the Torah for themselves; rather, they had a responsibility to go out and share the Torah with other Jews—and what the first 24,000 students didn't do, those seven students successfully did.

And so their names remained inscribed on the heart of the Jewish Nation for generations on end.