

THE COUNTING OF THE OMER AND SHAVUOT

Why do we count the omer?

The 49-day period between the festivals of Pesach (Passover) and Shavuot (Pentecost) is called *sefirat ha-omer* (the counting of the omer). Bridging the period between the beginning of the barley harvest at Pesach and the beginning of the wheat harvest at Shavuot, it begins on the night following the first day of Passover (i.e., the second night of the holiday, the 16th of Nisan) and continues until the day before Shavuot, the fiftieth day. The Israelites were commanded (see Leviticus 23:15-21) to bring an *omer* (a measurement of newly ripened barley) each day as an offering. (We can assume that this was not brought in the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.) The barley was first made into a roasted flour, and then a handful was burnt on the altar, while the rest was given to the priests. A male sheep was offered at the same time as a burnt sacrifice, accompanied by a wine libation and a wheat flour offering. After the sacrifices were made, the people could eat the rest of the new grain harvested.

Leviticus 23:15-21

טו וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת-עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעַת שַׁבְּתוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה: טז עַד מַמְחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׂבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה: יז מִמּוֹשְׁבֵיכֶם תִּבְיֹאוּ | לֶחֶם תְּנוּפָה שְׁתֵּים-עָשָׂר נֵי עֶשְׂרֹנִים סֶלֶת תִּהְיֶינָה חֲמֵץ תִּקְרְבֶנָה בְּפוּרִים לַיהוָה: יח וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם עַל-הַלֶּחֶם שִׁבְעַת כִּבְשִׂים תְּמִימִם בְּנֵי שָׁנָה וּפָר בֶּן-בָּקָר אֶחָד וְאֵילָם שְׁנַיִם יִהְיוּ עֲלֶיהָ לַיהוָה וּמִנְחָתָם וְנִסְכֵיהֶם אִשָּׁה רִיחַ-נִיחֹחַ לַיהוָה: יט וְעֲשִׂיתֶם שְׁעִיר-עִזִּים אֶחָד לְחֻטָּאת וּשְׁנַיִם כִּבְשִׂים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה לְזִבְחַ שְׁלָמִים: כ וְהִנִּיף הַכֹּהֵן | אֹתָם עַל-לֶחֶם הַבְּכָרִים תְּנוּפָה לִפְנֵי יְהוָה עַל-שְׁנַיִם כִּבְשִׂים קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיוּ לַיהוָה לַכֹּהֵן: כא וּקְרַאתֶם בְּעֶצְם | הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה מִקְרָא-קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל-מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ חֲקֹת עוֹלָם בְּכָל-מּוֹשְׁבֵיכֶם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם:

15 And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering - the day after the sabbath - you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: 16 you must count until the day after the seventh week - fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain unto the Lord. 17 You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an elevation offering; each shall be made of two-tenths of a measure of choice flour, baked after leavening, as first fruits to the Lord. 18 With the bread you shall present, as burnt offerings to the Lord, seven yearling lambs without blemish, one bull of the herd, and two rams, with their grain offerings and libations, a gift of pleasing odor to the Lord. 19 You shall offer one he-goat as a purification offering and two yearling lambs as a sacrifice of well-being. 20 The priest shall elevate these - the two lambs - together with the bread of first fruits as an elevation offering before the Lord; they shall be holy to the Lord, for the priest. 21 On that same day you shall hold a celebration - it shall be a sacred occasion for you; you shall not work at your occupations. This is a law for all time in all your settlements, throughout the ages.

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Ohev Tzedek-Shaarei Torah, May 18, 2016

This might seem to us to be a strange way of marking time, but bringing an offering was certainly fitting during this time between the liberation from bondage in Egypt (Passover) and the revelation of the Torah on Mt. Sinai (Shavuot). Considering that this was to be a ritual for all time (see verse 21), what were the Jews to do between the Temples and after the destruction of the Second Temple? Since the harvested barley was no longer offered as a sacrifice, how would the ritual of counting the omer be carried forward in as meaningful a manner? Some sages believed that, after the Destruction, there should no longer be a commemoration of this period post-Temple. Yet others understood that the counting is for all time - just as we often count the days until something special (such as a vacation), so too should we expectantly await Revelation every year.

Questions:

1. Why might the ancient Jews have wanted to count the 49 days? What kind of special time spans do you count?
2. According to Midrash, the Israelites were told when they left Egypt that they would receive the Torah 50 days later - how do you think that this knowledge might have changed their behavior during this time?

The omer in history:

Sadly, the period of the omer came to be seen as a time of semi-mourning because of its association with the persecutions by the Romans. During the Roman occupation of Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel), the Talmud records, a “plague” raged among Rabbi Akiva’s students, killing off thousands of pairs of them (students traditionally study in pairs - *chevrutot*). (We understand now that the “plague” was a euphemism for the killings by the Romans of the revolutionary followers of Rabbi Akiva during the time of the Bar Kochba revolt - we read about Rabbi Akiva’s death and those of nine other scholars by torture in the Martyrology service read on Yom Kippur.) Thus, this became a time of mourning during which no weddings take place, and when traditional men do not shave their heads or beards. However, on the 33rd day of the omer (Lag B’Omer), something changed, and the “plague” broke, so on that day, the mourning is lifted, some say for the rest of the count, while others continue thereafter for the full period. Picnics are traditional for Lag B’Omer, sometimes as an archery outing (during the Roman occupation, the rabbis and their students pretended to be hunting in the woods when they were really going out to study, away from the scrutiny of the Romans, who had forbade study of the Torah).

Counting the omer today:

At evening services, the leader, to remind the congregation of the correct count, says what number was counted last night (so as to not say the current night’s number until the blessing is made). Then the count itself is made: first, the blessing is said - *Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu bimitzvotav v’tzivanu al sefirat ha-omer* - “Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us about counting the omer.” Then the count itself is announced. Today, for instance is the 26th day of the omer, so we would say: *Hayom shisha v’esrim yom, shehem shlosa shavuot vakhamisha yamim la’omer* - “Today is 26 days, which is three weeks and five days, of the omer.” Why the strange repetition (number of days followed by the number of weeks and the number of additional days? See the Torah commandment - to count off seven complete weeks, so

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it makes sense to name the number of weeks along with the number of additional days.

The rabbis disagree on whether the count is to be seen as one *mitzvah* (commandment), or as a distinct commandment to be fulfilled each day - the practical implication of this agreement is in saying the blessing: the ones who see it as all one *mitzvah* say that if you miss a day (i.e., no blessing and no count) completely, you've nullified the commandment, and should not make the blessing for each day following. The ones who see it as a *mitzvah* for each day say that missing one opportunity only nullifies "credit" for that day's *mitzvah*, but you can and should continue as usual when you do remember, and thus say the blessing along with the count.

Without actually bringing an omer of barley to the Temple (the synagogue is not a stand-in for the Temple), how do we meaningfully mark this time? For some people, the kabbalistic practice of matching each day with a specific set of qualities/traits/emotional attributes fills the need. The seven lower sefirot, G-dly emanations, is matched to the seven weeks of the count, as is each day of the week. From the website aish.com, we get:

"With the mitzvah of counting the 49 days, known as Sefirat Ha'Omer, the Torah invites us on a journey into the human psyche, into the soul. There are seven basic emotions that make up the spectrum of human experience. At the root of all forms of enslavement, is a distortion of these emotions. Each of the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot is dedicated to examining and refining one of them.

The seven emotional attributes are:

- 1 Chesed - Lovingkindness
- 2 Gevurah - Justice and discipline
- 3 Tiferet - Harmony, compassion
- 4 Netzach - Endurance
- 5 Hod - Humility
- 6 Yesod - Bonding
- 7 Malchut - Sovereignty, leadership

The seven weeks, which represent these emotional attributes, further divide into seven days making up the 49 days of the counting. Since a fully functional emotion is multidimensional, it includes within itself a blend of all seven attributes. Thus, the counting of the first week, which begins on the second night of Pesach, as well as consisting of the actual counting ("Today is day one of the Omer...") would consist of the following structure with suggested meditations: Upon conclusion of the 49 days we arrive at the 50th day Mattan Torah. After we have achieved all we can accomplish through our own initiative, traversing and refining every emotional corner of our psyche, we then receive a gift ('mattan' in Hebrew) from above. We receive that which we could not achieve with our own limited faculties. We receive the gift of true freedom the ability to transcend our human limitations and touch the divine."

That means on each day, we can concentrate on the traits at the intersection of the week's traits and the day of that week's traits, thus yielding 49 distinct sets of attributes to be perfected. Here is the meditation from aish.com on Day 26:

Day 26 Hod of Netzach: Humility in Endurance

Yielding, which is a result of humility, is an essential element of enduring. Standing fast can sometimes be a formula for destruction. The oak, lacking the ability to bend in the hurricane, is uprooted. The reed, which yields to the wind, survives without a problem.

Do I know when to yield, out of strength not fear? Why am I often afraid to yield?

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Endurance is fueled by inner strength. Hod of Netzach is the humble recognition and acknowledgement that the capacity to endure and prevail comes from the soul that God gave each person. This humility does not compromise the drive of endurance; on the contrary, it intensifies it, because human endurance can go only so far and endure only so much, whereas endurance that comes from the Divine soul is limitless.

Do I attribute my success solely to my own strength and determination? Am I convinced that I am all-powerful due to my level of endurance? Where do I get the strength at times when everything seems so bleak?

Exercise for the day: When you awake, acknowledge God for giving you a soul with the extraordinary power and versatility to endure despite trying challenges. This will allow you to draw energy and strength for the entire day.

Questions:

1. What could such a practice do for us?
2. What might be the difficulties in maintaining such a discipline?
3. What is your feeling about the blessing in regards to “forgetting” a day?
4. Other questions?

SHAVUOT

The festival of Shavuot gets short shrift too often in non-Orthodox Jewish communities. It began as an agricultural festival in the Torah - in Exodus 23:16, it is called *khag ha'katzir*, the Feast of the Harvest, when the Israelites were supposed to bring the first produce of the grain harvest (in this case, wheat), and is given in the context of the other agricultural festivals: *Khag HaMatzot* (the Matzah Festival, that is, Pesach), and *Khag HaAssaf* (the Feast of the Ingathering, that is, Sukkot). In Exodus 34:22, it is called Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, since it is seven full weeks after Pesach. In Deuteronomy 16:10, calls it a time for offering “a freewill contribution according as the Lord your God has blessed you,” and the Torah goes on to call it a day of rejoicing for you and everyone with you, including servants, Levites, orphans and widows.

Deuteronomy 16:10-12

י ועשית חג שבועות ליהוה אלהיך מסת נדבת ידך אשר נתתו באשר יברכך יהוה אלהיך:
יא ושמחת לפני | יהוה אלהיך אתה ובניך ובתך ועבדך ואמתך והלוי אשר בשעריך והגר
והיתום והאלמנה אשר בקרבך במקום אשר יבחר יהוה אלהיך לשכון שמו שם: יב וזכרת
כיעבד היות במצרים ושמת ועשית את החקים האלה:

10. Then you shall observe the Feast of Weeks for the Lord your God, offering your freewill contribution according as the Lord your God has blessed you. 11. You shall rejoice before the Lord your God with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite in your communities, and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your midst, at the place where the Lord your God shall choose to establish His name. 12. Bear in mind that you were slaves in Egypt, and take care to obey these laws.

Deuteronomy often comments based on social justice, while the previous three books generally give the agricultural basis for the holidays, so here the offering is called for, but so is the extension of the holiday to all in the household and in the community, in order to be grateful

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that we were freed from slavery in Egypt. And yet, there is still something missing: what is the specific religious significance of this holiday? Is it simply a day of rest and rejoicing?

The sages asked the same question and realized that no specific day had been tied to the Revelation at Sinai, so the rabbis, post-Biblically, linked the two. Shavuot (the 6th and 7th of Sivan) became known as *Zman Matan Torateinu*, the season of the giving of our Torah. Many Jews follow the *minhag* (custom) of eating dairy foods only for the day. The practice has several explanations that arise from *midrash*: one is that the flocks and herds themselves awaited quietly while Moses was up on Mt. Sinai receiving the Torah - in deference to them, we don't eat them! Another is that, before the giving of the Torah, we didn't fully know or understand the laws of preparing meat to be eaten, so we don't eat meat on that day to mark that period of being uninformed. A third is that meat makes us sleepier, and we should be alert to receive the giving of the Torah at dawn on Shavuot.

Working with that last idea, the kabbalists (who gave us the *sefirat ha-omer* meditations I discussed before) devised a *tikkun leyl Shavuot*, a practice of studying Torah all night in anticipation of receiving the Torah at dawn. It is interesting to note that the beginning of this custom coincided with the introduction of coffee to the Middle East and Europe! Many people still practice this custom today.

However, despite the introduction of those two *minhagim* (customs), Shavuot is often neglected, lacking the festivity of Sukkot (and its symbols of fall bounty and its celebrating in booths) and the many forms of Passover celebration.

Questions:

1. Are there holidays on the Catholic calendar that too many similarly ignore?
2. What might be other fitting commemorations for something as important as the giving of the Torah?
3. Why do you think the Torah itself did not assign a date to the Revelation?