

## TORAH STUDY WOOD RIVER JEWISH COMMUNITY

### THE OMER PERIOD

RABBI MARK KULA

SHABBAT SHEMINI - APRIL 15, 2023 - 25 NISAN, 5783 - 10<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF OMER

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ  
בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדַבְּרֵי תוֹרָה.

*Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech haolam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu la'asok b'divrei Torah.*

We praise You, Eternal One, Source of all in our universe, who calls us to holiness through mitzvot, guiding us to engage in the study of Torah.

**Leviticus 23:15-16** (15) And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of Barley 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—50 days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Lord.

**Psalms 90:12** Teach us to count our days rightly, that we may obtain a wise heart.

**The ritual practice:** Prelude to Counting the Omer: *Hineni muchan um'zuman l'kayem mitzvat aseh shel s'firat ha'omer k'mo shekatuv baTorah:*

Behold, I am ready and prepared to fulfill the *mitzvah* of counting the *Omer*, as it says in the Torah: You shall count from the eve of the second day of Pesach, when an *Omer* of grain is to be brought as an offering, seven complete weeks. The day after the seventh week of your counting will make 50 days.

The counting of the Omer (*S'firat HaOmer*), which lasts for 49 days, takes place at night, commencing on the second night of Pesach. When counting the Omer, one recites this blessing each night: *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav vitzivanu al sefirat ha'omer.* We praise you, Eternal One, Source of all in our universe, who calls us to holiness through mitzvot guiding us to count the Omer. The count is stated in both total days and weeks and days.

While Passover celebrates the initial liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, Shavuot marks the culmination of the process of liberation, when the Jews became an autonomous community with their own laws and standards. Counting up to Shavuot reminds us of this process of moving from a slave mentality to a more liberated one realizing the purpose of freedom and its connection to responsibility.

**Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #306** Since the acceptance of the Torah was the goal of our redemption and serves as the foundation of the Jewish people, and through it we achieve our greatness, we were commanded to count from the day after [the first day of] Pesach until the day that the Torah was given. This manifests our great desire for that awesome day which our hearts yearn for just as a servant yearns for shade. We count constantly – when will the day come that we yearn for, the day that we left slavery? Because counting [towards a certain date] shows a person that all his desire and longing is to reach that time.

**Rambam, 1138-1204, Moreh Nevuchim (Guide for the Perplexed) 3:43** Shavuot is the time of the Giving of the Torah. In order to honor and elevate this day we count the days from the previous festival until it [arrives], like someone who is waiting for a loved one to arrive, who counts the days by the hours.

**Rabbi Joseph Soleveitchik (1903-93)** teaches that the practice of counting days and weeks makes us aware both of where we've been and where we're going, thus evoking a sense of movement from one state of being to another.

1. **Kabbalah**, 16<sup>th</sup> century - Jewish mystics, interpreted counting of the Omer between Passover and Shavuot as a spiritual practice, utilizing the seven lower sefirot to represent the seven weeks. What are sefirot? "There are 10 s'firot, linked in a complex figure that some have called the "Tree of Life," significantly a phrase also often used to refer to the Torah. Each of them represents one aspect of the Godhead, a facet of the powers of the All Powerful. Each is also identified with a part of the body or aspects of the human personality. The seven S'firot representing the seven weeks during the Counting of the Omer are:

1. Chesed - Loving Kindness, Overflowing
2. Gevurah - Strength, Discipline, Boundaries
3. Tiferet - Beauty, Harmony, Balance
4. Netzach - Victory, Endurance, Persistence
5. Hod - Glory, Splendor
6. Yisod - Foundation, Intimacy, Generativity
7. Malkhut - Majesty, Divinity in Nature.

It is based on seven Divine qualities in the kabbalistic design of the universe, which were represented by the illustrious leaders of Israel (in one variation): love (Abraham), respect (Isaac), compassion (Jacob), efficiency (Moses), beauty (Aaron), loyalty (Joseph), and leadership (David).

**Lag Baomer**-33<sup>rd</sup> Day of the Omer- Rabi Akiva's students. Death of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, considered the Author of Zohar-central work of Kabblah. Celebrate his life on Lag Baomer.

Additionally, in the year 135 C.E., some 65 years after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans, the Romans crushed the rebellion led by Shimon bar Kochba.

During this period, the Talmud tells us, the students of Rabbi Akiva, one of Bar Kochba's supporters, suffered from a plague, in which thousands died. The traditional reason given for the plague is that it was a divine punishment for the fact that the students did not show proper respect to one another. Some have speculated that the deaths were in fact connected to the Bar Kochba revolt. Mourning ensued for generations as this occurred during the Omer period— no weddings, no parties, no haircuts — in memory of Rabbi Akiba's students. The 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the Omer, known as Lag Ba'Omer — was celebrated as a minor holiday, as on that day the plague ended.

Subsequently, Lag Ba'Omer has evolved into a day when, in different Jewish communities around the world, as celebrating the lives of *tzaddikim*. The most well-known of these is Shimon bar Yochai, who, in modern Israel, is honored on Lag Ba'Omer in Meron, outside of Safed, with a Burning Man-like gathering of a few hundred thousand people every year.

### **The Omer & Zionism**

On May 5, 1948, David Ben-Gurion announced that the Jewish nation in Israel accepted the United Nations' partition plan, and declared a state. May 5th falls out during the Sefirat Ha'Omer period, which created a conundrum for religious Jews. Was Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day), the day of Israel's birth as a modern state, important enough, religious enough, to counteract the mourning customs of the Omer? Might we celebrate Israeli Independence Day as a holiday, even though it falls during the mournful Omer period? Judaism's genius is recognizing changing realities and the organic nature of its religious and social structure. Judaism is aware of changing realities. The way we relate to time is multi-layered. Our past, our present, our future, are integrated. The old is not forgotten; the new is not ignored.

### **Thoughts?**

\*What about new approaches and considerations of the Omer counting?

\*\*When do we count down and when do we count up?

\*\*\*What is the poser in numbers and counting?

\*\*\*\*How do we add layers to our customs and practices, why and what does it mean about Jewish ritual?

Rabbi Abi Weber's contemporary elaborations on *Omer* counting.

**1. Connect to friends, family, partners.** A nightly ritual that involves taking a moment to remember and reflect can be very healthy for relationships. Counting the *Omer* can be an experience of pausing and sharing together.

**2. Get Kabbalistic.** Each week of the counting is assigned a principle, such as “wisdom,” “might,” or “majesty.” There are seven principles and each day of each week is associated with one principle within another. Meditate on the experience and qualities of beauty, love and compassion.

**3. Increase awareness of the Jewish calendar.** Important days between Passover and Shavuot: Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day), Yom HaZikaron (Israel's Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers), Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israel's Independence Day), and Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Reunification Day). As you count the *Omer*, note these special days.

**4. Have a picnic.** The *Omer* has a mournful element from the Talmudic era. That sad time ended on Lag Ba'omer the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the counting. Use that day as a moment to celebrate.

**5. Add to your routine.** Counting the *Omer* might help with other routines like exercise, yoga, or journaling. Be more sensitive to your days and shape a more meaningful, aware, and healthy lifestyle.

**6. Anticipate Shavuot.** After Passover think about the next Jewish holiday, Shavuot, when we celebrate the giving of the Torah by studying and reading the Book of Ruth, and eating dairy foods.

**7. Count up.** We count down a lot. 3, 2, 1!, With the *Omer*, we count up toward the wonderful giving of our Torah. Counting up, reaching a higher number each night, influences our capacity to aspire. How is counting upward impactful? When do we count up?

“The power of Judaism, is it ritualizes our day-to-day experiences and marks the passage of time.” These visceral traditions allow us to feel time in our bodies and differentiate moments in time.

Make every day count! Make every person count! Make our lives count! Make our actions count!

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach!