



## *Omer and Covid 19*

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Counting is such a human thing to do. From the time we are little, we are asked how old we are. Our little ones tentatively hold up their fingers. “I...free.” “Oh you are three years old,” we say as she smiles in satisfaction. As we get older, some of us take pride in announcing our years and others like to keep it on the down low. “Oh, I’m just twenty nine again.” We like to count our children and grandchildren. Some of us even get to tally up great grandchildren as part of our family. There are others who like to number their friends on Facebook. Are they in the tens, hundreds, or thousands? And we also check, these days not so eagerly, to see what the number is in our bank and retirement accounts.

Numbers can represent value at least ways to measure time, financial resources, items of value, and even people.

Today, Jews are in a period of counting the days of the Omer.

In Leviticus 23:15-16, we are told,

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמִּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבְּיָאֲכֶם אֶת-עֹמֶר

“And from the day on which you bring the omer/sheaf of elevation offering—the day after the Sabbath—you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: you must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the LORD.”

An Omer means ‘measure’ and refers to sheaves of a harvested crop. When the great Temple in Jerusalem stood, the priests would offer there, on behalf of all Israel, newly harvested grain such as barley starting on the second day of Passover till eve of Shavuot, the holiday that celebrates the revelation of Torah at Sinai. The counting of the Omer signaled the beginning of Israel’s harvest season. After the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the Omer could no longer be brought to the altar, however counting continued.

On the one hand, this was a time of uncertainty. There was hope that the crops would grow, fruits would ripen, and that the summer would produce much needed grain to last the upcoming winter. Later on, this period came to be associated with mourning and sadness. Some of you know Orthodox or Conservative Jews who avoid having joyous events such as weddings during this time. They also will avoid cutting their hair unless it’s Lag B’Omer, the 33<sup>rd</sup> day. The reasons for mourning are obscure. One legend posits that 12,000 of Rabbi Akiva’s students died one year between Passover and Shavuot during the Hadrianic persecution. In the Middle ages, crusaders massacred our people and ransacked our towns during this time. Because of this

custom of sadness and the timing of Israel Independence day, the Holocaust is commemorated during the Omer, on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan, i.e., Tuesday, April 21.

While most of us don't observe the sadness associated with this period of time, we can connect with the gloom. We've been sheltering in our homes for longer than we thought. We no longer go to restaurants, movie theaters, gyms, or even the beach. Most disheartening of all, is the lack of contact we have with our community, dear friends, and even our own family members. This period of mourning is not because of the Roman persecutions from almost two thousand years ago but rather because of the Corona virus, the concern for the wellbeing of people we love, and the continuing isolation and loneliness we are feeling. Even as we are counting the days of restrictions what makes it even harder is that we really don't know when they will be lifted. We understand that the virus will be with us for some years. A vaccine may not come till 2021. Yes, there is hope in the coming weeks for increased testing of the virus and antibody analysis to see who may already have it or at least is relatively immune to it. There's also an expectation that some parts of our country are peaking, lending us to believe that the numbers of fatalities will lessen in time.

So in the meantime, what is one to do? I would like to draw your attention back to the Omer. It isn't all doom and gloom. There is rather something sacred in counting off the days, linking Passover with Shavuot. We start with our liberation out of Egypt and 7 weeks later, we stand at Sinai and see the cloud of God's glory, hear the thunder and blare of the shofar, see the lighting and experience the revelation of Torah at Shavuot. Jewish tradition tells us to count each and every day. Not to just let it slide by in anonymity. Why is that? We are no longer farmers in the fields and there is no more Temple to bring our barley sheaves to. It's more than just keeping the memory of this ancient practice but it can remind us of the value of time itself, even when many of us have more than we know what to do with.

Abraham Joshua Heschel in his seminal book *The Sabbath* writes, "A special consciousness is required to recognize the ultimate significance of time. We all live it and are so close to being identical with it that we fail to notice it. The world of space surrounds our existence. It is but a part of living, the rest is time. Things are the shore, the voyage is time....It is the dimension of time wherein man meets God, wherein man becomes aware that every instant is an act of creation, a Beginning, opening up new roads for ultimate realizations. Time is the presence of God in the world of space, and it is within time that we are able to sense the unity of all being." (pg. 96, 97, & 100)

We are all on a special voyage right here and right now. We are on a vessel riding on the water. We can feel the rocking and swaying. I can even smell the salt of the sea. It's been many

nights and days since we've been on dry land. Time moves slowly. However, we are all in this same vessel, only six feet from one another. I can see you out there, neighbor and friend. I see your face on Zoom, Face time, Skype, and life stream. I can hear your voice on the phone. We are all in the water and even though our vessels are moving slowly, the shore is on the horizon. And so, we float and propel and try to live in our boats. The one thing we have is time.

Time for Heschel is the only way to connect with God. Normally, we are too consumed, too busy, to notice the sanctity of life. But here is an opportunity. Now we have the days. We have the time to think, ponder, walk, and smell the blooming flowers outside. We have the time to write, read, paint, garden, and cook. Our minds are more vast than the ocean and can hold more than the sky above. Even now, we can take time to reflect, remember, imagine, and create. Just to take time to think. It's a luxury most of us didn't have before but now we do. We can reflect on where we are in our lives. What have brought us the greatest joys? What insights have we gleaned even recently. There is so much that happens in our brains in just one day not to mention a week, a month, or even years.

But the process doesn't have to be solitary. We can speak with our family and check in on relatives we haven't connected with in years. Many of us have family members or friends that we haven't spoken to in a long time. And what about our relationship with the ultimate source of life and meaning?

We are all connected regardless of where we live or who we are. Can you catch a glimpse of the interwoven nature of life? I sense it in the air we breathe, birds soaring through the sky, a friendly smile or wave from another person, or picturing the dolphins diving into the water right beside our vessels. Looking up beyond the clouds above, we know that there are stars, planets, and galaxies beyond our imagination. You are not alone. I am not alone. We are part of the energy of life that lights up the darkness of the universe, that can illuminate the gloom of these weeks, and can bring a spark of joy to another's eyes.

We finally have the time. And so during these days of the Omer, where we count up our days, let's use them as best as we can by filling them with meaning. Let's make them sacred and holy. And then, we will see each other, one way or another, at Sinai.