

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Emor
May 21, 2016

פרשת אמור
י"ג באייר תשע"ו

Torah Reading: *Vayikra* (Leviticus) 21:1-24:23

In this *parasha*, Hashem gives Moshe a series of laws specific to the *cohanim* (priests); Hashem then instructs Moshe to tell the people about the festivals in addition to the laws of blasphemy and murder.

The Torah commands us the following (23:15-16):

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם, מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת, מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם, אֶת-עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה : שִׁבְעַת שַׁבָּתוֹת, תִּמְיַמַת תִּהְיֶינָה. עַד מַמְחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית, תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם ; וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה, לַיהוָה.

And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the day of rest, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the waving; seven weeks shall there be complete; even until the day after the seventh week shall you number fifty days; and you shall present a new meal-offering to Hashem.

This is the mitzvah of counting the *Omer*, a mitzvah which we are currently in the midst of fulfilling. Today, Shabbat, is the 28th day of the *Omer*, making this coming Thursday *Lag B'Omer*. ל"ג or *Lag* equals 33 in the *gematria* system of associating Hebrew letters with numbers, hence the name of the 33rd day of the *Omer*.

What is this *Omer* about and specifically why is *Lag B'Omer* singled out for special consideration?

The *Omer* is a Biblical measure of volume of grain, equaling around 2 liters. On the second day of *Pesach*, an *Omer* of barley was offered in the *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple), signaling

that the consumption of *chadash* (grains from the new harvest) was now allowed. On the holiday of *Shavuot*, two loaves made of wheat were offered in the *Beit HaMikdash* to signal the start of the wheat harvest.

“Counting the *Omer*” is a verbal counting of each of the forty-nine days between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*, and derives from our verse above. Jews are commanded to count forty-nine days beginning from the day on which the *Omer* of barley was offered in the *Beit HaMikdash*, up until the day before the wheat offering was brought on *Shavuot*.

The idea of counting each day represents a spiritual preparation and anticipation for the giving of the Torah, which was given by Hashem on *Har Sinai* at the beginning of the month of Sivan, around the same time as the holiday of *Shavuot*. *Midrash Rabbah Parashat Emor* explains that when the *Bnei Yisrael* left *Mitzrayim* (Egypt), they were told by Moshe that 49 days after the Exodus, they would be given the Torah. The populace was so excited at the prospect of a spiritual liberation, following the physical emancipation from Egypt, that they kept a count of the passing days that ended with the giving of the Torah at *Har Sinai*. The Counting of the *Omer* thus demonstrates how much the Jews desired to accept the Torah into their own lives.

In keeping with the themes of spiritual growth and character development during this period, the Rabbis compared the process of growth to the two types of grain offered at either end of the counting period. In ancient times, barley was an animal food and wheat was a human food. At *Pesach*, the Jews were raised out of the Egyptian exile although they had sunken almost to the point of no return. The Exodus was unearned, a gift from Hashem, like the food of animals who are not expected to develop their spiritual potential. For the next forty-nine days, however, the *Bnei Yisrael* worked on themselves so they might receive the Torah on their own merit. The receiving of the Torah required spiritual elevation and active cooperation. Thus the *Shavuot* offering is "people food".

The Jewish calendar is largely determined by the rhythms of agriculture, and the period of *Omer* falls between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*. On *Pesach*, we shift from praying for rain to praying for dew, and this begins the growth period for the fruit of the season. *Shavuot* is the day of giving the first fruits. The outcome of the season's crop and fruit was still vulnerable during this period. Linking this to personal growth: daily reflection, work on one's *middot* (positive character traits), and potential inner growth from this work over seven weeks offers ways to pray for and invite the possibility of affecting one's external fate and potential.

The period of counting the *Omer* is also a time of semi-mourning, during which many traditional Jews refrain from getting haircuts, shaving, listening to live instrumental music,

or participating in weddings, parties, and dinners with dancing. Traditionally, the reason cited is in commemoration of a plague that killed the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva. According to the Talmud, 12,000 *chavrutot* (pairs of study partners) were divinely killed during the days of the *Omer*-counting for not honoring one another properly. Many scholars suggest that this talk of "plague" was really a way for the early Talmudic rabbis (who were living under Roman rule) to speak in code about the Bar Kochba rebellion, a failed uprising against Roman power in which many Jews, possibly including Rabbi Akiva's students, died.

According to Rabbi Avraham Walfish, an Israeli Bible scholar, we do not know whether *sefirat ha-Omer* (counting of the *Omer*) had aspects of mourning prior to the death of R. Akiva's students. We have no historical evidence of the character of this period. Our earliest testimony regarding a period of semi-mourning at this time comes from the Middle Ages, and these sources trace the mourning to the period of R. Akiva. As for earlier periods, we can only conjecture, and two opposite thoughts have been offered. The Ramban [13th Century Spain/Palestine] compared the period of the *Omer*, which bridges two festivals, to *chol hamo'ed* (the intermediate days of a holiday), implying that it is a joyous period. On the other hand, Nogah Hareuveni [a 20th century Israeli naturalist and scholar] noted that this fifty-day period is a time of great apprehension for the farmer, whose grain harvest is subject at this time to many dangers, especially hot east winds that frequently occur in this season. Hareuveni has therefore suggested that the practices of mourning, attributed by tradition to historical events such as the death of R. Akiva's students, actually have grounding in agricultural realities that predate R. Akiva.

Lag B'Omer, the thirty-third day of the Counting of the *Omer*, is considered the day on which the plague was lifted, (and/or: the day on which the rebellion saw a victory), or perhaps the day when the extreme danger from the seasonal hot east wind had passed.

Lag B'Omer also marks the *yahrzeit* (anniversary of the death) of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. After the death of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students, Rabbi Akiva taught five students, among them Rabbi Shimon, who went on to become the greatest teacher of Torah in his generation. According to tradition, he revealed, on the day of his death, the deepest secrets of the Torah in a Kabbalistic work called the *Zohar*.

Although the anniversary of the death of a *tzaddik* (righteous person) is usually a mournful day, the anniversary of Rabbi Shimon's death on *Lag B'Omer* is a festive one. Bonfires are lit and people sing and dance by the flames. Weddings, parties, listening to music, picnics, and haircuts are commonplace.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy *Lag B'Omer*.

For Discussion:

- The *Omer* is forty-nine days, or seven days times seven weeks. What else occurs in sevens in Jewish life? (Suggested answer: Seven species of the Land of Israel, seven days before a *brit milah*, seven Biblical days of *Pesach* and *Shavuot*, seven days of intense mourning for a lost loved one, seven days of celebration after a wedding...)
- What do these things have in common? Why are they seven? (Suggested answer: The number seven, according to the Kabbalists, connotes “completion,” due to the creation of the world being completed in seven days.)
- How would you have prepared yourself if you had been at *Har Sinai* to receive the Torah?