

Emor: Changing Meanings of Counting the Omer

Source Sheet by Rabbi Marina Yergin

Based on a sheet by Erin Dreyfuss

ויקרא כ"ג:ט'-יא

(ט) וידבר יהוה אל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: (י) דַבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי־תָבֹאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וְקִצְרֹתֶם אֶת־קִצְרֹהָ וְהִבֵּאתֶם אֶת־עֹמֶר רֵאשִׁית קְצִירְכֶם אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן: (יא) וְהִגִּיף אֶת־הָעֹמֶר לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לְרִצְוֹנְכֶם מִמִּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת יְנִיפְנוּ הַכֹּהֲנִים:

Leviticus 23:9-11, 16

(9) יהוה spoke to Moses, saying: (10) Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first **sheaf, omer**, of your harvest to the priest. (11) He shall elevate the **sheaf, omer**, before יהוה for acceptance in your behalf; the priest shall elevate it on the day after the sabbath.... (16) you must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to יהוה.

Torah: Agricultural

Passover and Shavuot are two of the three harvest festivals celebrated throughout the year. When the Temple stood, the people presented offerings on those two days and counted the days in between offerings, as mandated in the Torah. It is also the understanding that it should be the time where we thank God for what we have received.

Rabbinic: Spiritual

Rabbeinu Bahya, Vayikra 23:16:1¹

....The Torah did not mention the Shavuot festival independently as it did with all the other festivals.... Seeing that the Torah did not refer to the festival Shavuot in that manner makes it plain that it is considered as a festival which is linked to the Passover, i.e. it completes what commenced on Passover and now that we have counted forty-nine days from the second day of Passover the time has come to celebrate the Shavuot festival. Looking at it from a spiritual point of view, the days between the last day of the Passover festival and the festival of Shavuot may be considered as somewhat like חול המועד, the intermediate days of the Passover and Sukkot festivals respectively.

Historical: A Period of Mourning

Yevamot 62b:9²

They said by way of example that Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students in

¹ Rabbi Bahya ben Asher (1255-1340) was a commentator on Tanach.

² Talmud Yevamot, composed in Talmudic Babylon (c.450 - c.550 CE)

an area of land..., and they all died in one period of time, because they did not treat each other with respect....With regard to the twelve thousand pairs of Rabbi Akiva's students, the Gemara adds: It is taught that all of them died in the period from Passover until *Shavuot*. Rav Hama bar Abba said, and some say it was Rabbi Hiyya bar Avin: They all died a bad death. The Gemara inquires: What is it that is called a bad death? Rav Nahman said: Diphtheria.

Israelis/Zionists: Independence

"For almost two millennia, from the mid-second century on, this is the way the Omer period was experienced, as a sad season, during which joyful activities were curtailed, punctuated by the minor festival of Lag Ba'Omer. Then, on May 5, 1948, David Ben-Gurion announced that the Jewish nation in Israel accepted the United Nations' partition plan, and declared a state....Nineteen years later, during the Six Day War, when Israeli troops... liberated the Old City..., another holiday — Yom Yerushalayim — Jerusalem Day, was created."³

Counting the Omer is an Example of the Reality of Jewish Life

"...When it was realized that this same time period [of counting the Omer] also contains within it another dimension, another reality, that of the receiving of the Torah, the Rabbis did not hesitate to incorporate that into the way this period of time is experienced.... Crucially, however, the Jewish people also never erased anything. The more recent events which occurred during the Omer period, and our responses to them, were never allowed to supercede the older ones; they live, like commentaries and addendum on a page of Talmud, side by side, together, vying perhaps for our attention, but all given equal time.

This openness to the realities of our history, this willingness to notice and respond communally to events as they occur in the real world, and not only to see the world through the prism of preordained understandings is, I believe, a particularly Jewish genius. The way we relate to time is multi-layered. Our past, our present, our future, are all here, with us. Nothing old is forgotten; nothing new is ignored. New events, sometimes contradictory ones, are assimilated into our personal and communal consciousness, as we try to balance our mourning of old tragedies with our celebration of new triumphs....

All of these events which occurred during the Sefirat Ha'omer period, along with everything else that we have gone through as a people, are remembered, commemorated, felt. They are, in fact, through our yearly experience of them, happening, again and again, in our memory and our imagination, as we continue to try to make sense of the unfolding text of Jewish history."⁴

³ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/sefirat-ha-omer-time-as-text/>

⁴ Ibid.