

THE OMER

The period between Pesah and Shavuot is called the Omer, “sheaf.” The Torah says:

From the day after the Sabbath, the day that you bring the sheaf (*omer*) of wave-offering, you shall keep count until seven full weeks have elapsed: you shall count fifty days until the day after the seventh week, then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Lord. [Lev. 23: 15-16]

This verse was understood to mean that the first sheaf of the new grain was brought to the Temple on the second day of Pesah. We are then told to count seven weeks (forty-nine days). On the fiftieth day, we are to bring loaves of bread made from the new grain as part of the holiday celebration of Shavuot.

After the Temple was destroyed, the agricultural rituals were no longer practiced. Therefore, the ritual of counting the days and weeks between Passover and Shavuot itself became the focus of this period. In fact, this time period is also known as *sefirah*, “the counting,” which is shorthand for *sefirat ha-Omer*, “the counting of the Omer.”

Preparing for Sinai

The Omer is a spiritual preparation for receiving the Torah on Shavuot. It is a time when we are challenged to discover what is new in Torah. A Hasidic teaching suggests that the Torah is given anew each year. The

next seven weeks determine whether we are ready to receive this new Torah on Shavuot. During the Omer period, we need to focus internally, allowing our lives to parallel the story of the Israelites as they journey through the desert. The Promised Land seems far away, the unknown seems not just challenging but terrifying. The past, despite its problems and disappointments, becomes more attractive because it is familiar. We long to return to Egypt, forgetting the “slavery” and remembering only the good food (as the Bible says, “the leeks and cucumbers”) that sustained us in slavery.

How do we create guidelines and principles to serve as our moral compass in our wanderings? The counting of the Omer challenges us to make our days count. Rabbi Everett Gendler teaches that the verse *lim-not yameinu kein hoda* (Psalm 90:12) means “make our days count by saying yes to each one of them.” If we can create a practice of awareness of each day, then hopefully we can carry that practice beyond Shavuot to every day of the year.

The Jewish mystics fit the counting of the Omer into their larger system of belief. They linked the seven weeks with the seven lower *sefirot*. In this context, the *sefirot* refer to the different aspects of the Godhead. The seven *sefirot* are: *hesed* (loving-kindness); *gevurah* (structure); *tiferet* (truth); *netzah* (endurance); *hod* (humility); *yesod* (construction); and *malkhut* (presence). (The translations given do not convey the full meaning of these *sefirot*; in fact, the meanings differ in different schools of Jewish mystical teaching.)

Not only was each week linked with one *sefirah*, but each day of the week was also linked with a *sefirah*. Thus the first week is associated with the *sefirah* of *hesed*/loving-kindness. The first day is linked to *hesed* combined with *hesed*. The second day is *gevurah* combined with *hesed*, and so on. For the Kabbalists, this period was a time to focus on these different aspects of God as preparation for the day after seven weeks of seven days. The fiftieth day is thus symbolic of perfection and appropriately is the day when God reveals both the Torah and God’s Presence to the Israelites assembled at Mount Sinai. Thus the Omer becomes a mystical preparation for the moment of Sinai. Recently, this connection of the *sefirot* to the counting of the Omer has been adapted in a new way. In addition to reflecting aspects of the Godhead, the *se-*

firot reflect aspects of the human personality. This is what is meant when the Bible says we are created in the image of God and that we are to act as God acts. Thus the linking of the seven weeks to the seven *sefirot* creates a specific structure related to significant personality traits. In one understanding of the *sefirot*, *hesed* and *gevurah* are opposites that come to a synthesis in *tiferet*. I would like to suggest that rather than being opposites, they are complementary. Thus all of the *sefirot* are necessary aspects of humanity. Accordingly, a way to think of the *sefirot* is as follows.

Omer and the *Sefirot*: A *Kavanah* for the Seven Weeks

Hesed, loving-kindness or love We begin with love, for that is how creation begins. God created the world as an act of love for human beings. Humans create new human beings through love.

In this first week of the Omer, we reflect on *hesed*/love. When is it easy for us to offer love? When is it difficult? How can we be generous? When are we not? Are there dangers both to ourselves and to those we love from too much love? Is there a stifling aspect to our love? An encouraging of codependency? Are there things that prevent us from being loving? Are there things that compel us to be loving? What should *hesed* mean for us?

Gevurah, structure *Gevurah* is also known as *din*, “judgment.” I think of this *sefirah* as “limitations.” Love is free-flowing and yet it needs a container, a structure to hold it. Without limits, love can be overwhelming, leaving no space for the object of that love. *Gevurah* then has an aspect of respect/*kavod*. Unlike love, respect intrinsically recognizes the worth of the other. *Gevurah* is discipline. It is knowing that not only children need structure. *Gevurah* involves contraction of self to leave space for others. It calls for focus in place of the boundless nature of *hesed*.

Do we set limits easily or find it difficult to do? If setting limits is easy, is it too easy? When can we say yes? If setting limits is hard, when can we say no? We need both *hesed* and *gevurah* to be able to open our

hands, arms, and hearts, and yet know when to set limits both for ourselves and for others.

Tiferet, compassion *Tiferet*, “compassion,” is also known as *emet*, “truth.” *Tiferet* blends and harmonizes *hesed* and *gevurah*. Herein lies the compassionate heart. *Tiferet* enables us to feel compassion toward people by perceiving their totality—their strengths and their weaknesses—and accepting them. The same is true regarding ourselves. *Tiferet* is compassionate acceptance. It is often translated as “beauty,” because when we see with truth we find beauty in all things. Shammai and Hillel debated what to say to a bride on her wedding day. Shammai held for the truth: if she is beautiful, say so, if not, describe her as she is. Hillel held that every bride is beautiful. Beauty is not some objective standard; it can be found in all things. *Tiferet*, which is the heart, perceives the beauty in all things. This is *tiferet*, the heart of compassion.

What kind of person or situation evokes our compassion? What kind of person or situation evokes our annoyance or antipathy? What can we learn about our own issues and limitations by reflecting on these contrasts? What inhibits our compassion? Is our compassion tinged with patronizing condescension? Can we be compassionate even with ourselves?

The next three *sefirot*—*netzah*, *hod*, and *yesod*—are also seen as a unit.

Netzah, endurance The qualities of endurance, fortitude, determination, certitude, energy, and commitment are associated with *netzah*. While often translated as “victory,” *netzah* really has more to do with achievement. It is the *sefirah* of creativity. Like *hesed*, its energy flows outward. As the *sefirah* of creativity, it has no limits and boundaries. It is the *sefirah* that reminds us that we are powerful, we are “little lower than angels.”

When do we feel energetic and empowered? When do we feel the opposite? When do our creative juices flow? When do we feel stuck, indecisive?

Hod, humility The qualities of humility, yielding, modesty, patience, planning, calm, forgiveness, and compromise are associated with *hod*. *Hod* focuses the energy of *netzah*. It takes creativity and actualizes it in reality. It reminds us that we are not always right, and there are times when change and compromise may be necessary. Our sense of humility comes from a recognition of the limitations of our power. True, we are little lower than angels; yet we are also dust and ashes. We are imperfect and mortal, no matter how powerful we seem. *Hod* can also be connected with *hoda'ah*, "gratitude." Unlike the striving associated with *netzah*, in *hod* we experience gratitude for the blessings that we have.

When are we impatient? Can we accept our limitations without self-flagellation? Can we drop our defenses enough to admit our flaws and become vulnerable? How can we be aware and thankful for the gifts and blessings that we have?

Yesod, construction *Yesod* is associated with the qualities of bonding, connection, and foundation. It is traditionally associated with the generativity of the sexual organs. *Yesod* brings together all the *sefirot* that came before. It specifically takes the pair of *netzah* and *hod*—creativity and planning, determination and patience—and combines them to create the foundation for what will be. It also adds to *netzah* and *hod* the element of connection. Connecting to others is essential for human beings. At creation we are told, *lo tov heyot ha'adam l'vado*, "it is not good for a human being to be alone." Thus, amid our creativity and planning, our connections to one another should not be lost. *Yesod* is about building relationships based on *hesed*, *gevurah*, and *tiferet*. By urging the connection to others, *yesod* moves us closer to unity, which is the energy underlying the system of *sefirot*.

How can we bring together *netzah* and *hod* to build balanced lives? Which kinds of relationships come easily to us and which do not? Do we work on building and maintaining those relationships or just expect them to flourish on their own?

Malkhut, presence *Malkhut* is often translated as "sovereignty," as in *melekh*, "ruler." I have translated it as "presence" because this *sefi-*

rah is associated with God's indwelling Presence or the immanence, known as *Shekhinah*. In Kabbalah, the *Shekhinah* is the feminine aspect of God. As the last *sefirah*, *malkhut* is considered the most accessible, the closest to our human world. If we live with a constant awareness of God's Presence, our beings are transformed. We become a presence ourselves, being openhearted but not overwhelming; compassionate, able to hold both assurance and doubt simultaneously, and yet comfortably and constructively building a future. *Malkhut* is the challenge to act in ways that imitate God. In that way, *malkhut* echoes its traditional aspect of sovereignty. Just as God is *melekh*, "ruler" of the world, so we too have an aspect of sovereignty.

Paradoxically, another understanding of *malkhut* is a sovereignty that comes from not being in control. When we give up the notion of control, we can stop striving to reach that mirage that is always out of reach. As mortals we can never control our fate, but we may achieve an aspect of *malkhut* by controlling our reactions to life's unfolding. Though we cannot stop suffering or death, we can make choices about how we respond.

Customs of the Omer

Traditionally, the Omer period is a time of mourning. The most common explanation is that we are mourning the thousands of students of the talmudic sage Rabbi Akiva who died in a plague. In time, the reasons for mourning expanded to include other tragedies in Jewish history that occurred during this time of the year, such as the massacres of Jews during the Crusades. Therefore, it became customary not to hold weddings or other celebratory events, and not to cut the hair (a traditional sign of mourning) during the Omer.

The lack of clarity in the origin of the mourning led to a number of customs about when the mourning should be observed. Some observe it from Passover to Lag B'omer (the thirty-third day of the Omer), others from the first day of Iyyar until Shavuot. Some regard the whole time period from Pesah to Shavuot as a period of mourning. Because of its uncertain origin and meaning, liberal communities have increasingly disregarded mourning practices entirely.

Lag B'omer The thirty-third day (Hebrew: *lag*) in the Omer is a minor holiday. According to tradition, the plague either stopped for a day or ceased completely on this day. Lag B'omer is celebrated with picnics and outdoor activities, especially in Israel.

Pirkei Avot It is a custom to study one chapter of *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of Our Ancestors*) each week during the Omer. There are five chapters in this tractate of the Mishnah, each containing short ethical teachings by the rabbinic sages. To facilitate its study during the afternoon service on the six Shabbatot from Pesah to Shavuot, a sixth chapter was added in the prayer book. The study of *Pirkei Avot* and its many commentaries is seen as an appropriate preparation for Shavuot, particularly since the sixth chapter is all about Torah.

Modern Holidays of the Omer

Three modern holidays fall during the counting of the Omer: Yom ha-Shoah, "Holocaust Memorial Day" (Nisan 27); Yom ha-Atzma'ut, "Israel Independence Day" (Iyyar 5); and Yom Yerushalayim, "Jerusalem Day" (Iyyar 28). Various liturgies for Holocaust Memorial Day have recently emerged, but in the main these holidays are marked by Jewish communal gatherings, replete with speeches by public figures or scholars. This is in part because they were established by the Israeli government rather than by religious authorities. Even more important, especially in regard to Israel Independence Day and Jerusalem Day, the theological meaning of these holidays is only slowly emerging. It will probably take time for spiritual practices to emerge. Yom Yerushalayim, celebrating the reunification of Jerusalem during the Six-Day War, is primarily observed in Israel.

Yom ha-Shoah Yom ha-Shoah commemorations often include the lighting of six candles in memory of the six million who perished during the Holocaust and also the recital of the memorial prayer (*eil maleh*) and *kaddish*. Some people light a yellow *yahrzeit* (memorial) candle. But neither synagogue nor home rituals are set.

The theological challenge of Yom ha-Shoah is stark. How could the

Holocaust have happened? What does it say about the human capacity for evil? Most of all, where was God during the Holocaust? For most people, the traditional response that the Jewish people were punished for their sins is in itself blasphemous. Yet the Holocaust only sharpens the question that has existed from the beginning of time: Why do the innocent suffer? How can you explain the death of one child, never mind one million children? My own response to the issue of suffering is discussed below in the section on Yom Kippur. Whatever one's theological answers, Yom ha-Shoah stands in sharp contrast to Pesah. There is no outstretched hand striking the Nazis with ten plagues. The promise of the Haggadah that in each generation God will save us from our enemies seems patently false. How quickly have we moved from joyous liberation to catastrophic destruction!

Yom ha-Shoah is a time to reflect on what was and in that remembering recommit to not letting it happen again. Let me share with you two notions of commemoration that give space for that reflection. Under the leadership of the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan, many synagogues have joined for an all-night program in which volunteers read from a list of names of those who perished in the Holocaust. Only a small percentage of the six million names can be read during the eight hours of the reading, but the vigil provides a way to grasp the significance of individual deaths as well as the overwhelming magnitude of the Holocaust.

The second commemoration is based on the medieval Kabbalistic custom of *tzom shtikah*, "a fast of silence" rather than a fast from eating. In response to the unspeakable nature of the Holocaust, we cease from speaking. In the silence, we reflect upon the silence of those years—the silence of God and the silence of the world. In my community, on the evening of Yom ha-Shoah, we enter the sanctuary in silence and receive a text for the service, but we participate in silence. The service is read, chanted, and sung to us on a tape. The service is made up of readings, songs, and some of the traditional liturgy rewritten to challenge rather than affirm God's goodness. It thus follows the example of some medieval *piyyutim*, liturgical poetry responding to persecutions in their times. The service concludes with the memorial prayer and *kaddish*. The community leaves in silence.

Yom ha-Atzma'ut, Israel Independence Day Yom ha-Atzma'ut also lacks home customs or special liturgy. Some communities recite Hallel and have a Torah reading for the day. Parades and cultural events also mark the holiday. In Israel, this is a national holiday. As we develop new conceptions of our relationship to the State of Israel, an underlying theology will be the foundation for practices for Yom ha-Atzma'ut. For one suggested theology, see "Israel: Toward a Torah of Zion," pp. 467-74.

SHAVUOT

The holiday of Shavuot marks the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Actually, the biblical texts never refer to its historical context. Rather it is described as an agricultural holiday during which the first fruits of the new growing season were brought as offerings in the Temple. Shavuot means "weeks"; its name derives from the fact that it falls on the fiftieth day, the climax of the seven weeks of counting the Omer. Over time, the agricultural nature of the holiday faded and the connection with the Revelation at Sinai became the central focus of the holiday.

Perhaps because of its origins in agriculture, Shavuot has a paucity of rituals as compared to Pesah or Sukkot. Some have suggested that the experience of Sinai cannot be re-created. The image of God descending upon the mountain amid the horns and noises, the people gathered below, and the act of revelation itself are almost beyond human experience. Even the Israelites, who gathered at Sinai, fled the Presence of God, asking Moses to listen and relate God's words to them. Perhaps, then, it is appropriate that there are few rituals for Shavuot. Perhaps, too, all we need is the Torah itself. On Shavuot, we engage in Torah. We literally embrace it by holding the scroll. We hear the words of Torah (specifically the description of Sinai) read to us as part of Shavuot services. We need no symbol of Torah, for we have the Torah itself.

In another sense, the moment of Revelation at Sinai is not an event that only happened in the past. Rather Sinai, the giving and receiving of Torah, is an ongoing experience. God's voice calls from Sinai every day.