

Rabbi's Message May 2022

Dear Friends,

As any seasoned carpenter will attest, one of the most important keys to success with any project is diligent preparation. Unless we measure twice, chances are, we'll be destined to cut more than once. For me, I know that when I sit down to write, whether it's a piece like this for the newsletter, a sermon, or anything else of substance, unless I prepare a general outline first, I'll wind up spending twice the time trying to write something that isn't as good. The same can be said for times of spiritual growth, such as the intensive period of seven weeks – known as the “Counting of the *Omer*” (*Omer* עֶמֶךָ [] being the Hebrew word for a measurement of bound and unprocessed grain) – in which the Jewish world finds itself right now.

The counting begins when the first day of Passover concludes, and continues daily for the next seven weeks, recollecting the period of seven weeks when our biblical ancestors would bring a new barley offering to sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem in the amount of one *omer* each day for 49 successive days, as prescribed in Deuteronomy 16:9-12 (and Leviticus 23:9-21 similarly):

⁹You shall count off seven weeks; start to count the seven weeks when the sickle is first put to the standing grain. ¹⁰Then you shall observe the Feast of Weeks for the Lord your God, offering your freewill contribution according as the Lord your God has blessed you. ¹¹You shall rejoice before the Lord your God with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite in your communities, and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your midst, at the place where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name. ¹²Bear in mind that you were slaves in Egypt, and take care to obey these laws.

On the 50th day, which is the day after we conclude counting, comes Shavuot, the day on which we commemorate receipt of the Torah.

Following the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., after which offerings could no longer be brought, the *Omer* came to represent a Jewish time of great anticipation and spiritual preparation, because while we are grateful for the invaluable gift of Torah, we know also that unless we render ourselves spiritually worthy, we run the risk of losing it in the future. And so we prepare with a mix of excitement and trepidation.

According to the mystical tradition of Kabbalah, each day of the *Omer* carries special opportunity for a different kind of spiritual growth. As such, many *Omer* calendars, such as the one written by Rabbi Margaret Holub of California's Mendocino Coast Jewish Community (<https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/middot-omer-calendar>), lead users through a specific 49-step process of reflection on a different aspect of spiritual growth during each of the 49 days.

Traditional communities observe the seven weeks of the *Omer* as a time of mourning for the thousands of Rabbi Akiva's students who were said to have perished during a

dreadful 1st century C.E. plague visited upon them by God in punishment for the disrespect with which they had been treating each other. A more scientifically historical perspective might suggest that it is more likely the students, along with well over half a million other Jews (according to Dio Cassius, the Roman historian who recorded the deaths at the time for the sake of posterity) were actually killed by the Romans in direct response to the revolt led by a man named Bar Kokhba against foreign rule in Judea from 132 to 136 C.E. Either way, whichever reason resonates more, the fact remains that for traditional communities, this period of the *Omer* is a time when we refrain from common celebratory acts such as enjoying live music, going to parties, holding weddings, and even cutting hair. There is, however, one day of exception, which comes in the middle of the *Omer*, on the 33rd day to be exact.

Perhaps you're familiar with the Jewish custom of using letters for numbers when counting (א = 1, ב = 2, ג = 3 etc.). Under this system, אג = 30. According to tradition, it was on the 33rd day of the counting of the *Omer* that the plague that had claimed the lives of so many students was lifted, even if for just a single day. Again, from a historical perspective, scholars conclude this understanding probably grew out of the likely fact that it was on this day that a significant military victory must have occurred. Again, whether we accept the traditional understanding or the more scientifically historical explanation, it is in recognition of this happy day that Jewish communities around the world gather to celebrate *Lag BaOmer*, a somewhat vague day of gratitude to God on which the period of mourning is suspended. On *Lag BaOmer*, family and friends gather to sing around warm bonfires, enjoy celebratory meals, go to parties, cut their hair, get married, and rejoice in all kinds of ways that are forbidden during the other 48 days. This year, in recognition of *Lag BaOmer*, the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey will be gathering around a bonfire to sing songs, eat some food, and enjoy each other's company. Details about time and place will be shared under separate cover. We do hope you will join us.

During this time of spiritual reflection, allow me to close by asking a few specific questions:

What are we doing, both individually and communally, to earn the ongoing gift of Torah that we will honor on June 3 with our annual Shavuot Shabbat service?

Where is it that we could benefit from concerted effort to improve our character?

How will we prove ourselves to be truly accepting of the obligation to seek and find the image of God in each and every one of our fellow human beings?

As we continue the process of spiritual preparation in anticipation of Shavuot, I pray our efforts will manifest in genuine spiritual growth that makes us truly worthy of God's ongoing blessing.

L'Shalom,
Rabbi Dubin