



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Emor: Why Count the Omer?

We are currently in the heart of the period known as the Omer, the 49 day-count that links Pesach and Shavuot. The source of this mitzva may be found in our Parsha. Each day we signify “Today is X days to the Omer,” detailing weeks and days.

To Discuss:

- Why do we count from Pesach to Shavuot? We don't count to Pesach, or to Rosh Hashana! Why count here?
- When we count days, it is usually to a special event; a birthday, a trip abroad, an exam towards which one might have to plan and prepare. What are we preparing for in the lead-up to Shavuot?

Most people suggest that this count is a linkage between the Exodus and **Matan Torah**, the Revelation at Sinai and the giving of the Torah.

It may be compared to a prisoner who receives a message: “On such and such a day, the king will release you, and fifty days later, he will give you his daughter's hand in marriage.” He responds, “Let's see me get out of jail first!” After the king released him, he says: “Now that the first promise has been kept, certainly the second will also be realized.” And so, he began to count fifty days, until the king had him marry his daughter as promised. Similarly, when God spoke to Moses [at the burning bush,] he said: “When you take the nation out of Egypt, you will worship God at this Mountain [Sinai]” (Ex 3:12). They responded: We cannot believe that we will be redeemed; we cannot even speak of the Torah! But once they were released they began to count to the moment in which God would grant the Torah. The count which God commands here is to endear the Torah to the nation. (Bechor Shor.)

The Omer count of 49 days is all about anticipation. This period reminds us annually of the heightened excitement of a newly freed nation eagerly awaiting the next stage

of its national growth, fifty days after freedom, in receiving the Torah at Sinai. We celebrate and re-live every year this ascent, our own personal commitment to not be merely free, but rather (Ex.19:6) a “holy nation” by forging our relationship with Torah as our guiding light.

But, there is a deep problem with this interpretation of the Omer. Vayikra ch.23 fails to mention a historical context to the Omer. Instead, the frame is exclusively agricultural!

When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first measure (Omer) of your harvest to the priest... Until that very day... you shall eat no bread or parched grain or fresh grain... And from the day you bring the Omer ... you shall count seven complete weeks... count fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Lord. You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an offering which is waved; each shall be made of two-tenths of a measure of choice flour, baked after leavening, as first-fruits to the Lord.

Here, the Omer is the name of a Temple ritual brought at the moment at which the first grains ripen. The “first of your harvest” is offered to God – the Omer offering – no grain may be consumed prior to this moment. This is the inauguration of the harvest season, dedicating the first sheaf of wheat in the country to God. Fifty days are then counted until another “first-fruit” offering. But this is not an offering of grain but two loaves of bread. This symbolizes a stage in which all the grain has been harvested and grain becomes the commodity which is feeding the nation. We take that bread and offer it as a symbol of thanks to God.

Everything here is about the harvest. But why count fifty days? Why count through this period? Seforno suggests this:

The purpose of the festivals is prayer and thanksgiving... And being that the success of the harvest depends on the climate of the season from the time of ripening (Pesach) until the harvest (Shavuot)... the Omer sacrifice is one of thanksgiving for the Spring, and the offering of the First Fruits to the owner Master of the land [-God]. The counting is a signal of a daily prayer. The harvest festival (Shavuot) is an opportunity to thank God for the harvest.

This interpretation embeds the counting of fifty days in the fields and barns of the land of Israel, and brings God into the world of commerce and industry. Whereas Seforno suggests that the fifty day count is one of prayer, we might suggest other directions:

1. Appreciation. As society is gathering its grain, its bounty and financial security, we are reminded to count our daily blessings. Psalms 90 warns us how easily we can forget the gifts of time: “The days of our life are seventy years, or by reason of strength, eighty ... So teach us to **count our days** that

we may get a heart of wisdom.” (90:10-12) Counting days means appreciating our blessing and making time count!

2. **Conceit:** The harvest is a time where we feel wealthy. Man feels pride at his power to control nature; his ability to boost his finances. This count reminds us of the fifty-**year** count of the Jubilee, when slaves go free and when land is returned to its ancestral owner. At the height of the harvest, let us recall that we are ultimately not the master of the land. This might connect with the law that is connected to Shavuot: “And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the Lord am your God.” (23:22) In other words, think about others. Do not become inflated with self-worth.

So Lets Discuss:

- How do we create moments to genuinely, deeply, appreciate time, slow down and value what we have?
- At moments of good fortune, do we become self-centred? How do we ensure that we think of people who are less fortunate than ourselves at moments of our celebration?

Shabbat Shalom!