

All sources taken from the book, [“The Jewish Holidays”](#) by Michael Strassfeld.

A) *Kavanot*, pages 54-55

The Journey

The *Omer*, as mentioned earlier, serves as a link between Passover and *Shavuot*. Each day of the *Omer* brings us that much closer to the event of Sinai. It is a form of countdown, except that in Judaism, everything is a 'count-up' (for example, the *Chanukah* candles). It is also a reminder of the *Pesach* liberation that has just passed, and a reminder that it is very easy to slide back into slavery. It is not only the generation who desired to return to the fleshpots of Egypt; similarly, it is not only the French Revolution that began with equality and liberty and fraternity and ended with tyranny. Liberty is easy to lose as we hurry back to the comfort of the old and familiar fleshpots, especially those where someone else tells us what to do, where choosing and responsibility lie in other people's hands. Liberty is also easy to lose when, for the sake of the new order, “temporary” measures are taken that soon negate the freedom that was gained. The easiest route *out* of Egypt leads back *to* it or else forward into a new Egypt.

Instead we turn to Sinai, where we are given the blueprint of a new order that calls for choice and responsibility rather than slavery. A new ideal - a new order that demands justice and mercy for others, not privileges for its members. We turn aside as Moses did years earlier, to see a wondrous sight - a bush that was on fire and yet was not consumed, a symbol of the paradox of a set of commandments that frees rather than enslaves, a symbol of a revolution that burns with its own fiery convictions and yet consumes neither its adherent or others.

In order then, not to lose the liberation of Passover and to prepare for *Shavuot*, it is important to count each day. Moreover, we are to mark the passage of this crucial time as a reminder that we should mark all of time's passage. As the psalmist says, “The span of our life is seventy years,” or symbolically seven weeks.

Preparing for Sinai

How do we prepare for this event?

Each of us must prepare in her or his own way for Sinai, so that we still hear the voice that called us at every moment with God's words. For some, this preparation may involve the study of *Torah*, the content of Revelation. For others, it will involve meditating on what God's revealing Himself to us will be like and how to prepare so as not to flee. For beyond the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai was the moment when the divine and the human came into contact. How, then, can we strive to recapture that experience?

These are the questions that face us each day as we fulfill the simple ritual of counting from one to forty-nine. So simple a ritual, and yet it is so easy to forget a day, unaccustomed as we are to marking time's passage, seeing one day like

another. The challenge is to remember what day it is, who we are, and how close we stand to Sinai. To completely forget even one day is to forfeit the opportunity to recite the *bracha* of the *Omer*, to become lost and to wander from the path to Sinai onto the multitude of well-trodden paths that lead back to Egypt.

B) *Minhagim*, pages 52-53

One custom that is still widely observed during the *Omer* period is the study of *Pirkei Avot*. The study begins after Passover, and one chapter is studied each week...

There are six chapters and six *Shabbatot* between Passover and *Shavuot*. The sixth chapter is about *Torah* and is therefore an appropriate prelude to *Shavuot*, which commemorates the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai.

On the *Shabbat* following Passover, the dates of the new month of *Iyyar* are announced. For that *Shabbat*, one custom is to prepare a *challah* in the shape of a key and sprinkle sesame seeds on it as a reminder that manna began to fall during the month of *Iyyar* in the desert.

For more information about this custom see:

<http://forward.com/food/218666/why-i-m-baking-key-shaped-challah-this-week/>

Another custom is to study the talmudic tractate *Shavuot* during the *Omer* period; the reason for this custom is that its name is identical to the word for the holiday *Shavuot* (even though it means vows instead of weeks). The tractate also has forty-nine pages, which correspond conveniently to the forty-nine days of the *Omer*.

Edward Greenstein (from *The Jewish Holidays: A Guide and Commentary*)

Flowers, plants, and bean sprouts are nice; grains are also nice, and especially appropriate when dealing with a grain-cycle ceremonial. Perhaps include some wheat grains in the sprouting for the period after Passover?

Further possibilities exist for giving substance to the otherwise abstract ceremony of numbering. For some years now, both at home and in the garden with students, I've planted winter rye during *Sukkot*. The rye generally germinates within ten days, grows a bit, then braces itself for the winter. In early spring, well before the ground can be worked, the rye resumes its growth. Depending on seasonal conditions and how early or late Passover occurs, by the time *Omer* counting begins, one can cut each night (or prior to each *Shabbat*) a good handful of rye for the numbering. As the counting continues, the rye grows steadily taller, and usually begins to head out before *Shavuot*...

Not only is the steady development of the grain exciting to watch, one can make use of the lengthening stalks, bound into sheaves, to perform the beautiful acts of 'waving' prescribed in Leviticus (23:15-16, 20).

In these ways one can achieve a renewed sense of the wondrous and life-sustaining power of the grain cycle, a central seasonal theme of the *Pesach-Shavuot* seven weeks.