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# SEFIRAT HA'OMER I

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## Making it Count

Counting the Omer is a mitzvah that connects Pesach to Shavuot, the Exodus from Egypt to the Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. This period is also a time of mourning for the deaths of the twenty-four thousand students of Rabbi Akiva.

There are two Morasha classes on the topic of Sefirat Ha'Omer. The first class will address the basics of the mitzvah of counting the Omer, the philosophy behind the mitzvah, and the reasons that this is a period of mourning. The second class will discuss the festive day of Lag B'Omer and how to use the period of Sefirah to achieve personal growth.

This class will address the following questions:

- ✧ Why do we count the Omer?
- ✧ Why do we count up from one to forty-nine rather than the reverse?
- ✧ Why do we mourn during this time?

### Class Outline:

Introduction.	The Value of Time
Section I.	The Omer Offering Part A. The Biblical Source Part B. The Message of the Omer Offering
Section II.	Counting the Omer Part A. The Biblical Sources for Counting the Omer Part B. Reasons for Counting Part C. The Counting Procedure Part E. Counting Forty-Nine Days and Seven Weeks
Section III.	Mourning Period Part A. Death of Rabbi Akiva's Students Part B. Pogroms and Massacres

## INTRODUCTION. THE VALUE OF TIME

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Perhaps the most precious gift that God has given us is the gift of time. It is the one commodity that we can never trade or exchange and that never loses its value as a result of changing economic conditions. It is a commodity whose value is potentially infinite –but ultimately depends on how we use it.

A slave's time is not his own. When the Jewish people were slaves in Egypt, their overlords were able to dictate how they used their time. The Egyptians forced them to work all hours of the day and night – never was their time their own. As slaves, they had no choice as to how they used the minutes and hours that made up their lives.

Then came the Exodus on Pesach, and in a flash, they were free. Their time was now their own. And they had a new commandment: to count the days until Shavuot, when they would receive the Torah. What was the significance of this counting? By counting each day separately, a person realizes how valuable each day is. A day that goes by without being used for meaningful accomplishments is a day that has been squandered, a day that will never come back. And every day is equally meaningful, equally filled with potential. As a person counts the days of the Omer and sees the numbers climbing higher and higher, he should come to a chilling realization: Time is passing, the hours of his life are ticking by, and he must take stock of his accomplishments and make sure that he is using each day to its fullest.

What happens when a person fails to perceive the passage of time? Rabbi Yissocher Frand quotes an “ethical will” that a doctor wrote before his passing, hoping to communicate to his children the lessons he had learned from life. Here are his words:

*“My dearest children, when I first graduated from medical school, my burning ambition was to go into medical research and discover a cure for a major disease. I felt I had the talents and the skills, and I wanted to do something great, something important that would improve the health of innumerable people and add years to their lives. I wanted to be a doctor in the fullest sense of the word. But I also wanted to be financially secure. I did not want to worry about bills and mortgage payments. I wanted to provide a comfortable standard of living for your mother. So I decided to open an office in an upscale neighborhood and practice medicine for ten or fifteen years. I would make a ton of money and retire. Then I would be free to devote the rest of my life to research.*

*“What should I say, my dear children? You know the rest of the story. My practice was extremely successful. I made a lot of money. And I kept delaying my retirement to make even more money. One year slipped by and then another and then another. Before I knew, I had spent the best years of my life amassing a large fortune. And my dream of finding a cure? I’m sorry to say that it remained just that, an unfulfilled dream. I squandered my best years. I squandered my great talents. I squandered my opportunity to achieve immortality. And for what? For a pot of gold.*

*“The worst of it is that in retrospect your mother would have stood by my decision to go into research. I told myself that I did it to give her the standard of living she deserved, but I know that she would have agreed to live more modestly, that she would have encouraged me to pursue my goals, if only I had asked her.*

*“My dear children, what can I say? The pot of gold I leave to you. It should be enough to free you from financial worry. Do not make my mistake. Do not spend your precious lives fattening that pot of gold.” (From An Offer You Can’t Refuse, ArtScroll Publications, by Rabbi Yissocher Frand)*

After many years of toil, this doctor came to the realization that he had squandered decades of his life in pursuit of material wealth. Time that could have been spent with his family or in pursuit of noble ideals had instead been funnelled into the endless pursuit of money. And that time would never return.

The mitzvah of counting the Omer should remind us that the days of our lives are passing, and we must take hold of each day and fill it with meaning – before it goes by.

## SECTION I. THE OMER OFFERING

The period of the Omer derives its name from a special sacrificial offering that was brought in the Temple. Before any newly grown grains – wheat, barley, oats, rye, and spelt – may be eaten, the equivalent of one day's worth of barley flour (for one person) must be offered in the Temple on the second day of Pesach. This offering of barley flour is known as the Omer offering. (Today, without the Temple, the new grains are permitted after the conclusion of the second day of Pesach).

### PART A. THE BIBLICAL SOURCE

#### 1. Vayikra (Leviticus) 23:9-11 – The Omer offering at the start of the new harvest.

God spoke to Moshe (Moses) saying, "Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When you come to the land that I am giving you and you reap the harvest, you shall bring the Omer of the first of your harvest to the Kohen. He shall wave the Omer before God to be an appeasement for you; on the day following the Sabbath (the first day of Pesach) the Kohen shall wave it."

וידבר יקוק אל משה לאמר דבר אל בני ישראל ואמרת  
אלהם כי תבאו אל הארץ אשר אני נתן לכם וקצרתם  
את קצירה והבאתם את עמר ראשית קצירכם אל  
הכהן: והניף את העמר לפני יקוק לרצונכם ממחרת  
השבת יניפנו הכהן:

### PART B. THE MESSAGE OF THE OMER OFFERING

The sacrificial services in the Temple are replete with meaning and significance. What lessons can we derive from the Omer offering?

#### 1. Chizkuni, Vayikra 23:10 – Showing appreciation to God for the harvest.

It would not be appropriate to eat from the new harvest without bringing a portion of it as a gift of thanks to God.

אין דרך ארץ שתאכלו מן החדש עד שתביאו ממנו  
דורון להקב"ה.

What is the propriety that the Chizkuni is referring to? A fundamental principle of the Torah is that all of our assets, income, and prosperity come from God. At the beginning of the annual harvest, as we literally begin to reap the fruits of our labors, the Torah requires us to bring a thanksgiving offering to God, to acknowledge that all the grain that our fields produced is really a gift from Him.

#### 2. Vayikra Rabbah 28:1 – The Omer shows gratitude to God for providing the crops.

Rabbi Yannai said, "The way of the world is that when a person buys some meat from the market he must expend much effort and hard work until he cooks it. Yet, while people are sleeping God makes the wind blow and brings the clouds, which cause the plants to grow and nourish the fruits, and we only pay Him the value of an Omer. This is the meaning of the verse: "You shall bring an Omer of the first of your harvest to the Kohen."

א"ר ינאי בנוהג שבעולם אדם לוקח ליטרא אחת של  
בשר מן השוק כמה יגיעות הוא יגע כמה צער הוא  
מצטער עד שבישלה והבריות ישנן על מטותיהן  
והקדוש ברוך הוא משיב רוחות ומעלה עננים ומגדל  
צמחים ומדשן את הפירות ואין נותנים לו אלא שכר  
העומר הה"ד והבאתם את עומר ראשית קצירכם אל  
הכהן:

### 3. Sifsei Chaim, Vol. III, p. 40 – The purpose of the Omer is to recognize that everything comes from God.

In order that a person should not, God forbid, think “my might and the strength of my hands” – he should not think, I plowed and planted and now I am harvesting, I am the one who produced the grain! Therefore the Torah teaches him that he did not do it with his own strength; rather, God gave him the sustenance, and everything comes from Him. How is this lesson taught? Through the fact that we give God the first and most precious portion of the grain. We thus admit that everything comes from God. When we connect the first portion [to God], the first portion reflects on all the portions, and everything becomes sanctified.

כדי שאדם ח"ו לא ירגיש "כחי ועוצם ידי" שלא יהשוב חרשתי זרעתי ועתה אני קוצר, הנה כי כן אני גידלתי את התבואה! לכן התורה מלמדת אותו לא הוא בכחו כי אם הקב"ה נותן לנו את הפרנסה וממנו בא הכל. והאיך הוא הלימוד? על ידי שנותנים הראשית לה' החלק החביב ביותר בכורי התבואה, בכך מודים שהכל הוא מאת ה'. כאשר מקשרים את הראשית בא הפרט הראשית ומוכיח על הכל, והכל מתקדש...

Since God is the Source of everything that we have, it follows that we are meant to utilize all of our possessions in His service. In fact, every detail of the Omer service symbolizes this point – that it is only through acknowledging God as the center of our existence that our lives become meaningful and fulfilling.

### 4. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Vayikra 23:10 – Our prosperity and joy of life finds direction and meaning within the context of God and Torah.

When you have attained not only freedom, but also national independence which the possession of one's own land gives, and you cut the produce of the land, bring that which the land has produced into your own personal possession, then bring the first Omer that you cut, i.e., the amount that corresponds to one day's food; to the Kohen, to your representative in God's Sanctuary ... This cutting corresponds to the real harvest of the land – wheat, barley, oats, rye, and spelt ... This Omer is brought from the barley, which is the earliest grain to ripen.

To the Omer, the law of waving is added – consisting of horizontal movements in all four directions, followed by moving upwards and downwards. By the procedure of waving, one's material nourishment (flour), one's well being (oil), and one's mental satisfaction with life (incense), which are all represented in the Omer, are stripped of every idea of selfishness. [Represented by our giving the Omer offering to the Kohen who does the waving – see Vayikra 23:10-11.] Then this symbol of our earthly existence, with all its prosperity and joy of life, is placed in the Temple to acknowledge that only through the Torah's ruling influence can we find our dedication to the community and to God.

#### KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ✎ The Torah commands us to bring a sacrificial offering of barley on the second day of Pesach. This offering, called the Omer, is meant to instill within us the awareness that God is the Source of our prosperity and everything we have.
- ✎ The procedure of bringing the Omer offering symbolizes the fact that we can only achieve meaning and fulfillment in life by dedicating our earthly endeavours to the service of God.

## SECTION II. COUNTING THE OMER

The mitzvah in the Torah is to count the days and weeks from the second day of Pesach until the evening before Shavuot, a total of forty-nine days. The days of the Omer are a time of preparation for Shavuot, which parallels the period between the Exodus from Egypt and the Giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai.

### PART A. THE BIBLICAL SOURCES FOR COUNTING THE OMER

1. **Vayikra 23-15-16 – There is a mitzvah to count each of the forty-nine days from Pesach (at which time the Jews left Egypt) until Shavuot (at which time they received the Torah at Mt. Sinai).**

You should count for yourselves from the day after Shabbat [Pesach], from the day that you brought the Omer of the waving; seven weeks, they shall be complete.

Until the day after the seventh week you shall count fifty days; and you shall bring a new flour offering for God.

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמִּחֶרֶת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר  
הַתְּנוּפָה, שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימוֹת תִּהְיֶינָה:

עַד מִמִּחֶרֶת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם;  
וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַה'.

2. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 16:9 – Apart from counting the days, there is also a mitzvah to count each of the seven weeks.**

Seven weeks shall you count for yourselves; from the time the sickle is first put to the standing grain you should begin counting seven weeks.

שָׁבָעָה שָׁבָעוֹת תִּסְפֹּר-לָךְ, מִהַחֵל חֶרְמֶשׁ בַּקֹּמֶה תֵּחַל  
לְסֹפֵר שָׁבָעָה שָׁבָעוֹת:

### PART B. REASONS FOR COUNTING

At face value, this mitzvah may seem somewhat strange. Is it not enough to know that we have entered a special period of time between Pesach and Shavuot? Why do we need to verbalize the count each day?

1. **Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #306 – Counting manifests longing and desire for the great and awesome day when we receive the Torah.**

The simple explanation is that the essence of the Jewish people is the Torah, and because of the Torah the heaven, earth and Israel were created, as the verse states, "If not for My covenant [of Torah] day and night I would not have appointed the laws of heaven and earth" (Yirmiyahu/Jeremiah 33:25). [Torah] is the foundation and the reason that we were redeemed and left Egypt – in order to receive the Torah at Sinai and to keep it ...

Since the acceptance of the Torah was the goal of

מִשְׁרָשֵׁי הַמִּצְוָה עַל צַד הַפֶּשֶׁט, לִפִּי שָׁכַל עֵיקָרָן שֶׁל  
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵינוֹ אֵלָּא הַתּוֹרָה, וּמִפְּנֵי הַתּוֹרָה נִבְרָאוּ שָׁמַיִם  
וָאָרֶץ וְיִשְׂרָאֵל, וְכֵמוֹ שֶׁכְּתוּב [יִרְמְיָהוּ ל"ג, כ"ה] אִם לֹא  
בְּרִיתִי יוֹמָם וּלְיָלָה וּגו'. וְהִיא הָעֵיקָר וְהַסִּיבָה שֶׁנִּגְאָלוּ  
וַיֵּצְאוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם כְּדִי שִׁיקְבְּלוּ הַתּוֹרָה בְּסִינֵי וּיקְייְמוּהָ...

וּמִפְּנֵי כֵן, כִּי הִיא כָּל עֵיקָרָן שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבִעֲבוּרָהּ נִגְאָלוּ

our redemption and serves as the foundation of the Jewish people, and through it we achieved our greatness, we were commanded to count from the day after [the first day of] Pesach until the day that the Torah was given. This manifests our great desire for that awesome day which our hearts yearn for just as a servant yearns for shade. We count constantly – when will the day come that we yearn for, the day that we left slavery? Because counting [towards a certain date] shows a person that all his desire and longing is to reach that time.

ועלו לכל הגדולה שעלו אליה, נצטוינו למנות ממחרת יום טוב של פסח עד יום נתינת התורה, להראות בנפשנו החפץ הגדול אל היום הנכבד הנכסף ללבנו, כעבד ישאף צל, וימנה תמיד מתי יבוא העת הנכסף אליו שיצא לחירות, כי המנין מראה לאדם כי כל ישעו וכל חפצו להגיע אל הזמן ההוא.

## 2. Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim (Guide for the Perplexed) 3:43 – To elevate and endear Shavuot.

Shavuot is the time of the Giving of the Torah. In order to honor and elevate this day we count the days from the previous festival until it [arrives], like someone who is waiting for a loved one to arrive, who counts the days by the hours. This is the reason for counting the Omer from the day that we left Egypt until the day of the Giving of the Torah, as this was the ultimate purpose of leaving Egypt: “And I will bring them to Me” (Shemot 19:4).

שבועות הוא יום מתן תורה. ולהגדיל היו ההוא נמנו הימים מן המועד הראשון אליו, כמי שממתין בו הנאמן שבאוהביו ושהוא מונה היום וגם השעות, וזאת היא סיבת ספירת העומר מיום צאתנו ממצרים עד יום מתן תורה, שהוא היה הכוונה והתכלית ביציאתם באמרו ואביא אתכם אלי (שמות י"ט:ד).

Thus, the mitzvah of counting the days of the Omer highlights the significance of the festival of Shavuot and the Torah that we received on that day. Counting toward it both demonstrates and reminds us of its importance to us and our love for it. But there is a noteworthy peculiarity about this. Usually, when people count toward an important event, they count *down*. Why do we count *up*, beginning with day one and ending on day forty-nine? Additionally, why do we begin counting on the *second* day of Pesach, rather than the first?

## 3. Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #306 – Since we desire the arrival of Shavuot we do not want to mention the large number of days that remain. We count from the day after Pesach, so as not to detract from the celebration of the Exodus.

The reason that we count from the [bringing of the] Omer “So many days have passed in our counting,” rather than counting how many days remain, shows our great desire to reach the time [of Shavuot]. Therefore, we do not want to mention at the beginning of our counting such a large number of days that remain until we reach the offering of the Two Loaves on *Atzeret* (Shavuot). We should not find it difficult [to understand] that once we have passed halfway through the seven weeks we do not count down the few days remaining, as one should not change the nature of the counting in the middle.

וזהו שאנו מונין לעומר, כלומר כך וכך ימים עברו מן המנין, ואין אנו מונין כך וכך ימים יש לנו לזמן, כי כל זה מראה בנו הרצון החזק להגיע אל הזמן, ועל כן לא נרצה להזכיר בתחילת חשבוננו ריבוי הימים שיש לנו להגיע לקרבן שתי הלחם של עצרת. ואל יקשה עליך לומר, אם כן, אחר שעברו רוב הימים של שבועה שבועות אלו, למה לא נזכיר מיעוט הימים הנשארים, לפי שאין לשנות מטבע החשבון באמצעו.



Why do we begin counting from the day after [Pesach] and not from the first day? The answer is that the first day is entirely dedicated to remembering the great miracle of the Exodus from Egypt, which is a sign and evidence of [the fact that God] created the world, and of the existence of Divine Providence. We may not mix [something else into] that happiness and mention a different idea with it. As such, the counting begins from the second day.

ואם תשאל, אם כן למה אנו מתחילים אותו ממחרת השבת ולא מיום ראשון, התשובה כי היום הראשון נתייחד כולו להזכרת הנס הגדול והוא יציאת מצרים, שהוא אות ומופת בחידוש העולם ובהשגחת השם על בני האדם, ואין לנו לערב בשמחתו ולהזכיר עמו שום ענין אחר, ועל כן נתקן החשבון מיום שני מיד.

According to this explanation, counting *up* rather than *down* is a greater expression of our emotional connection to Shavuot. This is in keeping with the general theme of the counting of the Omer – that the mere act of counting toward Shavuot highlights the significance of the day. But there is another, deeper explanation for this phenomenon, which touches on a very significant aspect of the mitzvah of Sefirat HaOmer.

4. **Rabbi Shimshon Pincus, Nefesh Shimshon: Pesach, Sefirat HaOmer and Shavuot, p. 176 – We would count down if the days of the Omer were merely days that intervened between us and Shavuot; but since they are days of preparation for Shavuot, we count up to demonstrate that each day represents an accomplishment.**

When a person counts the days toward a certain day, the intervening days have no significance. For instance, a person who is expecting to receive a large gift at the end of fifty days views the days of waiting as “fifty days that are interfering with my receipt of the gift,” and when a day passes, only forty-nine days remain that separate him from the gift. But we relate to the days of Sefirat HaOmer differently. These days are days of spiritual building, and when a person builds a ten-story building, he counts each story: I have built one story, a second story, etc. He doesn't say: “I have nine stories left to build.” Similarly on the days of Sefirat HaOmer, we are building and preparing ourselves for Matan Torah. God would be prepared to give us the Torah right away, but we are simply not ready yet. Therefore, we count the days of preparation, and count the spiritual “stories” that prepare us for Matan Torah.

כאשר אדם סופר את הימים לקראת יום מסוים, הרי לימים שחולפים בינתיים אין משמעות. לדוגמא: אדם שאמור לקבל מתנה גדולה בעוד חמשים יום הריהו מתייחס למשך הציפייה למתנה כ”חמשים יום שמפריעים לי לקבל את המתנה”, וכאשר חולף יום נשארו רק ארבעים ותשע יום החוצצים בינו למתנה. אך לימי ספירת העומר אנו מתייחסים באופן אחר. ימים אלו הם ימים של בניה רוחנית, וכאשר אדם בונה בנין בעל עשר קומות הרי הוא סופר כל קומה: בניתי כבר קומה אחת, קומה שניה, וכו', הוא לא אומר “נותר לי תשע קומות לבנות”. כך בימי ספירת העומר אנו בונים ומכינים את עצמנו למתן תורה, הקב”ה מצדו מוכן לתת לנו את התורה מיד, אך אנחנו פשוט לא מוכנים עדיין. ולכן אנו סופרים את ימי ההכנה ומונים את הקומות הרוחניות המכשירות אותנו לקראת מתן תורה.

The significance of the Omer period as a time of spiritual accomplishment is closely related to the sacrificial offerings which mark its beginning and conclusion.

5. **Rabbi Aryeh Carmel, Masterplan, Feldheim, p. 205 – The forty-nine-day count is a seven-step process from physical freedom (which we share with animals) to a spiritual purpose and destiny (which is a uniquely human aspiration).**

The Omer on Pesach was from the barley harvest. The offering on Shavuot was of wheat. Barley is

mainly food for animals. Wheat is food for human beings. The Torah hints to us that physical independence by itself still leaves man – from the Torah perspective – on the animal level. The counting of the forty-nine days signifies a sevenfold refining process and marks our progress to full human status with our acceptance of the Torah at Sinai, seven weeks after the Exodus.

## PART C. THE COUNTING PROCEDURE

The particulars of the mitzvah are clearly summarized by the Rambam (Maimonides).

### 1. **Rambam, Hilchot T'midin U'musafin (The Laws of Continual and Additional Offerings) 7:22-25 – Laws of counting the Omer.**

It is a positive mitzvah to count seven complete weeks from the day of the bringing of the Omer, as the verse states, "You shall count for yourselves from the day following the Sabbath" (Vayikra 23:15). It is a mitzvah to count the days with the weeks, as the verse states, "Count fifty days" (Vayikra 23:16). One should count at the earliest time: therefore, one should count at night, from the night of the sixteenth of Nissan.

If a person forgot to count at night he may count during the day. Counting should be done while standing, but if one counted while sitting he has fulfilled his obligation. This mitzvah applies to all Jewish men in every place and at all times. Women and non-Jewish slaves are exempt from counting the Omer. Each night before counting one should say the blessing, "Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us regarding the counting of the Omer." If one counted without a blessing he has fulfilled his obligation and should not go back and make the blessing.

מצות עשה לספור שבע שבטות תמימות, מיום הבאת העומר-- שנאמר "וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת" (ויקרא כג, טו); ומצוה למנות הימים, עם השבועות-- שנאמר "תספרו חמישים יום" (ויקרא כג, טז). ומתחילת היום מונין; לפיכך מונה בלילה, מליל ששה עשר בניסן.

שכח ולא מנה בלילה, מונה ביום. ואין מונין אלא מעומד; ואם מנה מיושב, יצא. מצוה זו על כל איש מישראל, ובכל מקום ובכל זמן; ונשים ועבדים, פטורין מספירת העומר. וצריך לברך בכל לילה אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וציונו על ספירת העומר – קודם שיספור; מנה ולא בירך – יצא, ואינו חוזר ומברך.

Additional laws are as follows:

### 2. **Mishnah Berurah 489:5 – A person may count the Omer in any language, but he must understand the language he uses.**

The later authorities wrote that the counting may be done in any language, provided that the person understands that language. If he does not understand it, then even if he counted in Hebrew he has not fulfilled his obligation. Since he did not know what he was saying, it is not considered counting.

כתבו האחרונים דספירה מותר בכל לשון ובלבד שיבין אותו הלשון ואם אינו מבין אפילו סיפר בלשון הקודש אינו יוצא דכיון דלא ידע מאי קאמר אין זה ספירה.



3. **Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 489:7-8 – One who forgot to count at night should count during the day without a blessing. One who skipped an entire day may no longer say the blessing, but he should continue to count.**

If a person forgot and did not count at night, he may count during the day without reciting the blessing. If he forgot to count on any of the days, whether the first day or any of the other days, he should continue counting on all subsequent days without reciting a blessing. However, if he is uncertain whether he skipped a day, he should count the rest of the days with a blessing.

שכח ולא בירך כל הלילה יספור ביום בלא ברכה. אם שכח לברך באחד מהימים בין יום ראשון בין משאר ימים סופר בשאר ימים בלא ברכה אבל אם הוא מסופק אם דילג יום אחד ולא ספר יספור בשאר ימים בברכה.

The Rambam mentioned that one should count the Omer while standing. What is the source of this law?

4. **Meah Shearim, Laws of Chodosh and Counting the Omer, p. 105 – The verse that commands the counting hints that it should be done standing.**

We have learned from our Rabbis that there is a hint in the Torah that the Omer must be counted while standing. It says, “From the [time the sickle is] first put to the standing wheat you should begin counting” – this [word “standing”] teaches us that one should count while standing.

קבלנו מרבותינו דאסמכתא דספירת העומר בעמידה, מדכתיב 'מהחל חרמש בקמה' תחל לספור, ללמוד שבקימה ובעמידה תספור.

Although one should stand in order to count the Omer, a person who counts while sitting has still fulfilled his obligation.

5. **Mishnah Berurah, 489:6 – The fulfillment of the mitzvah is not dependent on whether one stands.**

A person should stand from the time when he begins the blessing. After the fact, even if he counted while sitting, he has still fulfilled his obligation.

וצריך לעמוד משעה שמתחיל הברכה. ובדיעבד אפילו אם סיפר מיושב יצא.

## PART E. COUNTING FORTY-NINE DAYS AND SEVEN WEEKS

The verses of the Torah may be somewhat confusing regarding the exact parameters of this mitzvah. Are we supposed to count forty-nine days, as the verse in Vayikra indicates, or seven weeks, as the verse in Devarim implies? The Talmud explains that we are required to do both.

1. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Chagigah 17b – Counting days and weeks.**

Abaye said that it is a mitzvah to count the days, as the verse says, “Count fifty days” (Vayikra 23); and it is also a mitzvah to count the weeks, as the verse says, “Seven weeks you shall count for yourselves” (Devarim 16). Furthermore, [at the end of the Omer period] the festival is called “Weeks” (Shavuot).

והאמר אביי מצוה למימני יומי דכתיב (ויקרא כג) תספרו חמשים יום ומצוה למימני שבועי דכתיב (דברים טז) שבועה שבועות תספר לך ועוד חג שבועות כתיב.

Exactly how does one verbalize the count of days and weeks?

2. **Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 489:1 – The correct format of the count includes both the number of the day itself and (beginning on the seventh day) the number of weeks.**

On the first day, one should say: "Today is one day of the Omer," until one reaches seven days. Then one says "Today is seven days, which are one week of the Omer," and on the eighth day, one should say "Today is eight days, which are one week and one day of the Omer," and so on, until one reaches fourteen, when one should say, "Today is fourteen days, which are two weeks of the Omer." One should continue to count in this manner until he reaches forty-nine days.

ביום הראשון אומר היום יום אחד בעומר עד שמוגיע  
לז' ימים ואז יאמר היום שבעה ימים שהם שבוע אחד  
בעומר וביום ח' יאמר היום שמונה ימים שהם שבוע  
אחד ויום אחד בעומר וכן עד שיגיע לארבעה עשר  
יאמר היום ארבעה עשר ימים שהם שני שבועות  
בעומר ועל דרך זה מונה והולך עד מ"ט יום.

The obvious question, however, is: Why should we count both days and weeks? What is the significance of this duality? The answer to that question will help us understand the significance of the specific number of days (forty-nine) and weeks (seven) of the Omer. As we know, nothing in the Torah is random.

3. **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Vayikra 23:16 – Significance of counting both the days and the weeks: Counting the days reflects the process by which a person achieves physical purity; counting the weeks is to remind us of the Shabbat, which testifies that the world belongs to the Creator.**

Counting of days is also found in connection with the *zav* and *zavah* (someone who experienced a bodily discharge which causes impurity). In general, the passing of a period of seven days in the laws of *tumah* and *taharah* (impurity and purity) are given for striving to leave the condition of *tumah* and bringing it to a close, to enter a period of *taharah* on the eighth day. A sevenfold counting of periods of seven days, a counting of forty-nine days, to enter a new condition on the fiftieth day would be the most complete nullification of the *tumah* restraint of being bound by one's senses, and the fiftieth day would bring the most positive entry into the *taharah*-realm of moral freedom. Just as the fiftieth Jubilee year brought a fresh foundation of the Jewish State ... so too the Omer denotes inner moral freedom ... necessary for the reception of the Torah.

In accordance with this, the fiftieth day, i.e. the day after the seven times seven days, has a very similar meaning as the eighth day of *milah* (circumcision). To this we can combine the idea of counting the Sabbath weeks and the counting of the days together, then they appear simply as an emanation from those two institutions – the Sabbath and *milah* – with which God wished to lay the foundation for Israel to be the People of His Law.

Paying homage to God in nature and history and the resulting subordination of man and his position in the world to the service of God, as is taught by the Sabbath, and struggling for moral purity by subordinating one's free will ... as *milah* demands, were established even before we received the Torah. And it is just these factors which the counting of the days and the weeks from the Omer to the Day of Receiving the Torah is to bring home to our minds, each year afresh, as the preliminary fundamental conditions for our great mission in the world.

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ☞ During the forty-nine-day period between Pesach and Shavuot, we are commanded to verbally count both the days and the weeks that elapse. The act of counting expresses our longing for Shavuot, when we receive the Torah, and the importance of it to us.

- ☞ The days of Sefirah represent a period of personal growth. Counting each day demonstrates that each day's accomplishment is like another brick being added to a structure. In this case, that structure represents our own characters, which we must prepare and “build” in preparation for receiving the Torah.
- ☞ The number seven itself represents a process of purification. Seven weeks (i.e., seven times seven days) represents the ultimate process of purification. That defines the process of the Sefirah.

## SECTION III. MOURNING PERIOD

The days between Pesach and Lag B'Omer (the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the Omer) are marked by reduced joy (such as not celebrating weddings or playing and listening to live music) because of the tragedies that befell the Jewish people during this period. Some extend this period until Shavuot (which is the 50<sup>th</sup> day of the Omer). What were these tragedies and how do we respond to them today?

### PART A. DEATH OF RABBI AKIVA'S STUDENTS

#### 1. Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 62b – Rabbi Akiva's students died between Pesach and Atzeret (Shavuot) for showing disrespect to one another.

Rabbi Akiva says, “If you have learned Torah in your youth you must [continue to] learn Torah in your old age. If you have had students in your youth you must [continue to] have students in your old age,” as the verse says, “In the morning plant your seeds and in the evening do not let your hand rest.” They said that Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students from Givat to Antiprat and they all died during one period of time because they did not treat each other with respect. The world was desolate until Rabbi Akiva came to the Rabbis of the South and taught them. [They were] Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Yossi, Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua. It was they who re-established Torah at that time.

It was taught that twenty-four thousand students all died between Pesach and Atzeret. Rav Chama bar Abba, or perhaps it was Rabbi Chiya bar Avin, said that they all died a terrible death. What type of death does this refer to? Rabbi Nachman said *askara* (death by choking).

ר"ע אומר למד תורה בילדותו ילמוד תורה בזקנותו  
היו לו תלמידים בילדותו יהיו לו תלמידים בזקנותו  
שנא' בבקר זרע את זרעך וגו' אמרו שנים עשר אלף  
זוגים תלמידים היו לו לרבי עקיבא מגבת עד אנטיפרס  
וכולן מתו בפרק אחד מפני שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה  
והיה העולם שמם עד שבא ר"ע אצל רבותינו שבדרום  
ושנאה להם ר"מ ור' יהודה ור' יוסי ורבי שמעון ורבי  
אלעזר בן שמוע והם הם העמידו תורה אותה שעה.

תנא כולם מתו מפסח ועד עצרת אמר רב חמא בר  
אבא ואיתימא ר' חייא בר אבין כולם מתו מיתה רעה  
מאי היא א"ר נחמן אסכרה.

#### 2. Bereishit (Genesis) Rabbah 61:3 – Rabbi Akiva reminded his new students not to repeat the mistakes of the past: treat each person with love and respect!

Rabbi Akiva said to his new students, “My

אמר רבי עקיבא [לתלמידיו החדשים]: “בניי,

sons, the first ones only died because they did not look generously toward one another. Pay attention that you do not act like them.”

לא מתו אלא שהיתה עיניהם צרה אלו לאלו, תנו דעתכם שלא תעשו כמעשיהם.”

The Talmud thus reveals to us that the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's students were a Divinely ordained consequence of their failure to treat each other with the proper respect. It should be emphasized that these 24,000 individuals were all great Torah luminaries in their own right. The plague that took their lives wiped out the entire spiritual leadership of the Jewish people; it was a disaster of immense proportions. Why was such a severe sentence meted out to them?

3. **Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Mishnas Rabbi Aharon, Vol. III, p. 17 – The students' lack of mutual respect prevented them from being the true transmitters of the Oral Torah, which emphasizes the intrinsic, infinite potential of the human soul.**

To explain [why Rabbi Akiva's students died for a seemingly trivial sin] perhaps we can say that Rabbi Akiva was the foundation of the redaction of the Oral Law, and his students were the ones who would pass on the Oral Law to future generations. Therefore, they had to embody the perfection of all the forty-eight traits through which Torah is acquired (see the second Morasha class on Sefirat HaOmer, Section II. B). For if they would lack [even one of these traits] they would be lacking in the essence of the acquisition of the Torah, and they would not be able to transmit it in purity and holiness.

Therefore, apart from the fact that God is strict with the righteous to within a hair's breadth, there was also this idea, that since they were lacking in the quality of “Being close with one's fellow students” [which is one of the forty-eight traits], their Torah would be fundamentally flawed. Therefore, they were not worthy of passing on the Oral Law to future generations.

Furthermore, their Torah [learning] was deficient because it was not completely pure, and the Oral Law had to be passed on as a complete Torah in every way. Therefore, they did not merit having the Torah passed on through them, but it was [instead] the Rabbis from the South who merited this. Since the life of the Sages is Torah, as Rambam writes (Hilchot Rotzeach 7:1), they were lacking in the essence of their existence, and that allowed for what happened.

ובביאור הדבר נראה בדרך אפשר, דהרי רבי עקיבא היה היסוד לתושבע"פ, ותלמידיו הם הם שעל ידם היתה המסירה דתושבע"פ לדורות, וממילא צריכים להיות אצלם בתכלית השלימות כל המ"ח דברים שהתורה נקנית בהם, דכחסר זה הנה חסר בעצם קניית התורה, כי אינו מקבלה בכל טהרתה וקדושתה.

ולכך מלבד הדקדוק עם צדיקים כחוט השערה היה בזה הענין, דכין דחסר להם בדיבוק חברים [שהוא א' מהמ"ח דברים], אין תורתם בתכלית הראוי, וממילא לא היו ראויים להיות המוסרים דתושבע"פ לדורות.

וגם דהיה חסר בעצם התורה, דלא היתה במלא טהרתה, ומסירת התושבע"פ לדורות היתה צריכה להיות תורה שלימה בכל עניניה ולכן לא זכו שתימסר תורה על ידם, וזכו בכך דוקא רבותינו שבדרום. וכיון שחיי החכמים תורה כמ"ש הר"מ (הל' רוצח פ"ז ה"א), הרי נחסר מהם ע"ז בעיקר מציאותם, והיה מה שהיה.

Due to the great tragedy of the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's students, certain practices of mourning were instituted for the period of the Omer. There are varying customs regarding when these practices should be observed.

Some observe them from the beginning of the Omer until the 33<sup>rd</sup> day (Lag B'Omer), others observe them from the beginning of the month of Iyar until the end of the Omer, and others observe the mourning practices throughout the Omer period.

4. **Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 593:1-2 – Weddings and haircuts are prohibited during the Omer period.**

It is customary not to get married between Pesach and Shavuot because the students of Rabbi Akiva died during that time period, but it is permissible to get engaged. . . .

It is customary not to shave or take a haircut until Lag B'Omer, when they say that the students stopped dying . . .

נוהגים שלא לישא אשה בין פסח לעצרת עד ל"ג בעומר מפני שבאותו זמן מתו תלמידי רבי עקיבא אבל לארס ולקדש שפיר דמי. . .

נוהגים שלא להסתפר עד ל"ג בעומר שאומרים שאז פסקו מלמות. . .

5. **Mishnah Berurah 493:3 – Engagements and engagement parties are held.**

It is permissible to get engaged and make an engagement party. . .

מותר לעשות שידוכין ולעשות סעודה. . .

6. **Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim, Vol. I, Ch. 166 – One should not listen to musical instruments being played during this period.**

During the days of Sefirah, instrumental music is prohibited.

ובימי הספירה יש לאסור בזמרא דמנא.

## PART B. POGROMS AND MASSACRES

The deaths of Rabbi Akiva's students were not the only tragedies that took place during the time of the Omer. Centuries later, other misfortunes befell the Jewish people during this time.

1. **Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, Aruch HaShulchan 493:1 – During the Crusades there were massacres during this time of year.**

The days which are between Pesach and Atzeret have been considered for the past several hundred years by Israel as days of judgement and mourning, as within this short span of time twelve thousand pairs of students of Rabbi Akiva died, as the Talmud explains (Yevamot 62b), and they all died of *askara*.

Furthermore, we see that the worst days of the decrees in the hundreds of years of [Jewish life] in France and Germany occurred during this time, as explained in the liturgical poems that the earlier Rabbis made for these days between Pesach and Atzeret. They are full of mourning, lamentation and woe.

אלו הימים שבין פסח לעצרת, מוחזק אצל כל ישראל זה שנות מאות רבות לימי דין וימי אבל, מפני שבזמן הקצר הזה מתו שנים עשר אלף זוגות תלמידי חכמים תלמידי רבי עקיבא, כדאיתא ביבמות (סב ב) וכולם מתו במיתת אסכרא.

ועוד: ראינו שעיקרי ימי הגזירות בשנות מאות שעברו בצרפת ואשכנז הוו בימים אלו, כמבואר מהפיוטים שעשו קדמונינו על שבתות אלו שבין פסח לעצרת. והם מלאים קינים והגה ונהי.

To help account for the loss of Rabbi Akiva's students, there is a collective responsibility for each individual to improve both his character and Torah study during the Sefirah period, as discussed in the second Morasha shiur on Sefirat Ha'Omer.

### KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ✧ During the days of the Omer, a terrible tragedy befell the Jewish people when Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students died from a devastating epidemic. In just a matter of weeks, the entire spiritual leadership of the Jewish people was wiped out. To commemorate this tragedy, we observe certain mourning practices during this time.
- ✧ Other tragic incidents have occurred throughout history during the Sefirah, notably a large number of massacres during the period of the Crusades.

## CLASS SUMMARY:

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### WHY DO WE COUNT THE OMER?

There is a commandment in the Torah that requires us to verbally count the forty-nine days leading from Pesach to Shavuot. The commentators explain that the reason for this commandment is to highlight the importance of Shavuot and express our yearning for the day on which we will receive the Torah.

### WHY DO WE COUNT UP FROM ONE TO FORTY-NINE RATHER THAN THE REVERSE?

The Sefer HaChinuch explains that we would feel discouraged by counting down, since that would make us realize how long a time still remains until Shavuot. Consequently, we begin with the number one. Counting up rather than down also alludes to the fact that the counting of the Omer represents a process of spiritual growth, in which each day is an accomplishment that can be added to our preparation for Shavuot.

### WHY DO WE MOURN DURING THIS TIME?

During the Omer period, twenty-four thousand students of Rabbi Akiva died from a devastating epidemic. This tragedy dealt a terrible blow to the Jewish people, who saw their entire spiritual leadership wiped out all at once. To commemorate this tragedy, we mourn during this time.

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