

# Sefira 101

By: R' Yochanan Schnall

## ❖ Sefiras Ha'omer - Counting the Omer

There is a Torah commandment to count forty-nine days from after the first day of Pesach until Shavuot (Vayikra 23:15-16). This commandment is called "Sefiras Ha'omer" or "The Counting of the Omer". According to many authorities since the Torah obligation applies only when there is a Beis Hamikdash, our obligation today is Rabbinic.<sup>1</sup>

- The primary time to count Sefiras Haomer is at night.<sup>2</sup>
- The specific texts relating to the Count can be found in a siddur after the maariv prayers. In addition, one will need to know each night what number of the count it is. That information can be found in many Jewish calendars.
  - Note: The siddur contains many optional texts that pertain to the Count. The only two required items are:
    - The blessing (when applicable- see below: **Mishaps**).
    - The day-specific sentence: "*Hayom ... ba'omer / Today is ... days, in the Omer*".
- Before the blessing is recited, one should know what number of the count it is.<sup>3</sup>
- While counting sefira, all who are physically-able must stand without leaning on anything.<sup>4</sup>

### Who is Obligated

- Men and boys over bar mitzvah are obligated to count. Women may count if they wish but they are not obligated to do so.<sup>5</sup>
- Once boys are old enough to understand the mitzvah's concept, their fathers are obligated to train them in its performance.<sup>6</sup>

### When to Count

- The earliest appropriate time to count begins fifty minutes after sunset.<sup>7</sup>
- The earliest technical time to count begins immediately after sunset.<sup>8</sup>
  - One who may forget to count at the appropriate time but wants to perform the mitzvah in an ideal manner should follow the procedure described in endnote 9.
- To ensure that the mitzvah is not forgotten or delayed, once the appropriate time to count sefira has arrived, a significant, absorbing activity may not be started until after counting.<sup>10</sup> Examples of this are studying, eating a meal or beginning a project.
  - One who always attends the same minyan for maariv may begin a significant activity and rely on counting with the minyan.<sup>11</sup>

### Mishaps

- One who neglected to count at night can still count through the next day until sunset.
  - The blessing is not recited when counting during the daytime.<sup>12</sup>
- If one definitely missed an entire night / day, the duration of the Omer continues as usual but the blessing is no longer recited.<sup>13</sup>
- If one possibly missed an entire night / day, the duration of the Omer continues as usual.<sup>14</sup>

- If the wrong number was mentioned, it must be corrected:
  - If the correction is within two seconds, a new blessing is not necessary.<sup>15</sup>
  - If it is after two seconds but still during the nighttime, a new blessing is recited.<sup>16</sup>
  - If the mistake was only realized after the entire night /day has passed, the duration of the Omer continues as usual but the blessing is no longer recited.<sup>17</sup>
  - If one is unsure if a previous night/ day was counted correctly, the duration of the Omer continues as usual.<sup>18</sup>

### **“Yesterday was...”**

A famous rule about counting Sefira is how to respond when asked which day it is. Since casually counting the Omer - even in another language – could fulfill the obligation, responding that “today is ...” could be a problem. Therefore, the common response to such a question is: “yesterday was ...” leaving it to the inquirer to figure out today’s number.<sup>19</sup>

In a practical sense, this concern is limited since:

- Counting the Omer is only valid when the counting begins with the phrase “Today is...”. Therefore, if one answers with just a number it is not a problem.<sup>20</sup>
- From the seventh day and on, the amount of weeks are mentioned when counting. If they were omitted in the response this is clear intent not to fulfill the mitzvah and it would not be a problem.<sup>21</sup>
- Regardless of how the response is worded, there is no issue if the responder has specific intent not to fulfill the mitzvah.<sup>22</sup>  
(This is a good option if the inquirer may be confused from a response of yesterday’s count.)
- \* Note: Even if one did respond in a manner that would be considered a valid counting of the Omer, it is still necessary to count again in the normal fashion without a blessing.<sup>23</sup>

## **❖ The Mourning of Sefiras Ha’omer**

A period of thirty-three days of mourning concurs with counting the Omer. It commemorates the untimely passing of 24,000 students of the great sage Rabbi Akiva<sup>24</sup> who would have been an important link in the transmission of the Torah and so the pain of their passing is especially sharp.

There are various customs concerning which specific thirty-three days are observed. These are detailed at the end of this pamphlet.

Following are some rules that pertain to the mourning period.

### **Nuptials**

Marriages are not performed during this time<sup>25</sup>.

- Engagements are permitted<sup>26</sup> and they may be celebrated with a small meal<sup>27</sup>.

### **Music**

Playing musical instruments and listening to music for recreation, is avoided<sup>28</sup>.

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- It is however, permitted to hear music not intended for recreation. Therefore:
  - Playing music as a source of income is permitted.<sup>29</sup>
  - Passively hearing music that is being played for children or someone with a different Sefira schedule is permitted.
  - Passively hearing music while standing-by on the telephone or shopping in a store is permitted<sup>30</sup>
- It is a matter of dispute whether “A Cappella” style music has the same status as regular music. One should consult his or her rabbi regarding its status.

## New Purchases

It is permitted to buy and wear new clothing unless one has a specific custom not to<sup>31</sup>.

- Significant, joyous acquisitions that would require the Shehechyanu blessing should not be planned for this period but they are permitted if the need arises<sup>32</sup>.

## Grooming

- Cutting nails is permitted<sup>33</sup>.
- Taking a haircut and shaving are usually not allowed during Sefira<sup>34</sup>.
- The following examples are exceptions to this rule.
  - It is permissible to shave in order to avoid a significant financial loss (such as losing a job).<sup>35</sup>
  - A mustache that interferes with eating may be trimmed.<sup>36</sup>
  - Women may pluck eyebrows, shave body hair and trim excess hair around their temples for tznius purposes. In addition, they may cut their hair in any extenuating circumstance.<sup>37</sup>
  - Technically, children may receive a haircut during this time but it is appropriate to refrain from doing so<sup>38</sup>.
  - If a bris occurs during Sefira, the father, mohel and sandek may cut their hair and shave<sup>39</sup>.
    - One who is mourning during the entire Sefira-count (see the chart below,) may not employ this leniency<sup>40</sup>.
  - A boy may take a haircut in honor of his bar mitzvah but it is preferable that he does so before he turns thirteen<sup>41</sup>.
  - This year, Lag B’omer (see below) falls on Sunday. Since it is insulting Shabbos to take a haircut on Sunday, it is permitted to take a haircut and shave on the previous Friday (April 26<sup>th</sup>) in honor of Shabbos<sup>42</sup>.

## Lag B’omer

Lag B’omer is the the thirty-third day of the omer. (The number 33 in Hebrew is “Lag”.) According to most customs, music and haircuts are permitted on Lag B’omer.<sup>43</sup> One explanation for its distinctiveness is that on that day the students stopped dying<sup>44</sup>.

Lag B’omer is also the anniversary of the sage Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai who authored the Zohar- a seminal work of Kabbalah<sup>45</sup>. In his tribute, many chasidic and sefaradic communities celebrate with bonfires.

- The predominant custom does not permit music and haircuts on Lag B’omer evening but rather Lag B’omer day - after sunrise<sup>46</sup>.

**When does the mourning apply?**

Three common customs for the days of mourning are charted below. (The shaded areas are the observed days of mourning.)

- One may adopt any of the three customs<sup>47</sup> and it is even permitted to switch customs from one year to the next.<sup>48</sup>
- Despite the fact that some of the traditions include Pesach as part of the mourning period, common custom permits listening to music during Chol Hamoed.<sup>49</sup>
- A wedding that occurs during the days when some groups are mourning and others are not, may be attended by all.<sup>50</sup> Regarding whether a guest who is mourning may take a haircut and shave in honor of the occasion, a rabbi should be consulted<sup>51</sup>.

**1. The first thirty-three days of the Omer<sup>52</sup>**

- Lag B'omer (day 33) becomes permitted after sunrise<sup>53</sup>.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	Shavuos										

**2. Mourning begins a day before the month of Iyar and concludes three days before Shavuos<sup>54</sup>**

- Lag B'omer (day 33) is only permitted after sunrise<sup>55</sup>.
- The 47<sup>th</sup> day also only becomes permitted after sunrise<sup>56</sup>.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	Shavuos										

**3. Almost the entire Sefira count<sup>57</sup>**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	Shavuos										

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- <sup>1</sup> See Biur Halacha 489 "Lispor"
- <sup>2</sup> Rambam T'midim U'Musaffim 7:22
- <sup>3</sup> Mishna Berura 489:29
- <sup>4</sup> Shulchan Aruch 489:1, Mishna Berura 489:6
- <sup>5</sup> Mishna Berura 489:3
- <sup>6</sup> Chayei Adam 66:1,2
- <sup>7</sup> Shulchan Aruch 489:2, see Iggros Moshe Orach Chayim Volume 3 #62 (page 94)
- <sup>8</sup> Mishna Berura 489:15
- <sup>9</sup> Count after sunset (after the synagogue's mincha/ ma'ariv) without a blessing and then count again at the appropriate time with a blessing. When counting at the earlier time stipulate that it should only be a fulfillment of the obligation if the later count is forgotten. Mishna Berura 489:16
- <sup>10</sup> Rema 489:3, Mishna Berura ad loc.
- <sup>11</sup> Iggros Moshe Orach Chayim volume 4 #99
- <sup>12</sup> Shulchan Aruch 489:7
- <sup>13</sup> Shulchan Aruch 489:8
- <sup>14</sup> Shulchan Aruch 489:8
- <sup>15</sup> Mishna Berura 489:32
- <sup>16</sup> Mishna Berura 489:32
- <sup>17</sup> Shulchan Aruch 489:8
- <sup>18</sup> Shulchan Aruch 489:8
- <sup>19</sup> Shulchan Aruch 489:4
- <sup>20</sup> Mishna Berura 489:20
- <sup>21</sup> Mishna Berura 489:22; Sha'ar Hatziyun 489:20
- <sup>22</sup> Mishna Berura 489:22
- <sup>23</sup> Biur Halacha 489 "Aino"
- <sup>24</sup> Yevamos 62B
- <sup>25</sup> Shulchan Aruch 493:1
- <sup>26</sup> Shulchan Aruch 493:1
- <sup>27</sup> Mishna Berura 493:3
- <sup>28</sup> See Mishna Berura 493:3; Iggros Moshe Orach Chayim III #87
- <sup>29</sup> Iggros Moshe Orach Chayim III #87
- <sup>30</sup> Shiurei Halacha from Rabbi Shmuel Felder
- <sup>31</sup> Shiurei Halacha from Rabbi Shmuel Felder
- <sup>32</sup> Mishna Berura 493:2
- <sup>33</sup> **Kaf Hachayim 493:16**
- <sup>34</sup> Shulchan Aruch 493:2; Kaf Hachayim 493:13
- <sup>35</sup> Iggros Moshe IV #102
- <sup>36</sup> See Shulchan Aruch 551:13, Mishna Berura 551:80 (The laws of sefira are not more strict than those of the Three Weeks)
- <sup>37</sup> Shiurei Halacha from Rabbi Shmuel Felder, Halachos of Pesach XXIX A 12
- <sup>38</sup> Shiurei Halacha from Rabbi Shmuel Felder
- <sup>39</sup> Rema 493:2, Mishna Berura 493:12
- <sup>40</sup> Sha'arei Teshuvah 493:4
- <sup>41</sup> Shiurei Halacha from Rabbi Shmuel Felder
- <sup>42</sup> Rema 493:2
- <sup>43</sup> Rema 493:2
- <sup>44</sup> Mishna Berura 493:8; Oruch Hashulchan 493:5
- <sup>45</sup> Chayei Adam 131:11
- <sup>46</sup> Rema 493:2; Mishna Berura 493:10,15; see also Mishna Berura 493:11 and Shiurei Halacha of Rabbi Shmuel Felder
- <sup>47</sup> Mishna Berura 493:17
- <sup>48</sup> Iggros Moshe Orach Chayim I #159
- <sup>49</sup> See Shiurei Halacha from Rabbi Shmuel Felder
- <sup>50</sup> Iggros Moshe Orach Chayim II #95
- <sup>51</sup> Iggros Moshe Orach Chayim II #95
- <sup>52</sup> Rema 493:2
- <sup>53</sup> Mishna Berura 493:10
- <sup>54</sup> Rema 493:3
- <sup>55</sup> Mishna Berura 493:15
- <sup>56</sup> Mishna Berura 493:15
- <sup>57</sup> Sha'arei Teshuvah 493:4