

Counting the Omer – Restraint and Joy: the Jewish Way

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Counting the Omer is one of the stranger activities in Jewish tradition.

It is a Biblical Mitzvah, and our Sages – following bitter arguments – determined that it begins on the day following the first chag of Pesach. It then continues for 49 days. In Judaism a new day begins in the evening. Therefore the counting takes place at the end of the Maariv service. On the 50th evening we celebrate the Shavu'ot holiday.

"And you shall count unto you from the morrow after the day of rest, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the waving, seven complete weeks. Unto the morrow after the seventh week shall you number fifty days; and you shall present a new meal-offering unto the LORD." (Vayikra 23:15-16)

On the first day of Pesach it was customary to bring the first of the barley harvest as a sacrifice to the altar. "Omer" is a measure – the amount of barley necessary for this purpose. Only after bringing the sacrifice, it was permissible to eat from the new barley, but not from the wheat. Barley was apparently animal fodder, whereas wheat was for human consumption. The wheat ripens a bit later than the barley, and is ready around Shavu'ot, when it was customary to bring an offering of wheat, called "Mincha" to the Temple, to the altar. Only then was it permissible to (finally) eat the new wheat too.

The Torah provides no explanation for counting. If the goal is to bring the first of the harvest to the Temple, to thank God for the abundance, then how does counting help?

Many explanations have been given for its significance. I will mention two of the more familiar ones, and then offer a third, which I find greatly exciting this year.

The Shavu'ot holiday is not just a holiday of harvest; it is also the holiday of the giving of the Torah. The Torah was given fifty days after the Exodus from Egypt. Counting is therefore a spiritual preparation between attaining freedom and receiving the Torah of freedom. The process of releasing ourselves from our inner enslavement to Pharaoh and to anything that restricts us, and bringing us to the point at which we are willing and able to accept the exclusive kingship of the God of Freedom - the power that releases slaves and frees people from the narrow and stuck places in their lives. Indeed, the first Commandment heard at the end of fifty days is "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. You shall have no other Gods before Me" (Sh'mot 20:2). Maimonides, in his Mishne Torah, says that this is the first and most important of all the Mitzvot. Yet there is no doubt that great spiritual focus and intent are necessary to truly understand and internalize this immortal statement. I don't know many people who live their lives truly and honestly in light of the first of the Ten Commandments.

Another explanation for counting the Omer is more practical, and has to do with the hametz and the agricultural cycle. In expectation of the new harvest it was customary to clean the previous year's grain from the storage containers to prevent mold and rot that could infect the new crop. A tiny speck of spoiled wheat can destroy the entire new crop in a few days! This, in fact, was the common process to bake bread (sour-dough) prior to the use of commercial yeast: a "spoiled" piece of dough is used to sour the fresh dough. This explains the seasonal insanity that grips the Jewish people at this time of year - since ancient times to the present – as we rid our homes from all remaining Hametz, and then, play hide-and-seek with the last specks of hametz, and burn them on the morning of Erev Pessach. But again, why count fifty days after Pesach before eating from the new harvest? Because some grain still remained from the previous year. Given that wheat was expensive and life-nurturing, it wasn't destroyed, just removed from storage and put out of sight during the holiday. And then, an additional fifty days were allotted to finish the old stock, before partaking of the fresh grain.

These, as I said, are two of the more common explanations. This year I would like to suggest another explanation.

Spring is a time of plenty in the Land of Israel. Nature bursts forth, plants are abundant, and farm animals give birth to lambs, goat kids and calves. Contrary to animals, humans never feel satiety. We want more and more. Why? Because we can, because it's there. Spring intoxicates us with the abundance it offers, and it is easy to lose one's direction and one's sense of proportion. Counting the Omer teaches us the strength of restraint!

Remember how our parents taught us to count to ten before answering or before saying something we might regret ten seconds later? They were teaching us restraint, and this is not a one-time lesson, it is on-going. It is endless. Something within us wants more and more and has no limits. This is both a blessing and a challenge. As our Sages said: "Nothing stands in the way of our will." Will is a force that is blessed and important, but because it is so strong, it requires an opposing force to channel it. This force is the force of restraint.

Restraint in Hebrew is Ippuk. Ippuk comes from the word Afik - a path. Restraint, then, enables our unending will to find its constructive path towards fulfillment. Without a path or direction, our will cannot take form.

Restraint does not mean seclusion or asceticism. That's what makes it so hard. Many of us know the "all or nothing" method. A crash diet is much easier than maintaining a moderate, healthy, permanent lifestyle. Even though the results of a crash diet will bring immediate and noticeable results, we know that they will be temporary. Most of our extreme decisions are usually short-lived and will dissolve sooner or later.

Restraint, then, is difficult; it requires finding the fine line, the middle path - Maimonides' Golden Mean - between asceticism and immediate gratification. It takes tremendous maturity and ongoing practice. But an adequate reward awaits our practice: deep joy. Yes, joy! No doubt, the momentary pleasure is enjoyable too, but it is followed by a great fall. Restraint deepens the pleasure, and turns it into ongoing joy.

In Eastern cultures the art of restraint is very much present in the art of Tantra. One can say that the art of counting is the Jewish Tantra. It appears in counting the Omer. It appears in the seven days of eating matza. It appears in the three weeks between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av. It appears in the forty days of Slichot between the first of Elul and the tenth of Tishrei, and in the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

And so, during this time of year, for fifty days, an entire People – hungry for fresh grain on the one hand, and intoxicated with plenty in their natural surroundings on the other – practiced restraint.

These days this has no meaning: fresh bread will be easily purchased at the end of the Pessach holiday, and it will be exactly the same as the bread we will eat fifty days later with the cheese and wine of Shavuot. We, moderns, are no longer familiar with the sensation of a long wait for fresh wheat, or for any wheat.

But we are able to take the idea of restraint to other areas of our life. The art of counting can be used in moments of anger, before saying something we will regret, or before sending out an unpleasant email. Counting between bites is a great diet! Counting at least two years between new smartphones; counting between the sweets we consume, etc. Counting and counting. And knowing that counting has its own reward: it allows us to receive a new Torah - the Torah of freedom - the freedom from enslavement to our unbridled, wild will.

As I said earlier – restraint is not a one-time event. It requires practice, just as the wisdom of the Torah is returned to time and time again.

Spring is here. The season of abundance is at its peak. Enjoy. But in order to really do so, in order for enjoyment to become joy, in order to extend joy indefinitely, we practice the Jewish art of restraint. This is the modern-day preparation for the giving of the Torah.

By the way, tonight we will count four days to the Omer.

Shabbat Shalom and Mo'adim LeSimcha,

Elisha