

Earn \$500 by making a mistake. This, essentially, is the premise of OpenMarkets Health's monthly "Failure Contest," an innovation brought to the company by BHBE's own Michael Fineberg who serves as the organization's CEO. After noticing his development team bury a minor data leak that occurred during software deployment, Fineberg realized how important it is not only for employees to refrain from hiding mistakes but also for them to actively share their errors so as to grow from past experience and encourage a culture of experimentation. So he started to do the counter-intuitive thing and incentivize failure, encouraging team members to acknowledge when an error has occurred, explain lessons learned, and detail how they will work with others to prevent similar mistakes in the future. Each month's biggest blunder receives \$500 and is greeted by a round of enthusiastic applause at the company's staff meeting. The wisdom gained from the mistake, presumably, has an even greater reward and more enduring payoff!

Judaism may not have a direct analogue to the "Failure Contest," but ours, too, is a tradition that openly recognizes and embraces human fallibility. Our patriarchs and matriarchs, far from being perfect, saintly individuals, are painted foibles and all – their parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, boastfulness, jealousy, and pride laid bare for all to see. On the High Holidays, even as we pray for God's forgiveness, we declare that "we are neither so insolent nor so obstinate as to claim in Your presence that we are righteous; for we, like our ancestors before us, have sinned," acknowledging that no human being is ever without blame. Rather than being embarrassed or ashamed when confronted with our limitations and missteps, Judaism rather has us apologize, make amends to the wronged party, and try to do better in the future.

It is for all of these reasons that I find Judaism's approach to *Sefirat HaOmer*, the counting of the Omer that takes place during the seven week period between Passover and Shavuot that we now inhabit, a bit surprising. Many of us will remember the basis of this tradition, that in ancient times we began preparing for the new grain harvest from the second night of Passover on in fulfillment of the verse from Leviticus: "You shall count seven weeks. They must be complete: you must count until the day after the seventh week – fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Lord" (Leviticus 23:15-16). The fact that these seven weeks are described as being "complete" leads to a puzzling custom when it comes to counting the Omer – if one should miss a full day of counting (skipping both the night when one traditionally counts the Omer and also failing to count all the next day), that individual should continue to count the Omer moving forward but is now disqualified from reciting the blessing that accompanies this act. If an individual forgets to count the Omer just one night, remembering the next morning, he should count that morning (without saying the blessing) and then can continue to count thereafter with the blessing as usual. But if one forgets to count the Omer for a whole day and night together, he is barred from reciting the blessing for the entire remainder of the Omer period – a custom that seems strangely unforgiving.

Perhaps there is something to be learned from the fact that the failed Omer counter should still continue to count Omer, even without the accompanying words of prayer. When we fall and make a mistake we get right back on the horse, as it were; our error does not prevent us from continuing to mark each passing day of the seven weeks even if we cannot do so with the accompanying *berakha* (blessing). Perhaps, too, there is a lesson in the now denied blessing – mistakes may be human and

unintentional and impossible to avoid, but that does not mean that they don't have consequences. Our forgetfulness, whether it is directed towards God or towards another person, has the effect of removing just a little bit of goodness from the world. We continue forward but it is not quite the same.

I will admit that the "Failure Contest" approach to mistakes has more resonance for me than the Omer approach – it seems that we should learn, and perhaps even benefit, from our mistakes rather than having them impugn us. Still, the desire to finish out the entire Omer period while still saying the blessing does create some form of motivation and incentive all the same! We strive to attain the "completeness" that is at the heart of the Biblical verse.

Last night was the 20<sup>th</sup> night of the Omer and, at least for now, I'm still going strong!

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Counting,  
Rabbi Annie Tucker