

## The Royal Countdown: Parashat Emor

Over the past few months, count-down fever to the royal wedding has exploded! Many of us now know that Prince Harry and his bride, the American actress Meghan Markle, have decided to break with tradition and marry on a weekend, choosing the date of Saturday, May 19, at noon for their nuptials which will take place at St. George's Chapel, Windsor Castle two weeks from today. Over 2,640 members of the public have been invited to watch the couple arrive including 1,200 young people chosen for having demonstrated strong leadership in their communities. Of these guests, about 600 will actually attend the wedding ceremony itself.

While I'm not necessarily sitting in my tiara eating crumpets, I will admit that I've gotten as swept up as anyone in the royal hoopla— the nostalgia for Princess Diana's wedding over 35 years ago, the hope and promise of a lovely young couple about to begin their life together, the welcome respite from overwhelmingly bleak news coverage to instead follow a story of romance, joy, and hope. Weddings – be they royal or pedestrian – tend to inspire strong feelings of emotion because they represent new beginnings and continuity at the very same time; they capture a wonderful spirit of optimism and, of course, of love. I join together with so many others in wishing Prince Harry and Ms. Markle the very best for a long and happy life together. Just 14 days left until the big event!

While we, as Americans, have been counting down towards the royal wedding these last few weeks, we, as Jews, have simultaneously been counting up – engaging in a ritual known as *sefirat haOmer*, the counting of the Omer. Beginning on the second night of Passover and named for the new grain harvest which was brought to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, the Omer is tallied nightly in fulfillment of the command from our Torah portion this morning, *Parashat Emor*, which reads: "...You shall count off

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). As many of us will remember, the fiftieth day of the Omer is none other than Shavuot, another of the festivals mentioned in our Torah portion today. Our counting joins these two holidays, asserting that our freedom from slavery is not totally complete until we reach Mt. Sinai and receive Torah.

Ironically, if Prince Harry and Ms. Markle were Jewish, the date that they have chosen for their wedding would be problematic – and not only because their nuptials will take place on Shabbat. One of the hallmarks of the Omer period is that it is considered a time of public mourning during which happy, celebratory events like weddings do not occur and during which individuals refrain from acts like shaving or cutting hair just as they traditionally would following the death of a family member. The idea of the Omer period being one of sorrow is connected to the great Rabbi Akiva and his students, many of whom died at this time of year centuries ago. Some explain that these scholars perished as result of a terrible plague brought on by vicious infighting; others claim instead that the scholars joined in the infamous Bar Kochba rebellion against Rome and were killed in the course of battle. Whatever the explanation, it is said that there was a miraculous break in the devastation – the plague lifting, the combat receding – on the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of this period. For that reason, we now celebrate Lag B’Omer (literally “33<sup>rd</sup> of the Omer” which occurred just earlier this week) as a day of bonfires and picnics and general revelry. On this day, and this day alone, it is even permissible to get married!

So what is the essential difference between counting down, as towards the royal wedding, and counting up, as with the Omer? My colleague, Rabbi Rick Sherwin, describes it as the difference between anticipation borne out of excitement versus anticipation borne out of expectation. Sherwin explains that we count down towards long awaited events – birthdays, b’nai mitzvah, due dates, vacations. We

count down to build energy – “3, 2, 1 blastoff,” “3, 2, 1, Happy New Year,” “3, 2, 1, ready or not here I come.” Counting down makes that thing for which we’re so eagerly awaiting seem just a mere smidge closer. It’s a way of enjoying the experience a little bit extra by planning for its arrival!

It is different however, says Sherwin, with counting up. When we are told that a delivery will be made within a week or that a company to whom we’ve sent our resume will be in touch within 3 business days or that a doctor whose reading of our test results we are anxiously awaiting will call within 24 hours, we mark 1, 2, 3. A pregnant woman might count down to her due date, but once it’s passed she’ll start counting up – marking the time that has elapsed since the delivery was to have taken place. Counting down generally involves discrete moments while counting up marks periods of engagement or relationship or commitment – the number of years someone has lived in a particular home or worked in a particular job or been married to a particular person. In Sherwin’s words, “There is a different kind of anticipation that comes with counting up....At the end of the count, lies an answer, a fulfilled promise, or a precious gift.”<sup>1</sup>

To Sherwin’s elegant explanation, I would also add that we tend to count down when we know precisely when an anticipated event will occur and tend to count up when we have only a rough idea or sometimes none at all. We count down towards the graduation scheduled on our calendar, to the dropping of the ball that will occur at midnight, to 5:00 PM when we can turn off our computer and go home for the weekend. We count up in waiting for the return phone-call that may or may not arrive, count up towards the delivery date that’s now long past due, count up the years of our lives never knowing exactly how many we’ll have. Seen in this way, we would expect that we would count down

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<sup>1</sup> <https://americanrabbi.com/count-down-or-count-up-by-rick-and-elissa-sherwin/>

towards Shavuot and not up – after all, we know that it will occur exactly 7 weeks after Passover! And yet, as we well know, this is not the case.

Traditionally, the reason for the custom as we have it regarding counting Omer is *ma'alin b'kodesh v'ain moridin* – that we should always increase in our holiness and never decrease. This is the reason that we add more and more light each successive night of Chanukkah rather than decreasing from eight nights down to one, another famous example of counting up versus counting down. But reading Sherwin's insight about anticipation borne out of excitement versus anticipation borne out of expectation and promise, I wonder if there's not perhaps another, deeper meaning to the way in which we mark the Omer period. By counting up we are looking, in Sherwin's words, for "an answer, a fulfilled promise, a precious gift." All of these are realized when we receive the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

Counting the Omer is a daily reminder that being freed from Egyptian slavery was only the very first step in our long journey towards redemption. True freedom comes not from being un-tethered to any system of law or moral responsibility but rather in accepting upon ourselves, lovingly and willingly, a set of sacred obligations and choosing to belong, lovingly and willingly, to a sacred community which makes demands upon us. The Rabbis of the Talmud point out that there is only one vowel sound of difference between the Hebrew word *herut* (which means freedom) and *harut* (which means etched in stone). At counter-intuitive as it may be, freedom is inextricably linked with the commandments carved into rock which we received at Mount Sinai. True liberty lies not in anarchy but in a meaningful life of purpose, structure, and responsibility.

We count up during the Omer because what we're truly anticipating is not a discrete event but rather an ultimate answer to our deepest questions, fulfillment of our deepest longings, creation of a sacred

covenant. We count up during the Omer because our anticipation is not borne out of excitement, in fact we might have a little bit of trepidation about the weightiness of the tradition we are about to receive, but rather anticipation borne out of expectation – we have faith that God will deliver on the Divine promise of Torah and that this gift will be transformative. We count up during the Omer because, much like with the royal wedding, all looking towards the same thing together builds a sense of connection and community. We count up during the Omer to link slavery and Sinai.

I would imagine that Prince Harry and Ms. Markle don't realize that their royal wedding is taking place on the very final day of the Omer, what we call *Erev Shavuot*. They have a lot of other things on their mind, after all, between the antics of Markle's half-brother and the planning of the carriage procession and the finding of just the right fascinator for all of the different wedding-related festivities. There is a lot to do, and only two weeks left to do it! Over these next fourteen days, however, while the Prince and his bride are counting down, we, the Jewish community, will be counting up! We'll be counting up towards Torah.

Shabbat Shalom.

