

Count Down
Rabbi Mona Alfi
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My sense of time has become fairly disoriented lately. If it wasn't for Shabbat, I think I would lose complete track of what day it is. Each week is anchored by Friday night. I remember what day of the week it is by counting either backward or forwards towards Shabbat.

And I have found it's not only the days that seem off, but I now count how many weeks this has been going on by marking how many weeks it has been since my son's birthday, because it was in that week that the "Shelter At Home" order was enacted.

And thank God for holidays which punctuate the days and weeks with something to look forward to it. It was just nine days ago we all gathered around our computer screens and celebrated the festival of Pesach. And the first night was, much to my surprise, as it always has been, a joyous celebration.

And because of the very different nature of the holiday this year, I paid attention to something I usually ignore, and that is something that comes at the end of the Passover Haggadah, and is supposed to be said every night for seven weeks, beginning on the second night of Passover. It is the prayer for the counting of the Omer.

It's a simple prayer. It begins:

Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'Olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tizivanu al sefirat ha'omer.

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who has sanctified us with your commandments and commanded us to count the omer.

And then the second part of the prayer changes each day. For example, on the first night we say:
Hayom yom echad la'omer.
Today is the first day of the omer.

And then after the first six days, it gets a little trickier and includes the number of weeks that one has counted. For example, tonight we would say:
Today is 9 days, which is one week and two days of the omer.

And we are supposed to continue counting the days and the weeks, every day from the 2nd night of Passover until Shavuot. This practice comes from Leviticus where it is written:

"You shall count from the eve of the second day of Pesach, when an omer of grain is to be brought as an offering, seven complete weeks. The day after the seventh week of your counting will make fifty days, and you shall present a new meal offering to God (Leviticus 23:15-16)."

So as we learn here, it's not just the days we are counting but the weeks as well, seven weeks of seven days, culminating in the 50th day with the Festival of Shavuot. Which is where that festival gets its name, because Chag haShavuot literally means "the Festival of Weeks."

So this raises a few questions. First of all, what in the world is an "omer"? And secondly, why are we supposed to make an offering EVERY DAY between the festival of Passover which commemorates the Exodus from Egypt, and our liberation from slavery, and standing at Sinai and receiving the Torah? And lastly, why are commanded to count BOTH the days and the weeks? Wouldn't one or the other have been sufficient?

So let's start with the "omer." An "omer" is a relatively small unit of measure when you think of it as an

offering. It's probably around 5 cups. For those of you who have been caught up in the quarantine bread making craze, as I have been, you know that 5 cups of flour is about what you need to make either two small loaves of bread or one very large one.

In Pirke Avot, the Wisdom of the Sages, it is written:

Ain kemach, ain Torah, ain Torah, ain kemach – without flour there is no Torah, and without Torah, there is no flour. (Pirke Avot 3:17)

At first, it's a strange quote, until you learn that kemach, or flour, is also a euphemism for sustenance. Because flour is the most basic ingredient for food. The motzi, the catch all prayer we say before we eat a meal is really a prayer for bread, the most basic of sustenance.

This daily offering of the omer can also be understood as an offering of nourishment. But not just physical nourishment, it is an offering that is meant to sustain our souls as well as our bodies. Ain kemach, ain Torah – without physical sustenance we do not have the strength to study, to learn, to grow or mature as human beings. But it is also equally true to say “ain Torah, ain kemach” – without personal growth, we can not be sustained physically.

With the Counting of the Omer, we are not being called upon to simply count the days and the weeks, but to accompany the counting with an offering. When we say the motzi, or a blessing over our food, we are in essence making a thanksgiving offering, and transforming an ordinary act, like eating, into something special, or something holy.

When we count the omer, we are sanctifying time itself. We are not only counting the days and the weeks between our physical liberation from slavery in Egypt to standing at Sinai and receiving the Torah, but we are being taught to understand that our journey through the wilderness from one place to the other, is in itself a sacred journey.

The counting of the Omer is a tangible way to understand what Rabbi Alvin Fine was talking about when he wrote this prayer:

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination
And life is a journey:
From childhood to maturity
And youth to age;
From innocence to awareness
And ignorance to knowing;
From foolishness to discretion
And then perhaps to wisdom.

From weakness to strength or
From strength to weakness
And often back again;
From health to sickness,
And we pray to health again.

From offense to forgiveness,
From loneliness to love,
From joy to gratitude,
From pain to compassion,

From grief to understanding,
From fear to faith.

From defeat to defeat to defeat
Until, looking backwards or ahead,
We see that victory lies not
At some high point along the way
But in having made the journey
Step by step,
A sacred pilgrimage.
Birth is a beginning
And death a destination
And life is a journey.

In Judaism we are taught not just to celebrate or sanctify the “high points along the way” – but the journey itself.

The Jewish people as a nation were in essence “born” as we walked through the Red Sea. That day, the 15th of Nissan, Erev Pesach, is the Jewish 4th of July, our Independence Day. But it wasn’t until we stood at Sinai that we came to understand what the purpose of our existence was supposed to be.

The connection between Passover and Shavuot is embodied by the counting of the omer, and it should remind us that freedom in and of itself is not enough, there must also be a purpose for our existence, or freedom should be used for a higher goal. And sometimes we have to walk through the wilderness for quite some time before we can understand what that purpose is.

Whether we are talking about a personal journey as Rabbi Alvin Fine wrote about, or a communal journey as the Torah describes, what we are taught by our faith is that each and every moment has the possibility of holiness. Not just the high points along the way, like the parting of the Red Sea, or hearing God speaking directly to us at Sinai, but every day, the trudging through the wilderness itself can be something that is holy, but only if we make it so.

Right now, most days feel as though we are trudging through a wilderness. Freedom feels like it an eternity ago, and it is hard to imagine a day when we will all stand together again, as we did at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

There are days that this journey feels like it is without end. And we not yet know how we as individuals or as a society will be changed by what we are going through now. Many of us hope and pray, that it will be an opportunity for communal transformation.

A journey from self-orientation to communal responsibility and we will remember or relearn the importance of us looking out for each other.

We pray that this will also be a journey of appreciation and recognition, where we realize that if someone is considered an essential worker, then they deserve a living wage to do the work that is essential to all of us.

We hope that this will be a journey that takes us to a newfound respect for our fellow human beings, and an understanding that a right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” includes adequate medical care as well as safe and affordable housing for everyone.

In so many ways right now, we are in a wilderness, a state of in-betweenness, of being neither here nor there, neither enslaved or yet enlightened.

But in Judaism, we have a history of the wilderness being a place of profound growth and opportunity.

Abraham and Sarah's encounter with God sent them into the wilderness where they founded a religion we still practice.

Moses first experience with the Holy One was at the burning bush, in the wilderness. It sent him on a journey to free his people.

The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years. They began their journey as slaves, but they ended it as a free people with a blueprint to build a society built on justice and compassion.

And for 2000 years the Jewish people wandered in the wilderness of the Diaspora, and, while there, learned how to transform our suffering into lives filled with meaning, and purpose and joy.

So we have a choice right now. We can let each day go by as in a blur, one day running into another, one week into the next. Or, we can choose to make each and every day, each and every week, count. We can fill this time with regret, or with opportunities for holiness.

Opportunities to connect with one another through acts of g'milut chasadim – acts of loving kindness.

Opportunities to help those who have less than us.

And opportunities to protect the most vulnerable amongst us.

When we look back on this wilderness, will we have made these days a blessing or will it just have been wasted time?

Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'Olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tizivanu al sefirat ha'omer.

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who has sanctified us with your commandments and commanded us to count the omer.

Today is 9 days, which is one week and two days of the Omer.

Today is 30 days, which is four weeks and two days of sheltering at home.

May we make each every day, and every week, of our journey worthy of blessing.

And let us say: Amen.