

Why Is Counting The *Omer* Still A Thing?

It is easy to feel like the Count from “Sesame Street” as a Jew in this season: 1, 2, 3 sheaves of wheat! Our tradition marks the Spring harvest of winter wheat and other grains that culminates in the second of three pilgrimage festivals with the celebration of *Shavuot*. [The other 2 pilgrimage festivals where our ancestors brought their offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem were Passover and *Sukkot*.] Each day as part of the liturgy, we read: “*Hineni*, I am ready to fulfill the *mitzvah* of counting of the *Omer*; Today is _____ day, which is _____ weeks and _____ days of the *Omer*.”

One might scratch the head and wonder about its relevance for us now. In truth, we are not an agrarian people by and large. But this custom of counting does have some degree of relevance for us. The Slominer Rebbe [Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky who died in 2000] wrote that we Jews should view the time from Passover to *Shavuot* as a full unit, where the counting the *Omer* can serve as the intermediate days of the holiday [*chol moed*]. In his opinion, Passover marks our freedom FROM servitude and *Shavuot* marks our freedom TO embrace God through our acceptance of Torah.

Just like the weeks leading up to *Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur* have us seeking forgiveness from others and working toward our own personal teshuvah/repentance, the days between Passover and *Shavuot* create the opportunity for us to prepare for the revelation of Torah which is also an essential component of the *Shavuot* observance. How can we prepare? Study some Torah or better yet, maybe some of the ancient wisdom of the Talmudic sages. Let me suggest a simple activity that we can do. Read a snippet of *Pirkei Avot*, which is an anthology of great, short statements—a few lines at most. My friend and colleague, Rabbi Don Cashman, calls *Pirkei Avot*/The Sayings of Our Ancestors “Talmud Lite”! Which means one can delve into Talmud easily and not get lost in the often-confusing logic that can go on for pages. *Pirkei Avot* is filled with incredible ethical sentiments and deeply philosophical concepts that are easy to access; it certainly presents one an opportunity to think about Jewish stuff beyond the reading of the texts.

And here is my invitation: if you do this, drop me a line via email with any questions or comments!! Let's do as the *bracha*/blessing encourages us to do—*la'asok b'divrei Torah*... engage in the business of studying the words of Torah.

Look forward to hearing from you!