

*And from the day on which you bring the sheaf (**omer**) of elevation offering – the day after the Sabbath – 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. --- Lev. 23:15-16*

We count the days that pass since the preceding festival, just as one who expects his most intimate friend on a certain day counts the days and even the hours. --- Maimonides, **Mishneh Torah**

The **sefirah** period came to symbolize the ever-present insecurity of living in exile. And the pall prevailed until the creation of modern Israel. Its history has at last transformed the counting of the **Omer** into a celebration of Jewish sovereignty and power after nearly two millennia of homelessness. There is nothing idle about the counting of the **Omer**. Not only does it join Passover to Shavuot, but the Jewish people to Israel. Redefined by the twentieth century, it should bring us to reflect each year about the destiny of Israel in the grand scheme of Jewish history and the contemporary world. --- Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, contemporary

The forty-nine days, connecting the exodus from Egypt with the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, are a time of preparation and growth – of leaving a world of slavery and getting ready to enter a world of personal, social and spiritual responsibility. The Jewish mystics attached special significance to this period of the year as one in which the various facets of the soul were cleansed, one by one. --- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Man is fond of counting his troubles, but he does not count his joys. If he counted them up as he ought to, he would see that every lot has enough happiness provided for it. --- Dostoevsky

You are to observe Shavuot, the festival commemorating the Giving of the Law not only for the sake of the statutes for which we would never have felt a need if they had not been set down in the Torah, but also in thanksgiving for the laws which readily make sense even to the human mind, such as the laws pertaining to compassion on the unfortunate and charity to the poor. For experience has shown that, without faith in God, man is liable to become like a wild beast which has not a spark of compassion and is therefore capable of committing the basest crimes in order to satisfy his selfish desires. Only if you will observe the commandments concerning the leaving of parts of your harvest for the poor and the stranger are you permitted to proclaim the festival of Shavuot as “a holy convocation” to give thanks even for such readily understandable commandments of charity and compassion as these, for had the Torah not been given, you might never have come to observe them. --- **Meshekh Chokhmah** (Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, 1843-1926, Lithuania/Latvia)

Every Shavuot, Rabbi Yosef would say, “Prepare me a feast of a third-born calf! If not for this day which is the source of it all, why! there are lots of “Joes” out there on the streets.” --- Talmud, **Pesachim** 68b

No symbolic ritual was instituted for Shavuot to mark the Sinaitic Revelation, for the reason that it cannot be translated into the tangible language of symbol. The Children of Israel had been commanded to take heed *that you saw no likeness on the day that the Lord spoke unto you at Horev from the midst of the fire*, so as not to become involved in any idolatrous, anthropomorphic conception of the divinity. They were simply bidden to commemorate the historic experience. They would celebrate on the day of the giving of the Law the conclusion of the harvest as well, to give thanks to Him on bringing their first-fruits to the Sanctuary and acknowledge that He is the Lord of all to Whom it was meant to pay homage and Whose commandments they were to obey. By this they would reenact the promise they made on Sinai, *We shall do and we shall hear*. --- Rabbi David Hoffmann, 19th c. Germany

The period between Pesach and Shavuot is called **Sefirah** (counting). The name is derived from the practice of counting the **Omer**, which is observed from the night of the second **seder** of Pesach until the eve of Shavuot. The **Sefirah** period is a

time of sadness. According to the Talmud, this is because twelve thousand pairs of Rabbi Akiva's disciples died one year between Pesach and Shavuot (**Yevamot** 62b)... Some associate the somberness of these days with an even earlier period of Jewish history. The fruits of the field ripen during the time encompassed by **Sefirah**, and it is, therefore, a period of uncertainty - of hope and prayer that our physical sustenance will be continued in abundance... --- Rabbi Isaac Klein, A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, p. 142

Israel is indissolubly bound up with the Torah, and for the sake of the Torah the heavens and earth and Israel were created... This is the principle and reason governing their redemption and departure from Egypt to receive the Torah on Sinai and observe it... This was the great principle for which they were redeemed, their greatest good, and a matter of far more importance to them than the freedom from bondage. Because of this we were commanded to count from the second day of Pesach to the day of the giving of the Torah, to give expression to our deepest and innermost yearnings for the arrival of this day... --- Sefer Ha-Chinukh, 13th century, Spain

The period of time between Passover and Shavuot is called the **Omer**, and owes its name to the omer sacrifice brought on the second day of Passover. From that day onward we count until we arrive at the holiday of Shavuot. Why does every other holiday have its own date, whereas we need to calculate the date of Shavuot by counting? The classic work Sefer Ha-Chinuch understands this tally as a countdown to the important event that will soon transpire. We are anticipating the event and feel an excitement for its arrival, namely the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The idea of a countdown may appear in many familiar situations: a child's countdown to a birthday, the countdown of the days toward a vacation or the countdown towards a graduation. We can, however, distinguish between two types of countdowns. One type is when we are just letting the time pass as we anticipate the day. The second type is a countdown that requires effort each day in order to reach the end goal. The counting of the **Omer** and the culmination of Shavuot represents the latter. Each day that we enumerate symbolizes the need to be engaged, to take initiative and to make every day matter. We fortify our spiritual muscles so that we are ready to accept the Divine law at Sinai. This unique period in the Jewish calendar teaches us about facing challenges on a daily basis. --- Reuven Spolter, contemporary

Why did the Torah establish that the date of the holiday of Shavuot would depend on counting, which is not the case for all the other holidays? Because when it was announced to Israel that they were to leave Egypt, it was also made known that they were destined to receive the Torah at the end of fifty days after their exodus, as it is said, *And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain* (Exod. 3:12). And because of their great love, Israel would count each and every day and say, “Behold, one day has passed,” and two days and so on. Because it appeared to them to be a long time due to their great love for this event, the practice of counting was fixed for the generations. --- Midrash cited in **Torah Sheleimah**, Rabbi M. M. Kasher.