

“Why Count the Omer?” Rachel Braun

**Where is the counting referred to in the Humash?**

1) Leviticus 23: 9-11, 15-16

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:	9	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:
Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first sheaf of your harvest to the priest.	10	דִּבֹּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי־תָבֹאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וְקִצְרֹתֶם אֶת־קִצְרֹתֶיהָ וְהֵבֵאתֶם אֶת־עֹמֶר רִאשִׁית קִצְרֹכֶם אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן:
He shall elevate the sheaf before the LORD for acceptance in your behalf; the priest shall elevate it on the day after the sabbath.	11	וְהִנִּיף אֶת־הָעֹמֶר לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לְרִצְוֹנְכֶם מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת יְנִיפֵנוּ הַכֹּהֵן:
And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—the day after the sabbath—you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete:	15	וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאְכֶם אֶת־עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעַת שַׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה:
you must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the LORD.	16	עַד מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׂבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה:

Notes on this offering: “the Sabbath” in v. 11 refers to Pesach, so, the “elevation” of the barley sheaf and the initiation of counting happens on the second day of Pesach.

2) Another citation in Deuteronomy 16:9

You shall count off seven weeks; start to count the seven weeks when the sickle is first put to the standing grain.	9	שִׁבְעָה שָׁבָעַת תִּסְפֹּר־לָךְ מֵהַחֵל חֲרֹמֶשׁ בְּקֹמָה תִּחַל לִסְפֹּר שִׁבְעָה שָׁבָעוֹת:
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## COMMENTARY ON THESE PASSAGES:

**Sforno** (R' Ovadia ben Yaakov Sforno, Italy, 1475-1550) on 23:10 :

### COUNTING EXPRESSES GRATITUDE

The Torah commences its reference to Shavuot by speaking of the Omer... "who keeps for our benefit the weeks appointed for harvest" (Jeremiah 5:24). The principal reason for the festivals is to afford us an opportunity to express our gratitude in prayer and in deed... The Omer was an expression of gratitude... This prayer also contains a request concerning the future. The counting of the 49 days between Passover and the Festival of Weeks reminds us of the need to offer such prayers on a daily basis.

וְהִתְחִיל דְּבוּר חַג הַשָּׁבוּעוֹת מִן הָעֹמֶר (פסוק י), כִּי מֵאֵז מִתְחִיל קִצִּיר בְּעֹמֶר וּסְפִירַת הַשָּׁבוּעוֹת שֶׁהֵם מַעֲנִין הַחַג הַנִּקְרָא "חַג הַקִּצִּיר" (שמות כג, טז) וְ"חַג הַשָּׁבוּעוֹת" (שם לד, כד ודברים טז, י ו טז) שֶׁבּו נִתֵּן הוֹדָאָה לְאֵל יִתְבָּרָךְ עַל "שָׁבָעוֹת חֲקוֹת קִצִּיר" שֶׁשָּׁמַר לָנוּ. כִּי אִמָּנָם מִכּוֹנֶנֶת הָרָגָלִים הֵם הַתְּפִלָּה וְהַהוֹדָאָה, כְּמוֹ "בְּמוֹעֵד חֹדֶשׁ הָאָבִיב" הַתְּפִלָּה לְאֵל עַל הָאָבִיב וְהַהוֹדָאָה עַל הַחֲרוּת. וּבְהִיּוֹת כִּי הַצִּלְחַת הַקִּצִּיר תִּהְיֶה כְּפִי מִזֶּג הַזְּמַן מִתְחִלַת הָאָבִיב עַד הַקִּצִּיר, כְּאָמְרוּ "שָׁבָעוֹת חֲקוֹת קִצִּיר יִשְׁמַר לָנוּ" (ירמיה ה, כד), הִנֵּה הָעֹמֶר הוֹדָאָה עַל הָאָבִיב כְּמִקְרִיב בַּכּוּרִי הַשָּׂדֶה לְבָעָלִים, וְהִנֵּה הַקֶּרֶבָן עָמוּ לְתַפְלָה עַל הָעֵתִיד, וְהִנֵּה הַסְּפִירָה זָכְרוֹן לְתַפְלָה יוֹם יוֹם, וְהִנֵּה חַג הַקִּצִּיר הוֹדָאָה עַל טוֹב הַקִּצִּיר, וְחַג הָאֶסִּיף עַל טוֹב הָאֶסִּיף.

**Rashi** (R' Shlomo Yitzhaki, France, 1040-1105) on 23:15 : **COMPLETE COUNTING**

תְּמִימַת תַּהֲיִינָהּ. מְלֻמָּד שֶׁמִּתְחִיל וּמוֹנֶה מִבֶּעֶרְבֵי, שָׂאֵם לֹא כֵן אֵינָן תְּמִימוֹת (ספרא; מנחות ס"ו):

[Seven weeks] shall be complete – This teaches that one has to begin counting in the evening, for otherwise they would not be complete (Menachot 66a)

**Rabbeinu Bahya ben Asher** (Spain, 1255-1340): **MUST COUNT ALOUD AND FOR ONESELF** (note: there is a dispute as to whether *shome'a ve'koneh* applies to the berakha for the omer; Rashi (Menachot 65b) says no, Rashba (1:458) says yes).

**וספרתם לכם** – count for yourselves, etc: The construction of *us'fartem lakhem* is similar to that of *ul'kachtem lakhem* "take for yourselves" in verse 40. It means that each individual is to count –ie, buy the four species of plants for Sukkot. Counting has to be by mouth, not merely in one's mind (Menachot 68). This is a different matter of counting than that which the Torah mentioned in connection with a woman who has to count seven days before immersion (Lev 15:13 etc). In that instance, the Torah means that one must not lose track of time. It would be adequate to note the dates on the calendar without mouthing the words each morning or evening. Not only that, in those instances if a woman decides not to immerse herself in a ritual bath and remain ritually impure, she is at liberty to do so (with all the restrictions that imposes on her). (trans. Sefaria, cited in Kayla Reisman, *Count Me In*)

**וספרתם לכם.** כמו ולקחתם לכם, שתהא ספירה ולקחה לכל אחד ואחד, שימנה בפיו ויזכיר כקבלת רז"ל. ומה שכתוב בזב וזבה (ויקרא ט"ו:י"ג) וספר לו, וספרה לה אינו מהענין הזה, אלא לומר שלא ישכחנהו.

## WHY DO WE COUNT UP RATHER THAN DOWN?

**Rambam** (R' Moses ben Maimon, Spain/Egypt, 1135-1204), *Moreh Nevuchim* (Guide for the Perplexed) 3:43 **COUNTING AGGRANDIZES/ANTICIPATES SHAVUOT, LIKE WAITING FOR A LOVED ONE.**

“Shavuot is the time of the Giving of the Torah. To aggrandize this day we count the days from the previous festival until it [arrives], like someone who is waiting for his

ו'שבועות' הוא יום 'מתן תורה'. ולהגדיל היום ההוא ימנו הימים מן המועד הראשון אליו - כמי שממתין בוא הנאמן שבאוהביו שהוא מונה היום וגם השעות. וזאת היא סיבת 'ספירת העומר' מיום צאתם ממצרים עד יום 'מתן תורה' שהוא היה הכונה והתכלית ביציאתם - כאמרו "ואביא אתכם אלי".

dearest friend to arrive, who counts the days and even the hours. This is the reason for counting the Omer from the day that we left Egypt until the day of the Giving of the Torah, as this was the ultimate purpose of leaving Egypt: “And I will bring them to Me” (Shemot 19:4).

**SEFER HaCHINUKH**, Mitzvah #306 (13<sup>th</sup> C work, Spain, follows Rambam's enumeration of mitzvot, possibly a guide written by a father for his bar-mitzvah-aged son):

**WE COUNT UP TO SHOW GREAT DESIRE TO REACH SHAVUOT** (that is, early on, do not want to feel burdened by the large numbers remaining in a count-down, and we don't switch halfway through).

“The reason that we count from the [bringing of the] Omer “so many days have passed in our counting”, rather than counting how many days remain, shows our great desire to reach the time [of Shavuot]. Therefore, we do not want to mention at the beginning of our counting such a large number of days that remain until we reach the offering of the Two Loaves on Atzeret (Shavuot). We should not find it difficult [to understand] that once we have passed halfway through the seven weeks, we do not count down the few days remaining, as one should not change the nature of the counting in the middle.”

אליה, נצטוינו למנות ממחרת יום טוב של פסח עד יום נתינת התורה להראות בנפשנו החפץ הגדול אל היום הנכבד הנכסף ללבנו כעבד ישאף צל, וימנה תמיד מתי יבוא העת הנכסף אליו שיצא לחרות, כי המנין מראה לאדם כי כל ישעו וכל חפצו להגיע אל הזמן ההוא. וזהו שאנו מונין לעמר, כלומר, כך וכך ימים עברו מן המנין ואין אנו מונין כך וכך ימים יש לנו לזמן, כי כל זה מראה לנו הרצון החזק להגיע אל הזמן, ועל כן לא נרצה להזכיר בתחילת חשבוננו רבוי הימים שיש לנו להגיע לקרבן שתי הלחם של עצרת, ואל יקשה עליך לומר אם כן אחר שעברו רב הימים של שבעה שבועות אלו, למה לא נזכיר מעוט הימים הנשארים? לפי שאין לשנות מטבע החשבון באמצעו. ואם

## Talmud Bavli Shabbat 21b HANUKAH CANDLES: COUNT UP OR COUNT DOWN?

Beit Shammai say: The first day one kindles eight [lights, and from] there on, gradually decreases [the number of lights, down to one]. And Beit Hillel say: The first day one kindles one [light and from] there on, gradually increases [the number of lights, up to eight].

Ulla said: [There were] two amora'im in the West [Jerusalem], who disagreed [concerning this dispute]. Rabbi Yosei bar Avin and Rabbi Yosei bar Zevida...And one said the reason for Beit Shammai's [opinion is that the number of lights] corresponds to the bulls of the festival [Sukkot: Thirteen were sacrificed the first day and one fewer was sacrificed each succeeding day (Numbers 29:12-31). The reason for Beit Hillel's [opinion is that the number of lights is based on the principle:] One elevates [to a higher level in matters of] sanctity and one does not downgrade.

תנו רבנן מצות חנוכה נר איש וביתו  
והמהדרין נר לכל אחד ואחד והמהדרין  
מן המהדרין בית שמאי אומרים יום  
ראשון מדליק שמנה מכאן ואילך פוחת  
והולך ובית הלל אומרים יום ראשון  
מדליק אחת מכאן ואילך מוסיף והולך

אמר עולא פליגי בה תרי אמוראי  
במערבא רבי יוסי בר אבין ורבי יוסי בר  
זבידא חד אמר טעמא דבית שמאי כנגד  
ימים הנכנסין וטעמא דבית הלל כנגד  
ימים היוצאין וחד אמר טעמא דבית  
שמאי כנגד פרי החג וטעמא דבית הלל  
דמעלין בקדש ואין מורידין

**Does this principle (*ma'alin beKodesh ve'ein moridin*) apply to Omer?**

**R' Aryeh Carmel, *Masterplan*, Feldheim p 205: COUNTING IS PREPARATORY TO SHAVUOT**

"The Omer on Pesach was from the barley harvest. The offering on Shavuot was of wheat. Barley is mainly food for animals. Wheat is food for human beings. The Torah hints to us that physical independence by itself still leaves man (sic) – from the Torah perspective – on the animal level. The counting of the forty-nine days signifies a sevenfold refining process and marks our progress to full human status with our acceptance of the Torah at Sinai, seven weeks after the Exodus."

(perhaps based on *Aruch ha-Shulchan (Orach Chaim 489:3)* ?)

Note: In Egypt, barley was food of animals and in Ancient Israel, an important part of a poor person's diet.

**Eliyahu KiTov (Poland/Israel, 1912-1976) Sefer HaToda'ah (Book of our Heritage):  
NO SHE'HE'HEYANU WITH OMER BERAKHA**

Quoting **Ridbaz** (R' Yaakov Dovid Wilovsky, Russia, 1845-1913) "The purpose of this mitzvah of counting the days is to prepare ourselves for the festival with which the counting ends – Shavuot – and we reach it we say the blessing to thank God for having kept us alive that day. This blessing therefore applies both to what preceded the festival and to this festival itself."

**Rashba**, (R' Shlomo ben Avraham ibn Aderet, 1235-1310, Spain): We don't derive a benefit from the counting – rather, we grieve loss of Temple.

## WHY DO WE USE THE WORD “SEFIRA”?

### On counting: sofer/mispar versus moneh/minyan

Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) explains that the word *mispar* is related to the Hebrew word *sippur* (story), because just as the different parts of a story should flow in a natural and logical way, so do the numbers of one counting flow in a logical way (i.e. numerically). One does not count the contents of a set by saying random numbers, just as one does not tell a story by relating unrelated incidents...Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865) writes the word *moneh* is related to the word *maneh*, which means, “a respectable portion”. Thus, the connotation of the word *moneh* is that whatever is included in the set that is counted must be something respectable or important — something worth counting. In contrast, the word *mispar* also means “number,” but especially connotes the use of a number as a limit.

--R' Reuven Chaim Klein <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/emor-when-just-counting-doesnt-count/>

#### Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 65a

One who passes among the graves, what does he say?: Blessed...who revives the dead. R. Hiyya said in the name of R. Yohanan: Blessed...who is firm in His word and revives the dead. R. Hiyya said in the name of R. Yohanan: The One who knows your numbers He will wake you, He will drive out the dust from your eyes. Blessed are You, YHVH, who revives the dead. R. Eliezer said in the name of R. Hanina: “who created you in judgment, and nourished you in judgment, and removed you in judgment, and in the future will revive you in judgment, who knows your numbers, He will drive out the dust from your eyes. Blessed...who revives the dead.”

#### תלמוד ירושלמי ברכות ס"ה א

העובר בין הקברות מהו אומר בא"י  
מחיה המתים. רבי חייא בשם רבי יוחנן  
ברוך נאמן בדברו ומחיה המתים. רבי  
חייא בשם רבי יוחנן היודע מספרכם  
הוא יעורר אתכם הוא יגלה את העפר  
מעל עיניכם בא"י מחיה המתים. רבי  
אליעזר בשם רבי חנינא אשר יצר אתכם  
בדין וכלכל אתכם בדין וסילק אתכם  
בדין ועתיד להחיותכם בדין היודע  
מספרכם הוא יגלה עפר מעיניכם ברוך  
מחיה המתים.

## **Rabbi Sue Fendrick, 7/8/12, counting out shelsohim for her brother, Alan Fendrick**

Day 13-14: The Jerusalem Talmud explains Jeremiah's dating of the breach of the Temple walls at 9 Tammuz (rather than 17 Tammuz) as "kilkul heshbonot"--literally, corrupted calculations. R. [Benjamin Samuels](#) says in the name of R. J. J. Schachter in the name of the Rav (Joseph B. Soloveitchik) that it was more than that: "kilkul heshbonot" refers to the confused state of mind when one suffers a terrible loss--one doesn't know which end is up, one's sense of time is off-kilter.

We Jews are a counting people: we count the days from Passover to Shavuot. We count up to a bris, we count the 7 days after a wedding. We count people for a minyan (prayer quorum), although some of us do that in clever ways that avoid actually numbering people for various superstitious and historical reasons. We call the first, most intense week-long period of mourning "shiva"--literally, 7. The next phase, the one I'm in, is called "sheloshim"--30. It is a number. It grounds the time. It is a counterbalance to "kilkul heshbonot", to the feeling of "where am I? when am I?" For a variety of reasons, it feels both like I lost my brother some time long ago and like it can't possibly have happened. The numbering of the days tells me how long it has been--that long, and no longer--and also that it is true.

### **DOES COUNTING INVOLVE PRECISION OR UNCERTAINTY?**

**Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitch** ("The Rav", Russia/US, 1903-1993) *On Pesach, Sefirat Ha-Omer and Shavu'ot*, edited by David Shapiro, Urim Publications 2005 **PRECISION (?)**

...In grammar we operate with three tenses: past, present and future. However, experientially the present can never be isolated and perceived as such. The point of time we call "present" lies either in the past or in the future...What is "past?" It's retrospection, recollection. And what is "future?" Future is anticipation, expectation. What we call "present" is nothing but the vantage position from which we look either forward or backward...Judaism requires of the Jew that he experience time in its two dimensions simultaneously... The halachic approach to time is the experiential memory that reaches out for the future...The Jews not only knows history; he lives history. History to the Jew is not just knowledge of the past; it is reexperiencing, reliving the events that occurred a long time ago...many mitzvot pursue just one goal; to sustain our awareness of the past, and to protect our feeling of closeness to events that transpired long ago...

On the one hand, Judaism requires us to re-experience the past. On the other hand, Judaism requires us to pre-experience the future, the as yet non-real that will become real at some point in time. To exist as a Jew means to be at the juncture of past and future, at the non-real any longer and the non-real as yet... Our mission is to engage in retrospection and anticipation, in recollection and expectation.

When one counts, one ushers in a continuum...At any position in which you find yourself counting, you have to be aware of two things: of the preceding position and of the following

position. For instance, we counted last night “lamed-gimmel ba’omer, thirty-three days in the omer. However, we could not have arrived at this position from nowhere, ex nihilo. When we say lamed-gimmel, thirty-three, we ipso facto state that this position was preceded by thirty-two previous positions...At the same time, however, we also know that “thirty-three” is not the last station. From here we’ll move to additional positions...In other words, any act of counting embraces retrospection as well as anticipation...And that’s why sefirah, counting, is so prominent in the Halacha...

Halakhic thinking is precise thinking, and counting is also precise thinking... There is no arbitrariness; logical necessity reigns supreme. An erroneous count, or an omission of one position, suspends the whole count...The same is true of Halachah. If you omit one position, the whole edifice crumbles and collapses...

The detail is important. It’s important in action as well as in thought. The religious ritual is fashioned after the mathematical formula. You cannot say, “I observe Shabbos, but I arrive home from work Friday night a little late.” Imagine a mathematician who says, “ $A=B$  and some fraction, which is not important.” If he then built a bridge on the basis of this equation, I would not cross that bridge. In Halachah as well, the detail plays a very important role both in thought and action...

However, when the detail is observed, then the Torah pays attention to the whole as well...in sefiras ha-omer you count up to “seven” in single positions, in single days. But when you reach seven days what do you say? “She-heim shavu’a echad ba’omer”. “They comprise a week.” It’s a new entity.

We are interested in both; in each count separately and in the new entity that emerges. The Torah tells man: be precise as far as your single acts are concerned, and act in such a manner that your individual actions be integrated into a meaningful whole...We are careful not to omit a single day in our sefiras ha-omer; at the same time we integrate weeks out of the days.

### (A CASE OF) UNCERTAINTY

**R’ Ovadia Yosef** (Iraq/Israel, 1920-2013, founder of Shas), Chazon Ovadia, Laws of Yom Tov, p. 238. If a person forgot to count one day, he continues without a berakha. BUT If a person is not sure whether he forgot to count, he continues for the rest of the Sefira period, WITH a berakha, as this situation involves a Sefeik-Sefeika, or “double-doubt”. (The 2 doubts are: Did he remember correctly? Are the 49 counts distinct mitzvot?)

### LAST BUT NOT LEAST

### אחרון אחרון חביב

**R’ Menachem Mendel Schneerson** (“The Rebbe”, Ukraine/US, 1902 - 2 1994) Likkutei Sichot 38:10 [printed in Toras Menachem 3:4-12]

If the Moshiah arrives in the middle of sefira, we continue to count, with the blessing.