

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld
ASBI Congregation
Behar - Behukotai 5778

Counting to Sinai

Almost seventy years ago on the English calendar a very momentous conversation occurred. In the aftermath of Ben Gurion's declaration of Israeli independence the only religious member of the provisional government, overcome with emotion recited the *Birkat Shehechiyanu*, the blessing recited upon hearing good news or in the aftermath of good fortune, in which we thank God for preserving our lives to reach the auspicious day being celebrated.

After reciting the *berakhab*, another religious Jew accosted him and confronted him for his choice to recite the blessing. How could he recite a blessing, *b'shem u'malchut*, using God's very name, for an occasion not described in the Talmud or halakhic literature as warranting this blessing?

He responded to his critic by remarking, "don't worry, I was wearing a new necktie."

This story illustrates the ways in which a *berakhab*, prayerful words of devotion to God, ceases to function as an expression of spontaneous emotion and becomes liturgy - something that can be codified and quantified. (I've mentioned before on other occasions that when filming the Israeli movie "Time of Favor" the filmmakers needed to film shoot after shoot of a brief scene in which the movie's protagonist walks into the home of his rabbi, picks up a pickle out of a bowl, and recites a *berakhab* before eating the pickle. The non-religious actor had great difficulty acting out the casual familiarity with the blessing that comes naturally, for better and for worse, to those of us who recite *berakhot* each time we eat).

The story from the Israeli declaration of independence also illustrates what has become a secret, yet significant, divide between Jews. There are Jews *love* the *she'chechiyanu* blessing and incorporate it into joyous occasions of all kinds. And there are Jews who remain quite reticent to recite the blessing other than on occasions with clear halakhic precedent for doing so. In my own experiences over the years navigating diverse Jewish communities, one of the most common areas of conflict is the *she'chechiyanu* blessing. Those who love the blessing want to incorporate it into happy occasions of all kinds and this causes all sorts of hand wringing among those who are more reluctant to say the blessing without, for example, wearing a new necktie.

I believe that "*she'chechiyanu* Jews" have a point. The range of *berakhot* listed in the Talmud that are meant to be recited in response to events that we experience or phenomenon that we witness suggest that our ancestors lived with a liturgy that was more alive and subjective than our own. On the other hand, the reluctance to recite *berakhot* whenever we feel like it reflects a reverence for God's name and a reluctance to use it willy nilly whenever we happen to be in the mood to say a *berakhab*. And, as in every sphere of Jewish life and Jewish law, here too we can pay attention to subtle details and distinctions and learn a great deal from out of those details.

When is the *shehechiyanu* blessing recited? It's recited for significant new purchases. It can be recited for eating new seasonal fruit for the first time. We recite it when we sanctify and inaugurate each holiday, and we recite it before performing annual mitzvot like sukkah and lulav and shofar.

But we do not recite the *she'chechiyanu* blessing before we embark on the mitzvah of *sefirat ha'omer*! Why not?

Since Pesach the Jewish people have been counting the days leading up to Shavuot. Perhaps it is one mitzvah with 49 distinct parts. Perhaps it is 49 distinct and independent *mitzvot* to count each night. Either way, the count connects Pesach and Shavuot. Just last week we heard the mitzvah to count in the Torah reading.

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת־עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שֶׁבַע שַׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה:
עַד מַמְחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַה':

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: you must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the LORD.

Interestingly, this is one of at least three mitzvot to count something that we have encountered in as many weeks. In Chapter 15 of Vayikra we learn that a *zav* and a *zavah* must count seven days before immersing in the mikvah, a practice that was incorporated into the observance of *Hillebot Nidab* in Talmudic times:

וְכִי־יִטְהַר הַזָּב מִזֹּבּוֹ וְסָפַר לוֹ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים לְטַהֲרָתוֹ וְכַבֵּס בְּגָדָיו וְרוּחַץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם חַיִּים וְטָהַר:
וְאִם־טָהַר מִזֹּבָה וְסָפְרָה לָהּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְאַחַר תִּטְהַר:

He shall count, she shall count. There is a mitzvah to count each day before going to the *mikvah* just like there is a mitzvah to count *sefirat ha'omer*.

Finally, in this morning's Torah portion of Behar, the Torah introduces a count on a grand scale:

וּסְפַרְתָּ לָךְ שֶׁבַע שַׁבָּתוֹת שָׁנִים שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים שֶׁבַע פְּעָמִים וְהָיוּ לָךְ יָמֵי שֶׁבַע שַׁבָּתוֹת הַשָּׁנִים תִּשַׁע וָאַרְבָּעִים
שָׁנָה:

“You shall count off seven weeks of years—seven times seven years—so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a total of forty-nine years.”

There are three mitzvah-countings in *Sefer Vayikra* which is a marked contrast to elsewhere in the Torah! In *Sefer Bereisbit* Avraham is told that a sign of God's blessing will be descendants who cannot be counted:

וְאַתָּה אֲמַרְתָּ הֵיטֵב אֵיטִיב עִמָּךְ וְשִׁמְתִי אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ כְּחֹל הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִסְפָּר מֵרֵב:

In *Sefer Shemot*, we are told that when Jewish people needs to be counted, we should collect a half-shekel from each person and in that way derive the size of the population. Somehow a direct census is forbidden. We preserve that caution when counting for a minyan. Some say “not one, not two, not three” to avoid a direct count.

It seems that counting people - or at least counting Jews -is problematic. But counting time is fine and is part and parcel of several *mitzvot* in *Sefer Vayikra*.

Why then, do we not recite the *She'chechiyanu* blessing for *Sefirat Ha'Omer*? How is it different than taking a *lulav* on Sukkot, lighting Hanukkah candles, or reading the *megillah* on Purim? After analyzing several possible answers to this question, Rabbi Joseph Solvoeitchik ultimately rejected each one before coming to the simplest explanation of all. *Sefirat Ha'Omer* is not a happy mitzvah.

Sefirat Ha'Omer connects Pesach, the commemoration of the exodus, and Shavuot, the commemoration of our standing at Sinai and receiving the Torah. That sounds like something we can be happy about.

Sefirat Ha'Omer is not a happy mitzvah because it is a ritualized declaration, made each year a we reenact our freedom, that we are not yet ready to receive the Torah. If *sefirat ha'omer* were a happy anticipation, we would count backwards as we eagerly count down to a happy anticipated event. Children count down towards their summer vacation. Parents count down until their children go back to school. We count up towards Shavuot and the commemoration of receiving the Torah as if to say, I've taken one more step to prepare myself to receive the Torah.

Of course we don't say a *she'chechiyanu* blessing when we begin *Sefirat Ha'Omer*! What is there to be happy about? How can we thank God for bringing us “*lazman ha'zeib*” to this time? What time? We aren't anywhere? We have just left Egypt and we are not at all ready to receive the Torah. We've progressed one day in our preparations for Shavuot. Big deal. There is still lots of work ahead.

Preparing for Sukkot and preparing for Pesach are very obvious. We need to find a lulav and etrog. We need to build a sukkah. We need to clean and kasher our kitchens. We need to bake or buy matzah and stock our homes with Kosher for Passover food. Shavuot is relatively easy. It is just a one or two day holiday. There is no special mitzvah for Shavuot.

But, in truth, Shavuot, inasmuch as we reenact the acceptance of the Torah, requires more preparation than any other holiday. Preparing for Shavuot well is very hard work, much harder than cleaning one's home for Pesach or building a sukkah, but the work is spiritual. This is what *sefirat ha'omer* signifies. It is indeed a mitzvah that comes each year, but not an occasion to say a boastful *she'chechiyannu* blessing as though we've arrived somewhere. It's a mitzvah that is about becoming rather than being.

Receiving the Torah is an intellectual project that requires preparation. If someone wishes to study calculus, for example, and use calculus as one of the most powerful tools to understand the world, then she first has to master algebra and mastering algebra requires mastering basic arithmetic. And if someone wishes to dive into Shakespeare and explore the hidden corners of the human soul that Shakespeare exposes, he won't be successful if he picks up a copy of Hamlet with no preparation, with no understanding of Shakespeare's vocabulary or the symbolism and themes that he explores. And, in contrast, what a waste it would be for someone to study addition and subtraction, algebra and geometry, but never encounter calculus. What a waste it would be to go through the trouble of learning how to read and write and then to give up the study of Literature without ever studying a Shakespearean play.

The same is true for Torah. Becoming is more important than being. What are we becoming? What are we preparing for? What are we striving to attain based on what we already know?

So too when becoming someone worthy of receiving the Torah, becoming is more important than being. Self-satisfaction with who we are right now is not a Jewish ethos. The great Mussar teachers, the rabbis who emphasized ethical sensitivity and development, like the Alter of Slabodka whose portrait is now on display downstairs, taught that one must always be striving to grow and to improve. There is no stable resting place for a human soul. Those who aren't improving and growing are declining and deteriorating. Someone who spreads a smug or triumphant attitude about our community is putting our community at great risk. To be a Jew is to be dissatisfied and agitated and hopefully making ourselves, our communities, and the world around us better.

Becoming someone worthy of receiving the Torah is more important than merely being someone to whom the Torah was given. If Torah could make someone good, we would not have needed to wait seven weeks before receiving the Torah. God could have given the Torah to idolatrous slaves in Egypt and relied upon the Torah to work its magic.

Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts and there is no magic solution. The Torah will help a good person improve. The Torah will take an ethical life and transform it into a holy life. But we have to be good and decent as a foundation for any positive interaction with the Torah. *Derech Eretz Kadmah l'Torah*. The rabbis taught us that being a decent human being is a preface to any connection to the Torah and *sefirat ha'omer* reinforces that same message.

There is only one week left before Shavuot. Let's get to work.