

Omer Madness: Counting the Days

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Last year at this time, we were playing Omer Madness, the Shir Hadash version of March Madness, where instead of anticipating the winning college basketball teams, we put important figures in Jewish life in competition with each other.

During Omer Madness, we started with an even number of women and men, Biblical figures and historical personalities—and ended up with Moses competing against Ruth Bader Ginsberg.

This year is not like last year. And, of course, it's not just Omer Madness that's gone, but so many events and activities that we previously have taken for granted are gone too. But the Jewish calendar continues, and so, even with all we are not able to do this spring, it is still the season for the counting the Omer—the days from the second day of Passover, when the first barley harvest was brought in during ancient times, until Shavuot, the time of the wheat harvest.

These 49 days of the Omer take us from the Israelites' liberation from Egypt to the moment when our ancestors stood at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah.

Traditionally, the Omer was a somber time of year when weddings weren't celebrated, though the reason for this serious tone is not totally clear. One explanation is that in the days of Rabbi Akiva, there was a plague in which thousands of his students died. Historians wonder, however, if these young people instead lost their lives in Bar Kochba's revolt, a tragic event which Rabbi

Akiva supported but which ended in disaster with many sacrificed in the hopes of removing the Roman occupation.

I think that this year, in our very exceptional and difficult circumstances, the counting of the Omer has the potential to be a help.

Counting days helps defines time. Think of prisoners in their cells, marking off the days on the wall. At a time when one day blurs into the next and when the end goal is not clear—May? June? July? sometime in 2021?—marking off these 49 days can be a help.

Forty-nine days is also a fairly long time, so it reminds us that worthwhile things don't always come quickly. That is so un-American. We like our Amazon Prime deliveries the next day, if not within several hours (at least in the good old days), and our technological progress measured in days and weeks, not months and years.

I remember years ago when I had a problem with a nerve in my jaw, and the dentist said it would take time, perhaps three to four months, to heal. At the time, I was so sure that the dentist's prediction meant never that I was pleasantly surprised when five months later, my jaw pain was a distant memory.

Counting the days of the Omer is a reminder to make our days count, a reminder that we can use this unusual time in positive ways. Traditionally, the seven weeks of the Omer were a time for study in anticipation of the giving of the Torah or for working on our *middot*, our personal character traits. It was in this context that

Benjamin Franklin's system of personal improvement made its way, through Yiddish translation, into the yeshivahs of 19th century Europe.

Study and character development take time and effort, but they don't require being outside or even with other people. Fortunately, both study and character development are things we can do while sheltering in place.

Tonight, we will count the 4th day of the Omer. May the counting of these days help us find meaning in our daily struggles, and may we come to Shavuot in healthier circumstances.