

# Making it Count: Studying Sefirat Omer, Judaism's Best Game

Rabbi Mishael Zion | Moonshine Iyar 2015 | Text and the City

*“From the morrow of the Sabbath you’ll count fifty days,  
And offer up a new offering to the Lord” (Leviticus 23)*

Few things are sillier in Judaism than Sefirat haOmer, “counting the days” from Passover until Shavuot. This innocuous spring ritual consists of ritually reciting a number each night, then repeating the way that number divides into seven. Today is the Twelfth day, which is one week and five days to the Omer. Those who can count the correct number each night through forty nine, win a hefty portion of cheesecake on the fiftieth night. Undoubtedly, if it wasn’t for the brilliant game layer of Sefirat haOmer (forget one night, and you’re out...), this ritual would never have survived three thousand years of Jewish upheaval. Yet dig into the silliest rituals and you’ll find microcosms of the biggest questions.

This month’s Moonshine is an invitation to dig into Sefirat haOmer through three lenses: read the original verses in

Leviticus, study Nehama Leibowitz’ exploration into the meaning of the original Omer ritual through traditional commentaries, or explore the Hasidic-psychological reinterpretation of the Omer in a delightful essay from the “Netivot Shalom” Rebbe of Slonim. You can even order a Sefirat haOmer spiritual workbook online. Sure, counting the Omer began a few weeks ago, but there are still five weeks left to make it count. Download one of these resources and study it before the fifty days are up.

A recap of some of these ideas and my own thoughts follows.

I love digging into the genealogy of Jewish rituals and uncovering their layers: the fossilized remains of ancient food, the lava-like polemics that have since frozen over, the small gems of interpretation that have crystallized amid the rocks. Studying the sources one finds that what at first seemed to be an empty shell of meaningless actions, held together by a sense of tradition, is actually a flourishing field. Feeding off the nutritious geological wonder hidden below it, it offers a fertile land for growth and rootedness today. Or something like that...

Such is the ritual of the counting of the Omer. At the bedrock level, it is an agricultural ritual of marking the grain harvest season, and counting from the very first crops to the peak of the harvest fifty days later, as described in [Vayikra 23](#). It was a sanctification ritual of food and labor, recognizing the source of this goodness and zooming out to the larger purpose of our life's work. In 16th century Tsfat, R. Moshe Alshikh described it as a corrective to affluence at the time of reaping profits:

*"Affluence has the most pernicious effect on a person's character, causing them to be haughty and arrogant... This can be avoided if a person acknowledges that Divine source of wealth instead of boasting that 'my mighty hand has gotten me this wealth' (Deut. 8:17). With the onset of the barley harvest, which is the earliest before beholding the abundant produce in the storehouses and on the field, man must recognize that his strength is illusory, for 'all is vanity' (Keheleth 3:19). Thus God has commanded us to offer up the earliest product of the harvest presenting the priest one omer as a token of gratitude... only after the omer has been offered up on the altar may Israeli enjoy the new produce of the year."*

But that agricultural reality ended hundreds and hundreds of years ago – covered over by a layer of Roman war and destruction. But the keen geological eye also recognizes the remnants of a great Jewish war, a huge intellectual debate between Pharisees and Sadducees, repeating a few centuries later between Karaites and Rabbinites. The focus: the start day of the Omer, and thus the date in which Shavuot is celebrated. Is it fifty days after Passover, or fifty days after the Shabbat after Passover? How does this frozen over lava of a debate resonate today? I hear in it echoes of the question of the Enlightenment: is liberation an end in itself, or only in the sense that it lead to a greater good? Is the Passover Exodus a sufficient redemption, or does it only bear meaning in its connection to the covenant at Sinai on Shavuot? In other words, are independence and liberty a goal in itself (negative freedom), or do they only set the stage for the achievement of a larger vision of society (positive freedom).

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Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch in 19th century Germany claims that's what the counting of the Omer is all about – creating a trajectory from liberation to construction, from exodus to obligation:

*You have celebrated the Feast of your Liberation (Passover) and remembered before your God your independence, living in your land and eating its produce. You have therefore reached your freedom and the benefits of independence, the very goals all nations aspire to. You, however, are but on the threshold of your calling as a nation, and have started counting the days to the attainment of another goal. The Torah expresses the commandment of the Omer thus: "From the first time you put the sickle to reap the crops, you shall commence to count seven weeks" (Deut 16:9). When others cease to count, you being your counting.*

Independence is amazing. It will be celebrated in Israel this week; will be reclaimed in every speech of an American presidential candidate in the coming 18 months; in the mouth of every graduating student this spring. But what is the goal of this independence? How does it tie into the achievement of a greater calling? It's easy to agree about independence, but it's what we do with it that matters. The counting begins now.

As one reaches the top of the Omer geological formation, a new layer appears. It is not about agricultural reality or national calling, but about personal journey. In the hands of Kabbalists and Hasidim, Counting the Omer becomes a psychological journey, an act of self-transformation, a tool of individual redemption. The grains of wheat turn into illuminations, the counting - a process of ethical and spiritual distillation. The Rebbe of Slonim articulates this best in his "Netivot Shalom," then takes it in a surprising direction:

*Counting ("sefartem" ספרתם) refers to the word sapir, meaning light, illumination. Thus "u'sefratem lachem" – ספרתם לכם – comes to mean "create for yourselves illuminations." And these illuminations refer specifically to the elements of "on the morrow of the Sabbath." The work of Sefirat haOmer should be specifically in the secular and concrete elements of life, those of the "morrow of the Sabbath." Thus the seven weeks of the Omer are for finding elevation and holiness within that which is permitted, the bodily pleasures, the bread. For bread has two meanings in the Torah – actual bread, and sexual intercourse – food and sex. Distilling our relationship to these two elements is the new grain offering we are asked to offer at the end of the fifty days.*

(A full translation of the Slonimer's essay on Sefirat haOmer is attached here, in my humble translation.

To explore the Omer as a journey of personal self transformation, I recommend Simon Jacobson's delightful booklet: "A Spiritual Guide to the Counting of the Omer")

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Suddenly we are back in the world of actual grain, the Omer is about how we deal with “bread.” Yet as the Slonimer notes, it is no longer about us as producers of grain, but as its consumers. This is where we need the work of refinement and distillation. It’s not an easy process – and it requires disciplined daily work in order to be met.

Anthropologists have notes that good ritual is one which offers a very specific container yet leaves a lot of room for varied interpretation. Add onto it the game layer of the Omer, and you have the trappings of some excellent ritual. Life – at its base - is counting the time go by. Let’s make that counting count.

Happy counting,

Mishael

Dedicated to a theme in the Jewish month, **Moonshine** is a combination Dvar Torah and springboard for learning in the coming 30 days. **Moonshine** - in honor of the Hebrew month’s commitment to the lunar cycle, with a hint of distilling fine spirits off the beaten track and - perhaps - intoxication. I’ll be hosting an **online text study** about the most clicked on texts towards the end of the month. Details forthcoming.



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