

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest.’”

— Leviticus 23:10



Omer: Making Every Day Count

Counting Our Days

First and foremost, the *Omer* is an agriculturally based ritual commanded by the Bible. The word *omer* is often translated as “sheaf” and refers to the sheaf of barley that was brought as an offering to the Temple. More literally, *omer* is simply an amount. When God brought *manna* to the Israelites in the desert, He commanded that each person take enough for himself and the members of his household: “Take an *omer* for each person . . .” (Exodus 16:16).

Bringing an *omer* of barley as an offering in Temple times is the foundation of this commandment. It was a type of “firstfruits,” symbolizing gratitude for and acknowledgement of God’s provisions. Until the *omer* was brought, none of the newly harvested grain could be consumed. Once the offering was brought, all new grain was permitted to be eaten.

However, that’s only the first of several rituals associated with the *omer* offering. Scripture tells us in Leviticus 23:15: “From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks.” The “day after the Sabbath” refers to the day after the first day of Passover. On that day, the second day of Passover, the *omer* offering was brought to the Temple.

From that day onward, we are commanded to count 49 days, which leads us directly to the holiday of *Shavuot*, also known as the Festival of Weeks. Christians are more familiar with this holiday from its Greek name, Pentecost. These 49 days serve as a bridge between Passover and *Shavuot*.

Every day that we count, we make reference to the *omer*. One reason is

because the *omer* offering was our starting point. For example, we will say, “It is three days since (we brought) the *omer*.” However, there is a deeper reason for this system of counting – one that speaks to the spiritual significance of this time period which has come to be known simply as “The *Omer*.” It is during this time that we “count the *Omer*.” In Hebrew, this practice is called *sefirat haOmer*.

The *Omer*, in a profound way, prepares us to receive God’s Word all over again on *Shavuot*. Counting the days between Passover and *Shavuot* echoes the counting that the ancient Israelites conducted from the time that they were freed from Egypt until they experienced God’s revelation on Mount Sinai.

The counting demonstrates both our excitement and anticipation of coming closer to God and His Word, while also providing us ample time to prepare ourselves spiritually for this momentous occasion. Therefore, this time of “counting the *Omer*” has become a time of introspection, change, and growth – one day at a time.

Today, as we no longer have the Temple or the *omer* offering, the Jewish observance of this divine directive has taken on a modified form. In addition, events throughout history have molded and shaped this important time period, as well. However, the essence of the practice remains intact and these seven weeks continue to be an important and inspiring time on the Jewish calendar.

Rabbi Eckstein



Counting Our Progress

“Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the LORD.”

— Leviticus 23:16

As we have noted, the time between Passover and the holiday of *Shavuot* is a time of counting excitedly toward the big event when the children of Israel received God’s Word at Mount Sinai. Just as the Israelites counted the days until this awesome event, so, too, do we excitedly count the days until the holiday that commemorates this event. However, when it comes to counting these days, we count *up*, starting at Day One and ending with Day 49. Day 50 is *Shavuot*. Wouldn’t it make more sense to count down to the big event?

We’ve all experienced the anticipation of exciting events, but usually we count down to the event we’re waiting for. *Ten days until my next vacation, now nine, now eight. Or 30 days until my wedding, now 29, now 28.* We mark the time as getting through each day that separates us from our cherished event and we celebrate the passage of time. However, the *Omer* was never meant to merely be a means to an end. Each day of the *Omer* is valuable all on its own.

In Judaism, as we progress from Passover to *Shavuot*, we are meant to grow each day. Just as the ancient Israelites needed time to prepare spiritually for the revelation at

Sinai, so, too, do we take this time of year, every year, to prepare ourselves spiritually for receiving God’s Word all over again. The *Omer* is a time of spiritual advancement and character development. It’s time for introspection and growth – one day at a time.

This is why we count up to the main event and not down. These days are like climbing a ladder. Each day we take another step up on our journey toward God. By Day 49, we stand on a higher plane than we did on Day One. We have ascended, risen, and hopefully, have become entirely different people than we were when we began this journey.

This idea is also reflected in the two offerings that traditionally marked the beginning of the *Omer* and its end. On Day One, the Israelites offered an *omer*, an amount of barley, grains that typically were used to feed animals. At the end of the counting, loaves of bread made from wheat were offered. This kind of food was “people food.” By Day 50, the offerings given symbolically had risen above an animalistic nature to reflect the nature of human beings made “*in the image of God*” (Genesis 1:27), ready to receive His Word.

think about it...

1. What would the world look like today if God hadn’t given us the *Torah* at Mount Sinai 4,000 years ago? How has the Bible molded and shaped civilization as we know it?
2. What excites you most about reading, sharing, and living God’s Word?
3. Why do you think it was important for the children of Israel to prepare themselves to receive God’s Word? In what ways do you prepare yourself to be in God’s presence?
4. Identify an area of character development in which you would like to grow. Create at least three steps you can take over the next month to help you develop that trait.
5. How might you display more honour and respect to your family, friends, and acquaintances?
6. Why do you think it’s important to set spiritual goals for yourself? What goals might you include for yourself?



Painting by Francesco Hayez

Counting Our Sorrows

“But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands... I will bring on you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and sap your strength.”

—Leviticus 26:14, 16

This time period called the *Omer* was originally intended to be a joyful one. Yet today, we spend the first 33 days out of the 49 in mourning. What happened that changed what was originally a celebratory time into a time of grieving?

First and foremost, when the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the *Omer* was already marred. There were three aspects tied to this celebratory time. The first was bringing the *omer* offering to the priests, the second was having the priests sacrifice the offering to God, and the third was counting the days until *Shavuot*. Once the Temple was destroyed, all that remained was the counting; gone was the celebratory sacrifice.

However, the Jewish sages also point to a single event that took place around that same time as the destruction of the Temple. After the Temple was destroyed, the entire Jewish way of life was in jeopardy. Rabbi Akiva, the preeminent *Torah* scholar of the nation at that time, provided hope for the uncertain future by teaching and training 24,000 students. Yet, during the first 33 days of the *Omer*, all 24,000 died. Even more tragically, the sages teach that they died because although they were well-

versed in the Bible, they lacked mutual respect for each other. As we approach the holiday of *Shavuot*, which in Judaism celebrates the receiving of the *Torah*, God wants to teach us that we are not worthy of receiving Him if we do not first receive each other.

Throughout our history, many other tragedies also took place during this time. A number of crusades that wiped out entire Jewish villages took place during the *Omer*. The notorious blood libels that took root on many Passovers had tragic consequences during the *Omer*. During this time period, as we get closer to *Shavuot*, we read the *Torah* portion, *Bechukotai*, which says: “But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands . . . then I will do this to you: I will bring on you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and sap your strength.” This is no coincidence. God is telling us that the *Omer* period became a mourning period because we failed to honour the *Torah* that we are supposed to be excitedly anticipating.

After the 33rd day of counting, we resume the joyful nature of this time period and remember what once was and what can yet be again.

apply it

1. After identifying a key character trait you would like to work on, keep a “growth journal” for the next 30 days. At the end of each day, record where you may have fallen and where you may have improved in these areas.
2. Make every day count! Learn something new, grow a little more, and do something positive each day.
3. Make at least one person feel special and cherished every single day.
4. Begin each day by expressing gratitude to God for all that He has given you.
5. Spend time in God’s Word daily. Identify a book of the Bible to study and think about it. Share what you have learned with someone!
6. Try counting up, with reflection, to an anticipated celebration or milestone.



Counting Our Blessings

And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.” — Exodus 3:12

When God sent Moses to confront Pharaoh and ask him to free the children of Israel, He had a plan. The goal was never merely to free the Israelites from bondage. From the very outset of the mission, God explained to Moses that physical freedom was only a means to an end. God said, “*When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.*” The ultimate goal was to grant the Israelites spiritual freedom by receiving God’s Word at Mount Sinai.

There are seven weeks separating the time of the Exodus and the giving of the *Torah* on Mount Sinai. The Jewish sages teach that the children of Israel were so excited to experience this revelation of God that they counted the days the same way that a slave counts the days until he is free. In fact, the sages teach that the Israelites were even more joyful at the prospect of receiving God’s Word than they were about receiving their physical freedom from Egypt.

From that time forward, this seven-week period has been both a time of counting toward the day when the Israelites historically received the *Torah* and also a time

of joyful anticipation. The sages liken these seven weeks to the intermediate days between the first day of Passover and the last, or the first day of *Sukkot* (the Feast of the Tabernacles) and the last. The intermediate days are not typically associated with as many rituals as the first and the last, but nonetheless, they are not ordinary days either. They are a time of celebration.

Similarly, Passover can be seen as the beginning of one long holiday that culminates 50 days later on *Shavuot*. The 49 days in between them joyfully connect the two holidays and make them one. The Exodus on Passover made the receiving of the Ten Commandments possible on *Shavuot*. However, the Exodus on Passover is only significant because it leads to the revelation of God during *Shavuot*.

In Temple times, this joyful period was kicked off with a barley offering, representing the first of the grains ready for harvest. It was given as an expression of gratitude for God’s abundance. As the barley offering was presented, it was waved in every direction, symbolizing that God is everywhere, providing for all our needs. It is this beautiful partnership with God that we celebrate during these seven weeks.



Customs and Rituals Observed Today

“Count off seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain.”

— Deuteronomy 16:9



Today, without the Temple in Jerusalem, the main aspect of the *Omer* is the counting of the days. Each day, we recite a blessing, count the day, and pray for the rebuilding of the Temple. Ideally, the counting is done at night, because in Judaism, a new “day” begins at sunset. This can be traced back to the time of Creation, where in Genesis 1:5 God specifies, “*And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.*” Night, followed by day, is a “day.” If a person forgets to recite the blessing at night, he or she may still count the next day, but without a blessing.

Additionally, if one forgets to count the *Omer* during the night and during the day, no matter if it is Day Two or Day 45, he or she must continue counting for the duration of the 49 days without a blessing. That one lost day affects the rest of the counting.

Again, emphasizing the importance of each day, our counting is very specific. From Days One through Six, we simply state the number of the day: “Today is day number five.” On complete weeks, we state the number of days and weeks: “Today is 28 days, which is four weeks.” For all other days, we state the number of days, the number of weeks, and the number of days we have passed in the current week: “Today is 33 days, which is four weeks and five days.”

During the first 33 days of the *Omer*, we observe a period of mourning. The customs during these days include not shaving, getting haircuts, listening to music, or holding wedding celebrations. These minor changes in our daily living remind us of the tragedies that took place during this time and the work we need to do to rectify the past.

The 33rd day of the *Omer*, called *Lag BaOmer*, ends the mournful time period and also commemorates the day that Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai died. Rabbi Shimon was one of the five students who carried on the Jewish tradition passed down by Rabbi Akiva. Tradition tells that on the day that he died, Rabbi Shimon revealed an immense amount of *Torah* knowledge to his students and that his home was surrounded by fire representing the light of *Torah*.

This is why today, in order to mark Rabbi Shimon’s passing and the end of mourning, it is customary to build bonfires. Many sit around the bonfires singing songs of worship, speaking words of *Torah*, and celebrating with roasted marshmallows and kosher hot dogs. In Israel, thousands flock to the grave of Rabbi Shimon to mark the occasion.

After *Lag BaOmer*, we continue counting until Day 49 and then we begin to celebrate *Shavuot* the very next day.