

Counting Up

Source Sheet

**What can we learn from Jewish tradition about the act of counting?
How might counting help us keep the awareness of the plight of the captives in our hearts and in the minds of others?**

THE COMMANDMENT OF COUNTING THE OMER

According to the Torah, there is a commandment to count the days from Passover (from the second day of Passover) until the holiday of Shavuot- the time of bringing the Omer offering, as well as the holiday of the giving of the Torah.

1. Leviticus 23:15-16

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.

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמִּחֶרֶת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת־
עֶמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָתוֹת תְּמִילַת תְּהִינָה: עַד
מִמִּחֶרֶת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם
וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַה': (ויקרא כ"ג: ט"ו-ט"ז)

In practice, the counting is done each night (the Jewish 24 hour period begins at sunset), starting with 1 and ending with 49, counting up towards Shavuot. There is a blessing said before the act of counting, and one should count both the days and the weeks that have accumulated. For a detailed description of how to count the Omer see [this practical guide](#).

COUNTING TOWARDS A GOAL

2. Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #306

Since the acceptance of the Torah was the goal of our redemption and serves as the foundation of the Jewish people, and through it we achieved our greatness, we were commanded to count from the day after [the first day of] Pesach until the day that the Torah was given. This manifests our great desire for that awesome day which our hearts yearn for just as a servant yearns for shade. We count constantly – when will the day come that we yearn for, the day that we left slavery? **Because counting [towards a certain date] shows a person that all his desire and longing is to reach that time.**

3. Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim (Guide for the Perplexed) 3:43

Shavuot is the time of the Giving of the Torah. In order to honor and elevate this day we count the days from the previous festival until it [arrives], **like someone who is waiting for a loved one to arrive, who counts the days by the hours.**



Rachel Goldberg, mother of captive Hersh Goldberg Polin, wears the number of days her son has been in captivity over her heart, counting up the days until his return.

4. Transcription of Rav Soloveitchik's speech delivered to the Chevrah Shas in Boston on May 20, 1973 from the book *Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat ha-Omer and Shavu'ot*

...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 for which we look either forward or backward... Judaism requires 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 Jew 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 addition 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...

Discussion Questions:

- What are the elements of counting towards something that are mentioned in the various interpretations of the Counting of the Omer above?
- How might these elements and the practice of counting be relevant to the situation of the hostages held in captivity? What might we be counting from? Towards?

COUNTING THE OMER IN 2024

5. The Work by Eliana Leader, in 49 Steps from Limmud North America, May 13, 2024

I've always loved the "counterculture" nature of the Omer. In a world where the cultural norm is to count down to something that we look forward to - vacation, midnight on New Year's, etc. - counting up as a way of Judaism's encouragement not to take even one day for granted, to lean into the journey of our vulnerable and unknown times; holding hope and faith that something good is to come. In that practice, being Jewish has always felt like another opportunity to count my blessings both literally and figuratively.

This year however, where thus far almost the entirety of our Jewish year has been counting up the days since the tragedies and losses of October 7th, when we continue to count the days we miss family, friends, and brethren still being held hostage, it is hard to reclaim the feelings of gratitude and hope I have always felt connected to this practice of counting up. Yet in continuing to look inside Judaism for answers there are more than enough examples in our history of moments of heartache and despair for our people, when all seemed lost and the future was uncertain, and reclaiming our practices were what gave us the strength that brought us our redemption.

Take Chanukah for example, another holiday in which we count up. In a moment when all felt lost; the Temple was desecrated, the Greeks seemingly won, and Judaism was at the brink of extinction, amidst the rubble a Jew in despair who had no guarantee, only hope and faith to guide them, found a little bit of oil and instead of giving up chose to do what they could and lit the menorah. The rest is a history that inspires us and shapes our future to this day.

Fascinatingly, the question of how to count the days of Chanukah— whether starting at eight and decreasing or starting at one and increasing— is the subject of rabbinic debate. For Beit Shammai who advocates counting down, they want to connect Chanukah to the dedication of the Temple and the sacrifices that were brought decreasingly each day. But for Beit Hillel who advocates counting up, there is simply nothing more important than striving to increase in holiness.

As Pirkei Avot says, "He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it." It is not our duty to eradicate the darkness, but we can light a single candle and put more light into the world. And the next day, add just a bit more. And then just a bit more.

I don't know what happens next to our People, and I don't know how to fix it. But I know that I can keep doing the work; I can count the Omer and reclaim the fragile hope that comes with it. I will tie that hope to the practice of counting up, and I will continue to believe that tomorrow might be the day of the Geula, just like that very first Day 50.

6. Parashat Emor – Counting Confessions by Rabbi Debra Orenstein, May 16, 2024

We are now in the process of counting. Then again, we are always in the process of counting.

Some of what I am currently counting: days till my daughter's high school graduation; my mother's hemoglobin in grams per microliter; 224 days by the time you read this, unless there is a breakthrough, that hostages have been in Gaza; \$69,789 out of a goal of \$72,000 raised so far by Rabbis & Friends for World Central Kitchen; and, of course, the Omer (days from the second night of Passover until Shavuot)...

I am sure that you have your own list of countables. The Jewish year is full of them, with instructions for the nine days before Tisha B'av, the seven Sabbaths of consolation, the 25 hours of Yom Kippur, and the eight nights of Chanukah – to name a few. Maybe you are also counting days until a wedding or months since you were declared cancer-free. Were you recently counted as the 10th for a minyan? May you live to 120 – and count each day as blessed!

The word “count” has four main meanings: to number or determine the number of, to take into account, to include, and to matter. We count things because they count.

One of the rules for counting the Omer is that you must do so each evening for 49 nights. If you forget, you can count the following morning, without reciting a blessing. If you miss evening and morning, however, then, traditionally, you no longer say the blessing for any subsequent day. A technical explanation for this is that while most rabbis treat each day's counting as a separate mitzvah, some regard all seven weeks as a single block, based on the phrase in Emor “seven complete weeks” (Lev. 23:15). Omitting the blessing after a lapse represents a compromise with the minority position.

Canceling the blessing can also be understood as a natural, though seemingly harsh, consequence. Because you forgot twice, you forgo the privilege of declaring counting to be a mitzvah. If the Omer didn't count enough for you to remember to count it, then don't recite the blessing that casts the numbering of each day as a sacred duty.

Counting is so simple. We teach toddlers to do it. Just add one! How hard can that be? But too often and too blithely, we forget or override an intention to take careful account. Sometimes, we try to count too many things. With regard to priorities, “if everything counts, then nothing counts.”

Discussion Questions:

- What do each of the above authors learn from the counting of the Omer to be relevant to their current lived experience in 2024?
- What resonates with you?
- Do you have any additional parallels or distinctions between the counting of the Omer and current times?