

# COUNT UP

*by Ezra Cohen*

The Torah commands us to count the days between the festivals of Passover and Shavuot. This period is called Sefirat HaOmer, or counting the omer, and it refers to the counting of the seven weeks from the second night of Passover until the day before Shavuot. What is the essence of this counting?

Let us take a look at the commandment to count. The Baal HaMeor, a medieval Talmudic commentator, asks the following question based on the Talmud (Tractate Pesachim). Why is it that we do not make the blessing of shehechianu on the mitzvah of counting the omer? Shehechianu is a blessing which is said on a mitzvah that is performed at a certain time period during the year. In the blessing, we thank G-d for allowing us to reach this time to perform this mitzvah. Although the counting of the omer refers to a certain time period, we do not recite the blessing of shehechianu.

The Slonimer Rebbe, the great Chassidic leader, offers the following answer which goes to the heart and essence of counting. He says that counting is used when there is an end result that we want. It refers to a certain time in the future that is anxiously anticipated and desired. It refers to a situation where we are presently in the here and now, but we desire to be "there" at the final destination. We count the days to a wedding, a vacation, and an event - these things are in the future. They are intangible, but we long for these events to be here now. So what do we do? We count - the days, the minutes, until these events arrive; counting bridges the gap between now and then. This way we can feel the desired moment approaching. We can, with certainty, say how many days are left. Without the count, the desired time is only a dream. When we count, the goal we long and yearn for becomes a reality.

The Sefer HaChinuch, a classic 13th century work explaining the mitzvot, elucidates that during the time period when we count the omer, we are anticipating the festival of Shavuot when we received the Torah. We yearn to be at Mt. Sinai, so we count the days until Shavuot. In this way it becomes a reality and it builds excitement. The Slonimer Rebbe explains that the blessing of shehechianu

means that we thank Hashem for bringing us to this time. We want to be here now. This is the goal. The counting, on the other hand, expresses the fact that we have not arrived at the goal, Shavuot. That is why we count. We long to be there. Only once we have arrived at the goal of Shavuot can we recite shehechyanu, "thank you Hashem for bringing us now to this time of Shavuot."

When we long for something in the future like a wedding or a vacation, we count down to that event. Two months, three weeks, three days, we are getting closer and closer each day. So why is it, then, that if we long for the day of Shavuot do we count upward - 1,2,3? We should be counting down to the day we await: 30 days, 29 days etc. An answer given by Rabbi Moshe Shapiro, a present day Talmudic scholar in Israel, for this upward counting can perhaps give us another insight into the essence of counting. He says that the days of the omer are meant to be days of introspection and growth. The counting that we do is not meant to be a sentimental passing of time until we reach Shavuot; but rather the counting is a process of development as each day passes. When we count to a wedding or a vacation, the days leading to those events are not important. In fact, we would like them to pass as soon as possible. By counting downwards, we are showing that the days until the event are meaningless. We are merely counting the passage of time, which at the time of the event will equal zero, nothing.

In the case of the omer, on the other hand, we count upwards. The omer is a time for growth, one day builds on the previous - 1,2,3, and so on until we have 49 days of spiritual growth and reached a level befitting a people ready to accept the Torah on Shavuot. In fact, it is a custom in many synagogues to learn Ethics of Our Fathers during this seven-week period, since within this text we find the keys to character refinement.

This idea is echoed by the Tiferes Shlomo, a great Chassidic rebbe of pre-war Europe, who asks a question on the order of the Passover seder: Why do we first say Kadesh (sanctification) and then Urchatz (washing)? Wouldn't it make more sense to first cleanse oneself and only afterward, in this heightened state of purity, be sanctified? He answers that when Hashem took the Jews out of Egypt they were on the 49th level of impurity, the lowest possible level. They were "dirty" with sin, undeserving of salvation, but Hashem still "sanctified" the Jews with His miracles and took them out of Egypt. It was only afterwards, in the following 49 days, that the Jews "cleansed" themselves of their impurities to merit the receiving of the Torah on Shavuot. So we commemorate this kindness of Hashem on the seder night by first saying Kadesh and then doing Urchatz. May our counting instill within us a yearning and longing for Shavuot, to spend this time introspecting and working on ourselves, so we can be a people worthy of receiving of the Torah.

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