

YOMTOV, VOL. IV, # 7 - THE COUNT OF THE OMER - A COUNT OF GREAT ANTICIPATION

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Starting the second night of Pesach, we begin counting seven weeks, 49 days, until the holiday of Shavuos. This counting is called Sefiras Ha'Omer, The Counting of the Omer. (For more information on Sefiras Ha'Omer, see [I:16](#), [I:18](#))

One question posed by many early Halachik authorities pertains to how we perform the count. On each night of the 49 days between the start of the count and Shavu'os, we first make a blessing *"Blessed are you G-d . . . who has sanctified us with His mitzvos (commandments) and commanded us regarding the Counting of the Omer."* We then recite which day it is in the counting, followed by a breakdown of how many weeks and days have elapsed. (For example *"Today is 23 days, which is three weeks and two days to the Omer."*)

Usually, the first time we perform a seasonal or occasional Mitzvah, we recite an additional blessing. This blessing, popularly known as *"Shehechyanu,"* reads *"Blessed are you G-d . . . who has kept us alive, and sustained us, and brought us to this time."* We say it, for example, the first time we light the Chanukah candles, the first time we shake the Four Species on Sukkos, and the first time we recite the Kiddush on the holidays. However, we don't recite Shehechyanu the first time we count the Omer. What differentiates this commandment from others which carry with it the additional blessing?

The *Kedushas Levi* writes that the counting of Sefiras Ha'Omer is akin to another counting we find in the Torah. Within the laws concerning ritual purity (Tahara), there is a set of laws that pertain to a menstruant woman (*"Niddah"*). Physical contact between a woman and her husband is forbidden while she is experiencing her menstrual period. Once this has ceased, she may not immediately resume contact with her husband. She must count seven days. At the end of the seven days, she immerses in a *Mikvah* (ritual bath), and she is then permitted to resume contact with her husband. The *Kedushas Levi* explains that these seven days are important to the marital relationship. During the seven days, husband and wife count the days until when the Torah permits physical contact. Their longing for each other grows, and with each day, anticipation for the end of the count builds. When the eighth day arrives, it is with a sense of excitement and joy. The longing during this imposed separation has made the heart grow fonder, and the husband and wife can now freely express their feelings of attachment and love to each other.

G-d gave the nation of Israel the Torah on Shavu'os. This was a gift like no other, and one whose value is immeasurable. We received the Torah, and became the guardians of this treasure, because of the special relationship we have with G-d. Every year, during the period of Sefiras Ha'Omer, we prepare ourselves for the anniversary of this special occasion. We strengthen our dedication to Torah study. We strive to improve our character and interpersonal relationships so that we are fitting representatives of those who live by the Torah. We eagerly anticipate the day on which we reaffirm our special relationship with G-d. We do not make the blessing of Shehechyanu on counting Sefiras Ha'Omer because it is not appropriate. The seven-week count of Sefiras Ha'Omer serves the same purpose as the seven-day count of the Niddah: it builds excitement and creates anticipation of a day we should be eagerly awaiting. The count is not a particularly happy time. It is a time that separates us from a moment we eagerly await. Although the days dwindle as the count progresses, the anticipation and impatience only builds. Only once we have reached the special moment, the day on which we received the Torah, do we recite the special blessing *"Who has kept us alive and sustained and brought us to this day."*

The *B'nai Yisaschar* adds that the Torah alludes to the feelings we should have during the count. The Torah does not just state we should count weeks and days. It states *"And you should count for yourselves . . . seven weeks, they should be complete. . . until the morrow of the seventh week you shall count, 50 days (Vayikra 23:15)."*

Why does the Torah state that we should count seven **complete** weeks, when the Torah says right afterwards that we count until the 50th day? If we count until the 50th day, that means we will have counted seven weeks of seven days each, which are seven complete weeks! The answer, the *B'nai Yissaschar* writes, is that the count should be one continuous period of anticipation. We should count, with fervent eagerness from the first day to the last day, until we reach the very day we awaited, the day we received the Torah. The time in which we waited for the special day was filled with such enthusiasm and excitement that it becomes part and parcel of the celebration of Shavu'os. The long preparatory period, a time in which our contemplation of day 50 never wavered, was a time of complete focus, a time which is completed with the celebration of day 50. Hence, the seven weeks of the count aren't just seven weeks. They are seven complete weeks.

The Sefira period is a time that we must use to prepare ourselves for the "big day." It is for purposes of preparation, some say, that the study of Pirkei Avos is customary at this time. (See II:7, III:6). When we arrive at Shavu'os, we should all recite the blessing of Shehechyanu with a true and heartfelt appreciation of the message the blessing conveys.