

FORTY-NINE DAYS, ELEVEN HOURS

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

It's really a matter of simple arithmetic. Seven times seven is forty-nine. Add one, and you get fifty. A young schoolchild shouldn't have any problems making this easy calculation. Yet it would appear that the Torah does not trust us to get the answer right.

In this week's portion, we are introduced to the mitzvah of counting the Omer, the seven-week countdown from the second day of Passover until the festival of Shavuot (Leviticus 23:15-16): "And you shall count for yourselves," the Torah commands, "from the morrow of the day of rest . . . there should be seven complete weeks. Until the morrow of the seventh week, you shall count fifty days." Why does the Torah find it necessary to do the arithmetic for us? Don't we know that the day after a full seven weeks is the fiftieth day?

The commentators offer a homiletic explanation.

Let us take a closer look at the counting of the Omer. On an elementary level, we count the Omer to build up our excitement and anticipation for the festival of Shavuot, which celebrates the Giving of the Torah. On the mystical level, however, the preparation is far more profound. During these seven weeks, we are meant to climb the ladder of elevation, to refine and improve our inner selves so that we will receive the Torah with purity of soul. Each day, each week brings us higher and higher until we reach the final goal.

But what if you are distracted by the disturbances of life and arrive at Shavuot having counted the days but not having done the introspective work? Should you lose heart and become despondent?

The Torah reassures us that all is not lost. Even if you waited until the eleventh hour, it is still not too late. You may have missed the opportunity to climb the fifty steps to perfection in the methodical, laborious and reliable step-by-step process. But you need not despair. You can still make the leap in one glorious bound. If you can generate within yourself one burst of transcendent inspiration, you can be catapulted right to the top of the fifty-step ladder in one day, in one exhilarating moment.

This is what the Torah is telling you. "Until the morrow of the seventh week, you shall count fifty days." You can still accomplish a complete fifty-day count on the morrow of the seventh week. It will just take more effort.

A young man who lived with his parents left on an extended business trip which kept him away from home for over a month. The first morning after his return, his mother came into the kitchen in the

morning to find that her son had prepared a lavish breakfast for her. The table was exquisitely laid and covered with platters of the choicest foods. A large bouquet of flowers stood in the center. The mother smiled with delight. "What's the occasion?" she asked. "Is it the anniversary of some special event? What's going on?"

"Mother," said the young man, "it is my honor and privilege to serve you breakfast every day. But since I've been away for over a month, let me at least make up for it with one special breakfast."

In our own lives, we are sometimes inclined to think that life has passed us by, that we have squandered away the opportunities for spiritual growth that came our way. If only we could live our lives over again, we tell ourselves, how differently we would do things. If only we could avoid all those foolish mistakes we made, how much better off we would be. All this is probably true, but it no cause for throwing up our hands in defeat. As long as we live, we have the ability to make a great leap that will transform who and what we are, a great leap that will bring us right into the loving embrace of the Almighty. © Text Copyright © 2009 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

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