

# COUNTING SEFIRAS HA-OMER UNINTENTIONALLY

*by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt*

As Lag ba-Omer approaches, it is timely to call attention to a halachic problem which can easily arise. People frequently ask each other what day of the Omer it is. If one gives the correct answer — even though he does not intend to fulfill the mitzvah of counting the Omer by answering his friend — it is considered as if he fulfilled his obligation to count the Omer. This halachah, which is recorded in Shulchan Aruch[1], is based on an opinion in the Talmud that holds that mitzvos einam tzerichos kavanah — mitzvos can be fulfilled even without specific intent to fulfill them. By uttering the correct day's count of the Omer, one has lost the opportunity to recite a blessing over the counting for that night since he has, in the eyes of the halachah, already counted the Omer, albeit unintentionally[2]. One should, therefore, not give a direct answer when asked for the day of the Omer; rather, one should say, "yesterday's count was such-and-such." Of course, this advisory applies only from sunset and onwards, since counting sefirah before sunset is invalid[3].

The danger of inadvertently counting the Omer by a causal response or comment regarding what day of the Omer it is, is most prevalent on Lag ba-Omer. The very name "Lag ba-Omer" states that it is the 33rd day of the Omer count (as Lag is the letter equivalent for the number 33)[4]. Thus, on the evening of Lag ba-Omer after sunset, one should be careful not to express that "today is Lag ba-Omer" until after he counts the Omer with the blessing.

Question: If, inadvertently, one forgot and responded with the correct sefirah count, is there any way that he can count again that night with the blessing?

Discussion: B'diavad, one is permitted to recite sefirah that night with the blessing:

- If he responded by saying just the correct number of that day, but did not say "Today is number so-and-so," then he may repeat the sefirah with a blessing[5]. But if he omitted just the word "ba-Omer" (or "la-Omer"), then the count remains valid and it may not be repeated with the blessing[6].
- If he responded by saying, "Today is so-and-so" but did not mention the "weeks" count, he may still repeat the sefirah with a blessing. For instance, on the seventeenth day he responded, "Today is day number seventeen," but he did not add, "which is two weeks and three days." [7] [Obviously, this applies only after the first week of sefirah has passed.]
- Even if he responded with the correct number and the right weekly count but had specific and clear intention not to fulfill the mitzvah of Sefiras ha-omer with his response, then he may repeat the sefirah with a blessing[8].

- If the person who inadvertently forgot and responded, "Today is so and so" is one who is always particular to count the Omer after tzeis ha-kochavim only, and this exchange took place before tzeis ha-kochavim, he may repeat the count with the blessing[9].
- If on the fifth day, for example, he responded, "Today is six minus one," or, "Today is three plus three," he may repeat the count with the blessing[10].
- If in response to the question he wrote down the correct sefirah count (but did not say it), he may repeat the sefirah with the blessing[11].
- If the questioner, for example, asked, "Is today day number five?" and the response was, "Yes, it is," then both the questioner and the respondent can repeat the sefirah and recite the blessing[12].

Question: May one repeat the sefirah with a blessing if, in response to the question, "What was yesterday's Sefiras ha-omer," one mistakenly answered today's count?

Discussion: Yes, he may. Since his intention was to say yesterday's count, it is considered as if he had specific intent not to fulfill today's mitzvah. Although he mistakenly said the wrong (today's) count, it still does not change the fact that he specifically intended not to fulfill the mitzvah[13].

Question: If one forgot to count one day of the Sefiras ha-Omer, may he continue to count?

Discussion: There is a major dispute among the poskim of the Geonic era over whether or not forgetting to count one day invalidates the entire count. Some are of the opinion that the Torah's command to count "seven complete weeks" renders the entire count as one entity, one long mitzvah. Consequently, forgetting to count one day destroys the entire sequence and no further counting is possible. Most other poskim hold, however, that each day is considered a separate mitzvah. One (or several) day's omission, therefore, has no bearing on counting the other days.

The Shulchan Aruch[14] rules like the majority opinion, that one day's counting has no connection to the other days'. One must, therefore, continue to count the sefirah even when a day [or several days] were omitted. The blessing over the count, however, should not be said, in deference to those who hold that omitting a day invalidates the entire mitzvah. The Mishnah Berurah recommends that one hear the blessing from someone else, so that he can fulfill the mitzvah in the proper way, with a blessing.

If a person is uncertain as to whether he missed the previous day's count, he is permitted to count the remaining days with a blessing[15].

One who forgot to count during the night should count during the following day without a blessing. He may then continue to count on the following evenings with a blessing.

One who forgot to count on a Thursday night but remembered to do so on Friday afternoon after kabbalas Shabbos and Maariv but before sunset, may count on the following days with a blessing[16].

There is a dispute among the poskim<sup>[17]</sup> concerning one who forgot to count one evening, but remembered to count the next day after sunset but before nightfall (the time period known as *bein ha-shemashos*). Most poskim allow him to count on the following days with a blessing while a minority opinion does not<sup>[18]</sup>.

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1.O.C. 489:4.

2.Although basic halachah follows the opposing view — that one must have specific intent when fulfilling mitzvos — still, in deference to the view according to which one would have fulfilled the mitzvah, we do not recite the blessing on the (second) sefirah; Mishnah Berurah 489:22 and Beur Halachah (s.v. *she'em* and *eino*).

3.Beur Halachah 489:4, s.v. *eino*. A minority view recommends that one should avoid a direct response as early as *plag ha-minchah*; see Shulchan Aruch ha-Rav 489:15 and Machatzis ha-Shekel 489:10.

4.See Sha'arei Teshuvah 489:1 and Beur Halachah, s.v. *moneh*, who quote various views as to whether or not one fulfills the mitzvah of sefirah by counting with *roshei teivos*.

5.Mishnah Berurah 489:20 and Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 25. L'chatchilah, however, one should not rely on this leniency and should avoid stating the correct number even without saying *Today*; Kaf ha-Chayim 489:53.

6.Mishnah Berurah 489:8; 489:21.

7.Mishnah Berurah 489:22. Since other poskim disagree and maintain that one has fulfilled his obligation even without mentioning the "weeks" count [except at the end of each week days 7, 14, 21, etc.], one should l'chatchilah not rely on this leniency; see Da'as Torah 489:4; Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 489:28 and Kaf ha-Chayim 489:55.

8.Mishnah Berurah 489:22.

9.Beur Halachah 489:4, s.v. *she'em*.

10.Be'er Moshe 3:82.

11.Chasam Sofer 6:19; Aruch ha-Shulchan 489:9.

12.Da'as Torah 489:4, quoting Zachor l'Avraham.

13.Be'er Moshe 3:80.

14.O.C. 498:8.

15.O.C. 489:8, Mishnah Berurah and Beur Halachah.

16. Sha'arei Teshuvah 489:4; Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:99-3.

17. See Beis Shlomo 1:102; Birkei Yosef 489:17; Sha'arei Teshuvah, 489:4; Sho'el u'Meishiv 4:3-127.

18. See Kaf ha-Chayim 489:83 who rules not to say a blessing, while Minchas Yitzchak 9:57 and Yabia Omer 4:43 rule that a blessing may be said. Surely, one who remembered to count within 9 minutes after sunset, may count on the following days with a blessing; see Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:62.

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