

The Counting of the Omer

S'firat Ha-Omer

ספירת העומר

You shall count for yourselves from the day after the holy day, on the day that you bring the Omer of grain as an offering. Count off from that day, until you have counted seven complete weeks. The day after the end of the seventh week of your counting will be fifty days. (Leviticus 23:15-16)

Teach us to count our days, that we may cultivate a heart of wisdom. (Psalm 90:12)

HISTORY

The Counting of the Omer is the ancient Jewish ritual of blessing and counting each of the 49 days between Pesach and Shavuot.

The counting began as an agricultural ritual. Our ancestors would pray for an abundant spring harvest by waving a sheaf, an *omer*, of barley toward the night sky. Over time, this agricultural rite was replaced by liturgy and the counting became the way to mark the Israelites' journey from bondage in Egypt to revelation at Mount Sinai.

For the Kabbalists, the Jewish mystics of the 16th and 17th centuries, the Counting of the Omer became a time of spiritual exploration and cleansing, a way for us to prepare our souls to receive the divine guidance that comes to us each year on Shavuot.

Counting the Omer is a mindfulness practice aimed at helping us pay attention to the movement of our lives. It is an opportunity for deep introspection. The Counting of the Omer seeks to cleanse and renew our *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshamah* (layers of body, mind and soul) so we can respond to the circumstances of our lives with compassion and wisdom.

The mystical tradition teaches that these 49 days between Pesach and Shavuot are divided into seven week periods, with each week containing a specific spiritual quality. The qualities are guided by seven of the ten *sefirot*, the Divine emanations through which, the mystics believed God revealed Godself in the world.

WEEKS OF THE OMER

Week One

Hesed—Generosity, Love, Compassion

Week Two

Gevurah—Strength, Judgment, Discernment

Week Three

Tiferet—Radiance, Harmony, Balance, Truth

Week Four

Netzakh—Eternity, Vision, Endurance

Week Five

Hod—Presence, Gratitude

Week Six

Yesod—Foundation, Connection

Week Seven

Malkhut/Shekhina—Majesty, Divine Presence

On each of the forty nine days, two qualities intersect with each other so that each day is unique. The invitation is to count each day, and as we do, to meditate and reflect on the spiritual qualities. Week by week, day by day, let these qualities focus our attention, pose questions and challenge our perceptions.

The Israelites' journey took place in the vastness of the desert where they encountered their deepest fears and their most expansive visions. It was in the desert that they heard the Divine speak, instructing them how to live in relationship to themselves and all creation with awe, reverence and gratitude. The mystics teach that when we leave our routines, habits and expectations and allow ourselves to go into the unknown—to traverse the wilderness of mind and spirit—we open ourselves to receive divine guidance. The Divine speaks in the wilderness. Our task is to open and to listen. May the journey be a blessing.

HOW TO COUNT THE OMER

On pages 48-53 of the Shir Tikvah siddur, you will find the instructions and blessing for fulfilling the mitzvah of the daily Counting of the Omer.

RESOURCES

Spiritual Guide to Counting of the Omer: 49 Steps to Personal Refinement According to the Jewish Tradition by Rabbi Simon Jacobson
Celebrating the Jewish Holidays: Spring and Summer Holidays by Paul Steinberg
MyJewishLearning.com
Neohasid.org