

# Counting the *Omer*: The Path of *Etz Chaim* Shabbat Hol Hamoed Pesach

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What's interesting about the holidays is that Torah readings are very specific. They come out of order, not the next parshah in line. They're reminders, wormholes back to some other part of the teachings. Like the pointing finger of the scroll reader, they guide us to a message linked to the holiday and its rituals.

In this case, tomorrow we'll read about the 13 attributes of God. I spoke on those the last time I was here, and no re-run tonight. Though ask me if you want a link to the *d'var*. We're readying ourselves for *Kedoshim*, *Holiness*, the next *parshah*, and interestingly also the middle *parshah* in the whole Torah, a spiritual lynchpin of sorts.

More on God and holiness later. First I'm going to tell you the story of a road. The road of *etz chaim*, the Tree of Life. Not the Five Books of Moses tree of life, but the other one, the Kabbalistic one.

I'm also going to tell you about my path to that road. And my feeling that both *etz chaim* – the Torah and the Kabbalistic tree – form the spine of each lifetime. A path that each of us travels, consciously or not, over and over on our soul's journey.

As too long a practitioner of unconsciousness – momentary or embedded – I want to focus on the benefits of daily practice as an antidote. In this case the practice of counting the *omer*, on the road from *Pesach* to *Shavuot*. The span of 49 days we're given each year in which to contemplate what it means to leave *mitzrayim* and to journey into a new beginning. To leave a predictable past, and to open ourselves to new ways of seeing and being.

I was called back to Judaism ten years ago by the 22 letters. Walking though Borders, I saw a box entitled *The Oracle of Kabbalah*, a book and deck of cards: ask a question; see what card responds; study the letter and its associations. While there are proscriptions in Judaism against prognostication, I wasn't (and likely never will be) *frum* enough to obey them.

The *Oracle's* both eclectic and deep. Interpretations of the letters from a fellow seeker based in Ashland, a guy named Richard Seidman. At the time it could have been an Art Scroll *Chumash*. To me it was Judaism with a capital J.

I took it home, prayed, asked, shuffled, and out popped a *lamed*. The staff. The ox goad. The stand up tall, get moving, time to hit the road and do your work letter. It wonked me about the neck and shoulders the way a Zen monk does if you fall asleep in meditation.

*Wake up, wake up. Wonk again. Wake up, wake up.*

A few years later I met Dolfy, who's by no means to blame for the persistent failings of my practice. He regularly emphasized the three pillars of Jewish life: Torah, prayer, and *mitzvot*.

Prayer's easy. I like talking to God. Asking, listening, answering, and, oh yeah, lots of bargaining. All of it. Any time, any where.

In my third year of Torah study I feel like the restaurant reviewer I always wanted to be: *I found this place so good I almost don't want to tell, lest it be trampled by tourists*. It's a weekly affirmation of paying attention. Of asking why we're being told this story, at this time, in this way. Sometimes we're literal, others philosophical. Sometimes we probe at the root of a Hebrew word. Others at our own hearts. It's always a teaching.

The *mitzvot* I'm still not qualified to talk about. I can't even get the ten commandments right. Dolfy'd probably tell me to keep more *mitzvot*. Still on my to-do list.

All to say this season offers us, in addition to spring cleaning and forsaking leavened goods, the practice of counting the *omer*. 49 days to look into our souls, to walk the path of *etz chaim*.

I was tempted to bring some visuals but settled on arm waving. There are ten (and a hidden eleventh, a different sidetrack) positions on the tree of life, called *sephirot*. Each is an attribute of the divine, and also an attribute of self, as we mirror the divine.

They form a series of triangles. The top three are the most ethereal:

*Keter* – the crown;

*Chochmah* – wisdom;

*Binah* – understanding.

The hidden *Da'at* – knowledge – is the bridge to the lower seven:

*Chesed* – loving-kindness, mercy;

*Gevurah* – restraint, justice;

*Tipheret* – harmony, compassion.

Then *Netzach* – victory, zeal;

*Hod* – glory, splendor; and

*Yesod* – foundation and possibility.

All to land at *Malkuth* – home of the *Shechinah* – the kingdom, and also here, today, now, this moment, this life.

It's a path from the most divine to the most real, a series of oppositions and resolutions: each triangle built of an attribute, its counterpoint, and their synthesis.

Here's an example: *Chochmah* – untethered Wisdom. Opposite: *Binah* – Understanding. The resolution, *Da'at* – Knowledge. The weight and responsibility that Oppenheimer and the Manhattan Project crew must have felt: You've channeled the truth into being and now you have to live with the consequences.

You can't go back to being unconscious.

That's what counting the *omer* can do: bring you to a higher level of consciousness, a greater understanding of your own depth and process.

Counting the *omer* teaches us how to walk the lower seven *sephirot*: one week, one attribute, at a time. We illuminate each aspect of each *sephira*, seven times seven, one day at a time. Along the way we can bring some light to our hidden, darker, places, and improve at least a little into our better selves.

Why “*omer*?” *Omer* means sheaf. Sheaf as in a specific measure of grain, like wheat or barely. A collection of stalks. What're we instructed to do? To count the sheaf of our souls, stalk by stalk, element by element, *sephira* by *sephira*.

What's the counting about? About telling the truth to ourselves. The truth about who we are, where we've been, what we want, and what we need to see, do, and become.

We're asked to break down the whole and look at the component parts. As we do, we gain greater understanding of what makes us human and what makes us holy. If we're good and lucky, if we do the process with deep *kavannah*, deep intention, we can do some healing along the road.

First we need to acknowledge our flaws and failings. What happens when *yetzer hara*, our lower self, has steered us off course. When ego has ruled the helm. When instead of moving forward, we've only been running ourselves in circles.

Think context: We're out of Egypt. Just one day but the world is hugely different. Instead of *mitzrayim*, we're thrust newly free into the world. Unsure, pursued by the chariots of an angry Pharaoh, till we're standing at the Red Sea, the future unknown, death looming in every direction.

Moments like this require utter trust in the divine. And in that moment, we're asked to start counting: To look deeply into our selves and our hearts. To look deeply at the worlds both seen and unseen. And to name our place in that cosmology.

One thing I love about Torah is how literal the metaphors can be. You need to see the way, God sends a pillar of fire. You get too distracted by YouTube or your job, you get a chance to focus: one, two, three four, five, six, seven. And back to one again.

*Wake up, wake up.* Remember to count. Get more conscious and more mindful. Wake up and see God.

That's the beauty of these seven *sephirot*. The counting starts with the *chesed* of *chesed*, the purest aspect of divine love. Unlimited blessing and acceptance. The outpouring of light and goodness from the eternal flowing directly into each of us. And the counting guides us inexorably to here and now, to the *malkuth* of *malkuth*. The most holy aspect of this present moment. Here, where we live our daily lives.

You iterate each aspect of each *sephira*. *Chesed v chesed, gevurah v chesed, tipheret v chesed*, and tonight, on night four, we begin *netzach v chesed*. That's the grad school version. But if you've never done this before, keep it simple. For the next few days simply concentrate on *chesed*. Every evening, every morning, and a few times during the day, really take it in. That you are loved by a loving God. And your job is to reflect that love back into the world.

Next Tuesday night, we move on to *gevurah*. You'll spend a week shining your light there. On where you're too tight and where you're too codependent. Where your boundaries are impermeable. Where you're too judgmental. Where you need to soften.

There's places to sign up for daily *omer* reminders. And numerous interpretations of the *sephirot* and their interactions. You can listen to others, or to yourself. Journaling the *omer* is a wonderful practice. Your scribbles and questions matter as much as your insights and answers.

Start where it all begins. In your heart. Start with prayer. With a conversation with God that goes something like this: *I want to get to know you better. I want to become softer and more open. I choose the path of etz chaim.* So that after 49 days, when you've moved from *chesed v chesed* to *malkuth v malkuth*, you're lighter and clearer and cleaner and ready to receive even more blessings.

Because after 49 days, we reach Sinai. After seven weeks on this journey, we are given the gift, instruction, and responsibility of the 10 commandments. We are told how to live.

That's counting of the *omer* 101. Sit with it. Embrace this practice. Let it in. Let the *sephirot* permeate you. Let them make you just a bit holier. A little more conscious.

Because that's what it's all about. Taking some time each day to think about what matters. Becoming more conscious without needing the wonking. Creating a richer and deeper daily practice. Who knows, maybe some of those other *mitzvot* will sneak into your life.

If we all do this, we'll become more ready to do our work. To do *tikkun olam* in the unique and beautiful ways we were sent here to do. Dedicate our lives more to goodness. To healing and compassion. To choosing what matters. To living with greater consciousness, greater awareness, and with greater *kavannah*.

So that next year when we count the *omer*, or tomorrow when we live our lives, we're just a little more likely to do things right. Become our higher, more holy selves. And to share that light and goodness with one another.

Shabbat shalom.