

As I write this and as you receive this newsletter, we are in the period of counting the Omer. Like so many Jewish practices, this brief evening ritual of counting the days from the second night of Pesach to the night before Shavuot has multiple meanings and connotations. At its ancient agricultural core, the Omer was a practice of bringing a sheaf of grain to the Temple and waving it as an offering and an invocation of blessing for each day of the harvest.

The Omer traditionally had a quality of melancholy about it. That may have originated with the time in the year cycle and the anxiety our ancestors felt about the harvest before it had come to completion. The Talmud in *Masechet Yevamot* 62b also teaches that 1200 pairs of disciples of Rabbi Akiva died during the period between Pesach and Shavuot, and one of the possible reasons given in the Talmud is from a respiratory illness. For that reason, it is traditional for the Omer to be treated as a period of mourning, at least up until the 33rd day, *LaG* (literally *lamed-gimel* – 33) *ba'Omer*, when the plague was said to cease. As our counting of the Omer this year coincides with what will likely be the peak of a plague of respiratory illness in our region, that sense of mourning is perhaps too relevant.

But the Omer has yet more meaning. There is also the spiritual significance of marking the time from when we were liberated from slavery to the time we arrived at Sinai and received revelation. To that purpose, many people follow the practice of meditating on different mystical attributes of each day of the Omer, in an attempt to refine their souls and ready themselves to receive revelation. It is a time of anticipation, of readying ourselves for what comes next.

I want to suggest that this year, we inhabit both the mourning and the hope of the Omer. It is important to mourn the plague and all who suffer because of it. And it is important to remember that revelation continues, and that we will have a role to play in receiving Torah and living Torah—now and after the plague has passed. I wish us the grace to hold all of these meanings together: the grief, the work and the hope.