

Some of you may be aware that 8 weeks ago, John had surgery to repair a torn Achilles tendon. It has been a journey these past 8 weeks of time feeling as if it is dragging along as he has been unhappily slowed down by this, and was waiting anxiously to be mended; longer days of caring for him and helping him heal, days filled with extra doctors' appointments or work to catch up on. Then, suddenly looking back and realizing that 8 weeks ago feels like yesterday as he is much closer to his healthy self once more.

In our ordinary lives, we note how often time seems to speed by. We may find ourselves saying, "Where has this day/week/year gone?" Time can disappear without a trace. In other moments, we experience time dragging by slowly, when we are waiting for something with great anticipation, when we are watching the second-hand as it slowly ticks its way around the clock face, feeling that endless waiting for the passage of time. Time seems to be our own internal measure of external realities that we impose on ourselves. Judaism offers a much different spiritual teaching about time during this season of the year.

The counting of the *Omer* spans the forty-nine days from Passover to *Shavuot*, stemming from the biblical commandment found in the book of Leviticus. It says, "You shall count... from the day that you brought the *Omer* as a wave offering" (23:15). The *Omer* was a measure of barley (approximately two quarts) that Jews brought as an offering to the Temple in Jerusalem on the second day of Passover. We are to set aside one measure

of barley on each of the forty-nine days between the two spring festivals, and then to offer that barley as a sacrifice on Shavuot. After the destruction of the Temple, these seven weeks continued to be marked, counted, as the period of “the *Omer*”. The command became simply to count the days sequentially, beginning in the evening when the Jewish day begins: ‘Today is one day of the *Omer*’, ‘today is two days of the *Omer*’... ‘Today is one week and three days, that is ten days of the *Omer*’, and so forth.

On Pesach, we celebrate our liberation from bondage in Egypt. We may know that the Hebrew word for Egypt is *mitzrayim*, a word that can also be translated as “the narrow place” (from the word *tzar* or “narrow”). This makes our liberation from *Mitzrayim* not necessarily freedom from an ancient place, but in every generation from restraints, inhibitions, and restrictions of our free movement and expression. In retelling the Exodus story on Passover, we symbolically come through these “narrow straits”, through the miracle of the parted waters into freedom; but, we need more before we are sufficiently mature to receive Torah at Sinai –as individuals and as a people.

By counting the *Omer*, we symbolically mark the time between *Pesach* - liberation from slavery - to *Shavuot* - the assumption of responsibility in the acceptance of Torah, which represents a collective commitment to living an ethical, rule-governed life of divine purpose. For each of these 49 days, we acknowledge one more step in our journey toward freedom.

Kabbalah, our Jewish mystical tradition, takes a further step to transform this time preparing to receive the Torah by instituting practice and prayer ritual designed to prompt personal character refinement. They actually established a prayer ritual consisting of seven elements for counting the *Omer*, the blessing and the actual counting being only one small part of the nightly ritual.

This kabbalistic liturgy for this counting includes reciting the commandment: “*And you shall count for yourselves (U’sefartem lachem)*”. They say that *U’sefartem* is not just about counting, but connected to the word *safir*, the lustrous sapphire stone – so it also means ‘you shall shine’. The additional word *lachem (for yourselves)* – which might seem superfluous (you shall count for yourselves...for who else?)– emphasizes that this counting consists not merely of numbering days, but is a reflexive statement, pointing back toward ourselves to internalize a refinement of ourselves to the point that we *shine for ourselves* – we emanate a glow and an aura from within that comes from the purified beauty of a transformed self. This readies us to absorb the 50th day – the moment of revelation at Sinai when we receive the Divine blueprint of Torah.

This traditional liturgy means to effect *tikkun* - repair and harmonious restoration - in all the realms of our souls, readying us to receive Torah at Shavuot. This is evidenced in a most beautiful part of the liturgy that we recite each night: “*Sovereign of the universe, you connect with us through Moses your servant to count **sefirat ha-omer** in order to purify us from our spiritual*

obstacles and the places where we are bound, in order that our souls be purified...and through this may the divine flow be plentiful in all the worlds, to repair our souls from all lowliness, and may this action of counting purify and sanctify us through your holiness.” Simply stated, our counting opens the flow of diving blessing into the world, which gives the marking of time an entirely different meaning and purpose, a soul-filled, eternal purpose.

The kabbalists used the emotional ladder of the *sefirot* – aspects of our soul and God’s soul – to illuminate each day: Lovingkindness, justice, beauty, eternity, splendor, foundation and divinity are these seven traditional qualities. Truthfully, there are many more spiritual character traits that I examine in my own self-reflection, including humility, compassion, gratitude, awe, responsibility, truth, and silence – not an exhaustive list, to be sure.

I embraced the counting the *Omer* over the past few year as another exercise in my ever-struggling discipline of mindfulness. Counting each of the days from Passover until Shavuot sounds deceptively simple, but believe me, it is not an easy task. It requires a consciousness, a mindfulness, to remember to count each night. The practice of counting the *Omer* reinforces the valuable experience and consciousness of making each of our days count. Think about the deliberate way in which the Torah numbers the days of the lives of our patriarchs: Abraham - “One hundred years and seventy years and five years” Sarah - “one hundred years and twenty years and seven years” Isaac – “one hundred years and eighty years” and so on....this helps us to consider the

fullness of their days and the significance of each and every day. We count the Omer in a similarly careful and focused manner in order to help us recognize the completeness of each day.

Here's the catch about any spiritual practice: it is not just about thinking but about how that reflection helps us to change our actions. All spiritual practice is meant to be preparation for the real-life situations that we encounter, that strengthens our ability to choose our actions, which expands our capacity to exercise free will. Judaism see that trait as a defining feature of being human. So, this brief acknowledgement of the passing of time each day as we count the *Omer* gives us the opportunity for reflection, followed by mindful action, with further reflection to follow. We might notice the difference between being fully in the present through this counting, and how we spend much of the rest of our time. Especially in challenging or troubling times, when we can pause in the present moment and put aside thoughts of past and future, we might gain an added measure of clarity; reconnect with a broader, more meaningful perspective. When we can rest our mind in the present moment, we might discover a sense of peace, gratitude, contentment.

Before counting each night, I gather my intention to attentiveness. This is my intention, my *kavanah* for this night:

Blessed are You, Breath of all Life,
Who provides me with this opportunity
to refine my life through the counting of the *omer*.
Today is the 11th day of counting the *omer*.
Today I will focus my attention on
my capacity to heal and be healed.
May my efforts aid in the redemption of the world
through justice, mercy, and spiritual awakening.
Amen.