

## סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר *s'fir-at ha-omer* Counting of the Omer

According to the Torah Vayikra (Leviticus) 23:15-16, "From the day after the day of rest--that is, from the day you bring the sheaf for waving--you are to count seven full weeks, until the day after the seventh week; you are to count fifty days; and then you are to present a new grain offering to Adoni."

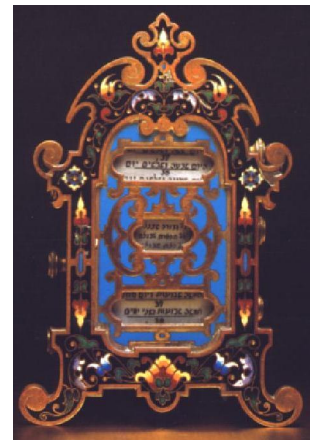
We are obligated to count the 50 days, or 7 weeks. However, there is controversy over the day when this count starts. The phrase in Hebrew for "the day after the day of rest" is מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת *mimakharat haShabbat*. That start day is understood by the P'rushim [Pharisees] and most of modern Jewry as the day after Passover, or Nisan 16. Passover is here viewed as the day of rest. Or HaOlam Messianic Congregation presently follows this widely accepted view. The alternative view, of the Ts'dukim [Sadducees], possibly the Essenes of Qumran, and the Karaites is that the count starts with the day after the first Shabbat after Passover. The count continues to the day before Shavu'ot, seven full weeks. Since there are two different possible start dates for the counting, there are also two differing versions of when Shavu'ot is celebrated. One advantage of the rendering according to the Ts'dukim is that then Shavuot, at the end of the counting, always falls on a Sunday. This was convenient for certain purposes in Temple times.



The farmers of Israel would begin their spring harvests with the barley crop at Passover. The harvest continued for seven weeks as the other crops and fruits began to ripen. As each fruit ripened, the first of each type would NOT be eaten but instead the farmer would tie a ribbon around the branch. This ribbon signified that these fruits were Bikkurim, or the first fruits. The instruction was specific that

"You are not to eat bread, dried grain or fresh grain until the day you bring the offering for your God." Vayikra 23:14

The counting period is known as the *S'fir-at ha-omer* סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר. An omer is variously defined as a sheaf of grain, or a unit of dry measure, used for grain. This term is used because on the first day of the count, in the days of the Temple, an omer of barley was cut down and brought to the Temple as a wave offering. Then, every night, from the second night of Passover to the night before Shavu'ot, a blessing was and is still recited, with a formal counting of the omer in terms of both weeks and days. As a reminder and ornamentation of the count, machines and charts were devised. (To the right is a picture of an Omer Counting machine.)



Traditionally, it is to be done daily in the evening, when the day begins according to Jewish reckoning. However, if one forgets, it can be done in the morning. The blessing said before the enumeration in the evening is:

בְּרִיךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ עַל סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר.

*Ba-rookh atah Adoni, Eh-lo-hay-noo meh-lekh ha-olam, asher keed-sha-noo  
b'meets-vo-tav v'tsee-va-noo al s'fee-rat ha-omer*

Blessed are You, Adoni our G-d, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with thy commandments, and commanded us concerning the counting of the omer.

The counting reminds us of the link between פסח Passover, which commemorates the Exodus, and שבועות Shavuot (Pentecost) which is the Firstfruits of the wheat harvest. Shavuot also commemorates the giving of the Torah (Word of G-d). Shavuot is linked to the giving of the Torah because the Ten Commandment were given on the day of Shavu'ot at Mt. Sinai. Redemption from slavery at Pesakh was not complete until we received the Torah on Shavu'ot. Liberation is useless unless we know how to live as free men and women. This is analogous to our spiritual journey as Messianic Jews. We believe we are brought out of the slavery to guilt and sin by our Passover Lamb, the Messiah, Who bore the guilt of our sins so the angel of death and condemnation "passes over" us, giving us a sense of forgiveness and joy. We must learn to walk in the ways of the scripture and the New Life, which are represented by the Shavuot celebration of the Torah.

Further, it is profoundly significant to us that the ספירת העמר, Sefirah or omer count is mentioned, or at least implied, in Acts 2:1 as the activity preceding Shavuot. Acts 2:1 declares that Shavuot had "fully come" συμπληρουσθαι *sumpleeroústhai* [to cram (a net), level up (a hollow)]. This could reasonably imply that they were counting the days. This would be consistent with the command of Yeshua the Messiah, to "stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven". At the end of the counting period the רוח הקודש *Ruakh HaKodesh*, the Holy Spirit, was poured out upon Yeshua's followers.

This daily counting, if we do it as a little verbal exercise, can adorn our personal worship as the symbolic focus of a spiritual inventory. Let us seek to take account of our ways, and be of "one accord" and of an open heart. Just as the grain is maturing and ripening during this time, so may we, as Messiah Yeshua's followers, mature and ripen by obedience to the Word, during the countdown to Shavuot, so that the Ruakh and the Sh'khee-nah, G-d's presence, may be upon us.

Furthermore, during the time encompassed by Sefirah, the fruits of the field ripen and it is, therefore, a period of uncertainty -- of hope and prayer that our physical sustenance will be continued in abundance (Abudraham Hashalem, p. 241; B. R. H. 16a). A contemporary scholar has suggested that this uncertainty was due, in particular, to the fact that in Israel, the hot winds that are so harmful to the crops blow between Pesakh and Shavu'ot (Wahrman, Hagei Yisra'el Umo'adaw, p. 171).

Therefore, this counting time is somewhat solemn, for the harvest is at risk. Historically, the omer period has been marked by several tragedies occurring to our people. The last great deportation to the gas chambers, that of the Jews of Hungary, took place during the Sefirah period. Although the crematoria and gas chambers of the Nazis operated all year round, the Parliament of Israel decided to

fix the twenty-seventh of Nisan as Memorial Day for those slaughtered by the Nazis during World War II. This day is called יום השואה Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, and was observed April 15, 2007.

In sharp contrast, some occasions of great joy break this spirit of solemnity. One of these is Yom HaAtsma-oot, Israel Independence Day.

Some communities of faith in the Messiah make it a point to have a time of intercession and protracted fasting in the weeks *before* Passover. According to the Jewish understanding of times and seasons, it would be wise to make the days of the Omer to be such a time, **after** Passover. In particular, the first 33 days, before the holiday of Lag B'Omer, could be an intensified time of prayer and fasting. Lag B'Omer means "the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the omer count" and is a minor observance celebrating the cessation of a plague among the students of Rabbi Akiva in the second century C.E.