

These days you can do just about anything on a smart phone! And this includes, evidently, creating a customizable count-down clock which will tick off the seconds, minutes, hours, and days until an occasion of your choosing. Not surprisingly, lifecycle events such as weddings or the birth of a child tend to be most popular for this kind of treatment along with peak moments like retirement, although some of the online count-down clocks I saw marked time until baseball season or Thanksgiving or even tax day (presumably for planning purposes rather than out of sheer joy for April 15). Happiness research indicates that looking forward to a special event, like a big vacation, can be almost as pleasurable as the event itself. As much as we try to live in the moment, we also like to look ahead and anticipate joyful times in our lives.

Presently on the Jewish calendar we are also in a period of counting, a time known as *Sefirat haOmer* (the Counting of the Omer) which began the second night of Passover. Named for the new grain harvest which was brought to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem on the 16th of Nissan, the Omer is counted nightly in fulfillment of the command from Leviticus, “You shall count until seven full weeks have elapsed; you shall count fifty days until the day after the seventh week.” As many of us will remember, the fiftieth day of the Omer is – in fact – Shavuot, leading us to breathe additional meaning into this sacred period. Not only do we count the Omer to remember the harvest season inaugurated by the offering of new grain, but we also count the days until our transformation from *avdei Pharaoh* – slaves to Pharaoh – to *avdei haShem* – servants of God. Our freedom is only fully realized when we reach Mount Sinai and become a religious community.

One of the things that makes *Sefirat haOmer* unique is that it is not a count-down, beginning at day 50 and marching back to day one, but rather a count-up beginning at day one and slowly building to day 50. Just as we add successive light each night of Chanukah in keeping with the rabbinic dictum that we should always “increase in holiness and never decrease,” here too we add rather than subtract each evening counting not the days until Shavuoth but rather the days that have transpired since Passover.

So what is the difference between counting down and counting up? I think it is the difference between a wedding and an anniversary, the difference between seeing achievement as captured in a discrete moment versus seeing it as a process that deepens and evolves over time. As much as we look forward to Shavuot and its celebration of the 10 Commandments, what we truly mark during the period of the Omer is not the day itself but the process that brings us there – our first seven weeks as a free people! We count up, treasuring each and every moment of our autonomy while also looking forward to the event that will make it complete - the receiving of Torah. Like so many other things that we count up in life – our age, the number of years we have practiced our profession or lived in our home, the length of our marriage - we see beauty in longevity and not only in newness.

This evening we will count the 25th day of the Omer, meaning that this holy period is just about half complete. Passover seems but a distant memory, holiday dishes long put away and the taste of matzah purged from our tongue; Shavuoth is still a ways off with its all night learning and delicious dairy desserts. I imagine at this time hundreds of years ago, our ancestors were starting to feel the reality of their newfound freedom with some of the trauma of slavery perhaps beginning to recede. Today is the 25th day of the Omer. We are half-way there!

Wishing you another 24 days of sacred counting!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Annie Tucker