

## Making Counting Count

“Thirty days prior to Passover, one asks and explains the laws of Passover.”  
(Talmud Pesachim 6a, and elsewhere)

“And you shall count for yourselves on the morrow of the Holiday (Passover) from the day of the waving of the Omer - seven complete weeks.” (Leviticus 23:15)

“Teach us to number our days, that we may attain a heart of wisdom” (from Psalm 90)

We Jews are inveterate counters. We count up and we count down. We are constantly measuring our time in terms of counting. We count forward and we count backward. Before Pesach, around the time you read this, we are engaged in preparation for this Yomtov by marking days of study, preparation, cleaning and cooking. And after Passover’s first day, we start to count the 49 Omer days until Shavuot, Festival of First Fruits as well as the Giving of the Torah.

Counting can be seen as a coping mechanism. People frequently count off the days before something expected and joyous, or perhaps something expected and dire.

Counting can be seen as a way to put a framework on life situations. At Recovery events, participants will “count down” the number of years, months, or weeks they have been sober. I will never forget how at one JACS retreat, after hearing many who had been clean for months, years, even decades, the biggest applause came for the call, “All who had been clean for 24 hours!” One individual Jew in a ponytail had checked in to the retreat stoned. We had all seen this. And after one day of sobriety, the entire hall cheered him on with the chant, “Keep coming back! “Keep coming back!” I hope and pray he did.

Counting is used in Halacha to face loss. The entire framework of Jewish bereavement tradition is based on numbers. There is *Shiva*, the initial seven day mourning period after the loss of a loved one, *Shloshim*, the thirty day mourning period (which includes Shiva) after the loss of a loved one, the eleven months for saying Kaddish, and a year to the Yahrzeit. The literature on bereavement suggests that these periods are accurate reflections of physical and psychological grief symptoms (see the last chapter of Glen Davidson’s Understanding Mourning and chapter 10 of my To Walk in God’s Ways).

But the key to a Jewish understanding of counting is in the words of the Psalmist: Numbering is a means to help us attain a heart of wisdom. When we prepare for Pesach, we are not just cleaning up the *chametz* from our homes; we are cleaning up the *chametz* from our hearts. When we count the Omer days to Shavuot, we are preparing ourselves to receive the Torah all over again. The Kabala tradition assigns *sefirot*, attributes of God, to each of the 49 days. In this way, we are not just counting but trying to find the Divine amidst all the numbers of our lives.

I once saw a hospice patient, a younger and lovely woman facing metastasized cancer. She was struggling to maintain some of her previous routine as she declined. She was troubled by her not knowing how many days she had left. I quoted this verse about numbering days to find wisdom to her. With it, she was able to consider how to make the most of whatever time God had for

her on this Earth. And I myself realized that this message is for all of us whose time on Earth is finite. How will we number our days to attain a heart of wisdom? How can we prepare and discuss Pesach intellectually, spiritually and also do our housecleaning? How can we find God in our lives while we count the Omer?

Everyone counts. The real challenge is what we do with the count. How do we make counting a spiritual exercise? The Torah suggests that we count with wisdom, sensitivity, intent and direction.

My family joins me in wishing all of you, our beloved Darchei Noam family, a *Chag Kasher V'Sameach* – a Pesach that counts!

Rabbi Joseph S. Ozarowski