

## Counting the Omer: A Lesson in freedom

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In the days of the Torah, on the second day of the Passover festival, a measure of barley called an omer was brought to the Temple from the new crops, after which 49 days were counted marking the weeks of the Spring harvest season. On the 50th day Shavuot was celebrated signaled by the bringing of the first fruits of the harvest.

On a deeper, more spiritual level, the rabbis explained the period of the omer as one that brought closure to the holiday of Passover. On Shavuot, they taught, the Torah was given on Mount Sinai. There, God and the people of Israel entered into an everlasting covenant, a brit, with one another, bringing the freedom from Egypt to its most meaningful conclusion: spiritual freedom.

The rabbinic idea is that we were liberated from Egypt not to exist hedonistically without boundaries and definition, but in order to freely commit ourselves to the values, beliefs and traditions we hold to be true and valid.

But why couldn't the Torah have been given to us in Egypt, you might ask? Wouldn't that have at least provided a salve to the harsh conditions of slavery? Or better yet, why couldn't God have taken us out of Egypt and immediately brought us to Sinai? What purpose was there to the 49 days in between the two events?

In Judaism there is a deep urgency for freedom, for only someone who is truly free can devote themselves to the brit, to the Torah, with any integrity and authenticity. Coercion compromises a covenant – any covenant.

In Jewish law a woman cannot be forced to marry, otherwise the validity of her marriage contract is negated. A non-Jew cannot be compelled to buy a Jew's chametz before Pesach, otherwise the sale is ineffective.

For any contractual arrangement to be legitimate, both parties must come to it voluntarily. We know this from our own secular transactions as well.

In the same way, the contract at Sinai, the bond between God and Israel, required both parties to enter into it freely, without any sense of compulsion, in order for it to have the spiritual integrity necessary to make the relationship lasting and meaningful.

Which brings us back to the question of why it's necessary to count 49

days between leaving Egypt and standing at Sinai to receive the Torah.

To have been offered the Torah immediately after being liberated from 210 years of slavery would not have had Israel in the right frame of mind to enter this brit freely. Who would have said no to whatever the God who just (with great drama and fanfare) ended your, and your people's brutal suffering? To have been airlifted directly to Sinai would have produced a dynamic between God and Israel not exactly conducive to genuine freedom of expression that such a covenant, perhaps more than any other, truly demands.

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev explained that God specifically waited until the effects of the miracles of the Exodus wore off and the people started to complain about the conditions in the desert before bringing them to Sinai to receive the Torah, for only then could God be truly convinced that their acceptance of it would be a totally voluntary act of faith.

The period we call the omer, the 49 days we count between the Passover festival of liberation and the Shavuot festival of the giving of the Torah, relives and re-dramatizes the inner emotional, psychological and spiritual evolution of the people of Israel in the wake of their physical freedom from slavery. It represents the days and nights wherein the process of them understanding and embracing their freedom took place; their gradual growing out of any residual slave mentalities and their eventual recognition of the choices they now had with respect to how to live, and what faith to believe in and practice and what life to live.

These 7 weeks (7 being a "magical" number in Judaism signifying completion or perfection, as in the 7 days in which the world was created) were the weeks in which the Jewish people gradually came into themselves as free and independent beings. And only after having accomplished that inner shift were they able to stand at Sinai and accept the Torah, enter into the brit with God, with not just dignity, but with freedom, and hence with integrity and authenticity -qualities critical to the validity of the covenant.

These lessons from our people's history bear out in our own spiritual lives as well. You've heard the expression "Jew by choice" as referring to one who chooses to become Jewish and undergoes conversion. In truth, we are all "Jews by choice". We have to be. Each and every one of us has made a conscious and unforced decision to live a Jewish life and participate in the Jewish community. And it is this very freedom that brings the greatest power, which brings the greatest kedusha/holiness to our choices.

Every single one of us has the freedom to be somewhere else tonight. No

one has forced us to come. (Ok there may some of you who feel that someone else in this room made you come here tonight, like your parents or your spouse, but that's a different kind of coercion).

The freedom we each exercised in coming here tonight is not just a freedom conditioned by our American citizenship (or residency status, as the case may be). It is not just a freedom conditioned by economic or social factors. It is an existential freedom with which we are each born and privileged to bear throughout our lives. We are free to believe what it is we wish to believe, and to practice whatever religious traditions speak most meaningfully to us. We are also free to believe and practice none at all. And it is precisely this freedom that lends the most weight to whatever it is we do choose. It is this freedom that God waited for us to understand before bringing us to Sinai.

What moves me about you all being here tonight to celebrate Shabbat is not your sense of duty or obligation, either to Judaism or to Sha'ar. What moves me is your freedom. What moves me is your knowledge that you do not have to be here, and yet you are. That kind of commitment – commitment borne of infinite possibilities; that kind of loyalty – loyalty borne of complete liberty, is commitment and loyalty of the highest order. It bears the most integrity. It promises the most rewards.

We know the same to be true of our human relationships, be they with partners, friends or colleagues. All the more so is it true of our relationship to the Source of Life itself.

As we make our way through these seven weeks of the omer towards Shavuot and Sinai once again, we ought to use our days that we count to reflect on the inalienable freedom we all possess, and what it is we are doing with it. On these 49 days let's immerse ourselves in the knowledge that we are the sole architects of our values and beliefs. Let's be refreshed by the awareness of the possibilities that lie before us, and let us in turn be renewed in the dedication and devotion we have for what and who it is we declare to be most dear and meaningful.

