



## **Around the Shabbat Table**

**Emor / Lag B'Omer**

**May 2006**

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**Shalom!**

### **Introduction**

This year, Lag BaOmer will be Tuesday, May 9. This minor holiday is traditionally a time to go outdoors with friends and family, have a picnic, play sports, and, especially in Israel, build a huge bonfire. Lag B'Omer, the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the cycle of the Omer, is a good time to think about the Counting of the Omer in general.



“You shall count seven weeks for yourselves; from when the sickle is first put to the standing crop shall you begin counting seven weeks. Then you shall observe the festival of Shavuot for the Lord, your God”

-Devarim (Deuteronomy) 16:9-10

“You shall count. . . from the day that you brought the Omer as a wave offering.”

- Vayikra (Leviticus) 23:15

Omer literally means “sheaf” and it refers to a measure of barley that was brought to the Temple on the afternoon of the second day of Pesach. The counting then began for forty-nine days (seven weeks of seven days) ending in the holiday of Shavuot on the fiftieth day. The counting of the Omer has many layers of connection to different cycles and it has evolved throughout Jewish history. All of these layers remind us of the possibilities of transformation.

### **Agricultural Cycle**

Have you ever had a tomato plant with a ripening tomato on it? What’s that like? You go out every day and check on it! You see how ripe it is, how red it is, how big it is. You can’t wait to eat that tomato, right? The anticipation is fun, exciting, and also torture.

Now imagine a farmer with an entire field of crops. Imagine how anxious and excited a farmer would be if s/he were looking towards a large harvest that would feed the family and also support the family financially.

The time of the counting of the Omer is a major growing season everywhere in the world. In ancient Israel, Pesach was the time of the barley harvest. The counting of the Omer was the period of growth

for the wheat. Shavuot was the actual wheat harvest. So during the Omer, people were eating barley (a more coarse, simple grain that was considered best used for animal feed) and watching their wheat grow with excitement, anticipation, and trepidation - watching and counting the days until Shavuot.

In the Northeast United States, seedlings are now being planted, beds are being prepared, and some crops, such as lettuces, herbs, and asparagus, are already being harvested. The period of the Omer is, in many ways, a period of judgment for our plants. How they fare during these seven weeks will determine the bounty of our harvest later in the season.

### **Natural Cycle**

As humans are engaged in planting, growing and anticipating the bounty of the harvest, so too is all of Creation at this time of year. All around us Creation is buzzing with new life, new growth, and procreation. From the bees, spiders, and wasps that have awakened from their winter sleep, to the baby rabbits jumping on our lawns, to the birds that have returned from migration to call mates and build nests, everyone is engaged in a frenzy of “building” and “planting.”



They look forward to a harvest as well. The energy that a maple tree gathers through its leaves results in an abundance of offspring – the seeds we know as “helicopters.” We can imagine the concern of the robin as she sits on her eggs, watches them hatch, feeds them, and eventually watches them leave the nest as fledglings.



Simply looking out our windows or taking a stroll down the street can remind us of the hopeful potential that the Omer period embodies.

### **Historical Cycle**

Counting the Omer is a reminder of the journey that begins with leaving Egypt (Pesach) and ends in receiving the Torah (Shavuot). This journey took our people from an oppressed slave nation to the height of religious experience. The Omer represents that period of growth necessary to move from a slave mentality to a free, spiritual people.

Another reminder of this idea is the way in which the barley and wheat harvests were brought to the Temple. Not only was barley considered a more simple, coarse grain, it was brought whole, in its raw form. But the wheat was cooked into two loaves. Again we see transformation. Bread represents a partnership between God, the provider of the wheat, and humans, who transform it through their creativity. So too the Torah is a partnership.

## **Personal Cycle**

Lastly, the Omer presents an opportunity for personal growth and transformation. It is an opportunity to work on the myriad of things that “enslave” us in our daily lives. It is an opportunity to refine oneself emotionally and spiritually. The Kabbalists connected this 49 day period with seven Divine emanations known as the *sefirot*, which can be guides to human qualities as well.

### **Questions for Your Family’s Discussion**

1. Why a commandment to count? What could the purpose of this commandment be?
2. How do these four layers of the Omer cycle – agricultural, natural, historical, and personal – relate to one another? Do all these layers make it easier or harder to understand what the Omer is all about?
3. What is your favorite thing about Spring? What are some things you notice every year that lets you know the growing season has begun?
4. How can counting the Omer help us to be more aware of the world around us? How can our awareness of Creation help us better understand the commandment to count the Omer?

### **Towards an Action Agenda**

#### **Count the Omer with a Partner in Creation**

If you haven’t been counting the Omer so far, you can join in any time. Traditionally, if you miss a full day of the count, you should not count with a blessing, but you can still keep count. I believe strongly that one should try hard to count every day, but not give up if they can’t achieve perfection.

The most important thing is not to count alone. Make that moment in the day an intentional moment of mindfulness and awareness by counting with a partner from Creation. Pick a tree, a bush, a garden resident, a new family of geese or rabbits, nesting birds, an anthill, or a landscape. As long as it something that will change and grow over the next few weeks.

Before you count, take a minute to really notice what’s going on with your partner today. Are the buds getting larger? Does it have new leaves? Flowers? Get up close and personal! (If you don’t worry about what the neighbors will think – talk to your partner! “Good Morning, how’s it going today?”) Is that Momma bird still building its nest or is it sitting on eggs? Where is the male? Is he getting her food? Are the goslings getting taller? You get the idea.

Then, with your new awareness, take a moment to count the Omer. You can find all the details of the language to use, which day we are on, and the specifics of how to do it at websites such as

[www.aish.com/holidays/counting\\_the\\_omer/default.asp](http://www.aish.com/holidays/counting_the_omer/default.asp)

[www.jvibe.com/homer/](http://www.jvibe.com/homer/) (Count the Omer with a Simpsons theme)

#### ***Some additional ideas:***

**Create an Omer journal or log** – When you go out to check on your partner take a pad of paper and jot down some notes or make some sketches. This record will help you notice more and keep a record for future years.

**Count with a human partner, too** – I find it is easier to remember to count if there is someone to remind you and visa versa.

**Take a moment to make a personal observation** – The best resource I know for personal introspection in conjunction with counting the Omer is Rabbi Simon Jacobson's, *Counting the Omer, Forty-Nine Steps to Personal Refinement According to the Jewish Tradition*, a small spiral bound notebook that follows the kabbalistic sefirot for each day of the Omer. You can find it at <http://www.meaningfullife.com/> along with a daily Omer meditation.

### **Celebrate Creation with a Hike or a Backyard Campfire on Lag BaOmer**

Plan to spend some time outdoors after school or when work is over on Tuesday, May 9. Pick a local park nearby to go for a hike and appreciate the liveliness of all Creation at this time of year. Point out new growth, nesting birds, budding trees etc. On Monday night, you could make a small fire (even in the most urban areas).

### **Have a Vegetarian-Friendly Lag BaOmer Barbecue**

One of the best ways to help the planet and your health is to reduce your meat consumption. In honor of your renewed Omer-Creation-consciousness, make your Lag BaOmer barbecue vegetarian-friendly (or entirely vegetarian!) with these great vegetarian barbecue recipes.

<http://allrecipes.com/advice/coll/all/articles/650PI.asp>

<http://vegkitchen.com/recipes/vegetarian-barbecue.htm>

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/food/recipes/mostof\\_bbqrecipes.shtml#vegetables\\_and\\_vegetarian](http://www.bbc.co.uk/food/recipes/mostof_bbqrecipes.shtml#vegetables_and_vegetarian)

## *Shabbat Shalom*



**Please join in sharing your thoughts and ideas with other families and subscribers by sending your responses to [RavADS@bjeny.org](mailto:RavADS@bjeny.org) . We'll post them to the list and to our website.**

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