



Torah Reflections: Counting the *Omer*

We have all experienced how unreliable our sense of time can be.

In our ordinary life, time seems to speed by, especially as we get older. We find ourselves saying “where has this week gone?” and “where has the year gone?” Sometimes even larger chunks of time seem to disappear without a trace.

On the other hand, time can also drag by so slowly. Lying in a hospital bed watching the second-hand as it ticks its way around the clock face can make us feel that our time here is endless.

During this season of the year Judaism offers a great spiritual teaching about time. For seven weeks--the weeks between Passover and Shavuot--we are instructed to count each day in a formal, ritualized way. This is called the Counting of the Omer, and is based on an ancient biblical celebration of the spring harvest.

In biblical days a measure (omer) of the first barley harvest was brought to the Temple each day for 49 days. After the completion of this ritual, by which the Israelites showed their gratitude for the grain, the people were allowed to enjoy eating the produce of the new harvest.

When the Temple was destroyed and the Jewish people became less agricultural, this ritual might have quietly faded. But the practice of time awareness was too valuable to lose. The Counting of the Omer was maintained as a spiritual practice, although its interpretation changed. The 49 days from Passover to Shavuot became known as the transition from slavery to freedom, from being enslaved in Egypt to freely encountering God at Mt Sinai. For each of these 49 days we acknowledge one more step in our journey toward freedom.

The Counting of the Omer also offers us a spiritual lesson. Each evening after sundown (which is the beginning of the next day on the Jewish calendar) we put aside what we are doing and say the ritual words “Today is the 12th [or whatever] day of the Omer.”

This brief moment in time gives us the opportunity for reflection. We might notice the difference between being fully in the present through this ritual act, and how we spend much of the rest of our time. Often our unhappiness comes from reflecting on past events, or anticipating and fearing future events.

But the past and the future exist only in our thoughts. The reality of life is in the present moment. Once we can pause in the present moment, putting aside thoughts of past and future, we might discover other more pleasant feelings. When we can rest our mind in the present moment, we might discover a sense of peace, gratitude, contentment.

When you take a moment to be fully in the present moment, what positive feelings arise within you?

The psalmist said, “Teach us so to number our days that we may attain a heart of wisdom.”
What does having “a heart of wisdom” mean to you?



This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Helen T. Cohn of Congregation M'kor Hayim in Tucson, Arizona. In addition, Rabbi Cohn teaches adult Jewish education, meditation, and Jewish spirituality and offers Spiritual Direction for individuals and groups. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties), an affiliate of the Institute on Aging. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.



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- Spiritual support groups for patients, caregivers, and the bereaved
- Healing and memorial services, and specialized rituals
- Education and training for synagogues, Jewish organizations, healthcare workers, and volunteers
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