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April 6, 2018

### **The Omer Season**

When planning a wedding, picking the date can be a challenge. First there are the schedules of the couple getting married, and then one has to take into consideration parents and siblings and the dates that are good or bad for them. Along with family concerns, there is the venue, the caterer, and other practical considerations. And on top of all that, there are the restrictions of the Jewish calendar.

Traditionally Jewish marriage, being a contractual agreement, needed to take place on a weekday, a day when business is conducted. In addition, so as not to mix one joy with another, Jewish weddings didn't take place on holidays or even on *chol hamoed*, the intermediary days of Sukkot and Passover. Finally, there were whole seasons of the year that were blocked out in more traditional circles. In the summer these were the days of mourning for the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, either the actual day of the destruction, Tisha B'Av; the first nine days of the month; or the three weeks from the Romans breaching the walls of the city until the Temple's destruction, depending on one's level of observance. In the spring, prime wedding season, weddings were not observed during the days between Passover and Shavuot with the exception of Lag B'Omer or for some, from Passover until Lag B'Omer.

That last, the Omer period, the days we are in at this time, has a curious history, and the rationale for not having weddings is very murky, and accepted in whole or in part only by some segments of the community. Let me explain.

In the Bible the counting of the Omer relates to agriculture and is explained thus in Parashat Emor in the book of Leviticus:

“And you shall count off seven weeks from the day after the Sabbath from the day on which you bring the sheaf offering, they shall be complete. You shall count until the day after the seventh Sabbath, fifty days, then you shall present an offering of new grain to the Eternal.”

This grain offering is when the ancient Israelites recited the famous words of our Haggadah, “My father was a wandering Aramean, . . .” and thanked God for deliverance from Egyptian bondage and for the gift of the land of Israel. They celebrated the fulfillment of God’s promise, witnessed by the first crop grown on the land.

This is all very positive. The days of the Omer then, were days of pleasant anticipation, with perhaps some measure of anxiety about the adequacy of the rain and the possibilities of pests attacking the crops, but they were not days of mourning.

The meaning of this Omer period changes dramatically in the rabbis’ reading of the Torah. Nowhere in the Bible is the holiday of Shavuot, in the third month after the Exodus from Egypt, associated with Mt. Sinai, but it is totally transformed by

the rabbis of the Talmudic period into a celebration of the giving of the Torah, *z'man matan Torateinu*. To this day that is the main focus of Shavuot.

In the eyes of these rabbis, just to be freed from Egypt, without a greater purpose, would be insufficient. Passover and Shavuot are a pair; after all, Moses said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go, that they may worship Me." Freedom without purpose is chaos; only with the receiving of the Torah is the work of liberation complete. The counting of the Omer then becomes a period of yearning, of longing for the day on which we as a people received this great gift. The time was to be used in preparation for this pivotal moment in Jewish history.

Still, all this doesn't explain the dark cloud that hovers over the Omer season. The element of sadness isn't found in sources until the Gaonic period, the 6<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, when marriages, haircutting, and even the use of musical instruments during this season were discouraged and in the view of some, forbidden. This was explained as mourning for Rabbi Akiva's twelve thousand pairs of disciples whose death is mentioned in the Talmud. The cause of their deaths is unclear; one rabbi said it was diphtheria, another described it vaguely as a cruel death. More modern historians wonder if this isn't hidden reference to their being killed by the Romans in the Bar Kochba rebellion, an unsuccessful revolt that Rabbi Akiva supported. These deaths are associated with the period after Passover, because Passover's promise of redemption contrasted with the failure of the revolt.

This was a difficult reality for the Jewish people all during the long years after the Temple's destruction. Where was the God who had been victorious over the forces of chaos at creation, who had defeated the Egyptian gods, and who had

brought redemption to the Babylonian exiles? The generations that designated this as a season of sadness were, according to Shai Held, a contemporary scholar, mourning the gap between the promise of redemption in Jewish texts and their own life experience of persecution.

Still even during the centuries of troubled Jewish life in the diaspora, there existed, side by side with this mournful approach to the season, another approach, which reconnected with the rabbis' original view of the Omer as a time of anticipation of the giving of the Torah. The seven weeks of the Omer were to be a time of study, and not just any study, but the study of *Pirke Avot*, a short and accessible book of the Mishnah that focuses on human behavior and developing character. How can we live best as members of community, and what personal qualities will make us successful in our study of Torah? *Pirke Avot* is the source of many sayings that have become a part of our Reform Jewish repertoire—for example, *Lo alechah hamlachah ligmor*, it is not incumbent upon us to complete the work, but neither can we desist from it; and the oft-quoted, If I am not for myself, who will be for me, and if I am only for myself, what am I, and if not know when?

I believe it is this aspect of this seasonal observance that has the greatest potential to add meaning to our lives and to deepen the experience of counting these 49 days. Accordingly, the Reform movement does not observe the ban on music and marriages at this time of year, but encourages our members to use the Omer as a time of learning and commitment, parallel in a sense to the month of Elul at the opposite side of our year. May this time of study bring us new knowledge by which to improve our lives and the lives of our community.