

# Every Step Counts: Making it Through Sefirah Complete

This year, we tell ourselves, we will make it. Even if in the past, despite our best intentions, we have dropped out of the “*sefirah* with a brachah” category some time before the count is complete, this year will be different ... we hope.

Absent-minded and distracted people are at a distinct disadvantage regarding the mitzvah of *sefiras ha-omer*. The halacha defers to the minority view of the Behag<sup>1</sup> that disallows one from counting with a brachah if he or she has missed any single day of the *sefirah*, as the Torah’s term “*temimos*” (complete) in describing the weeks of the *omer*, would no longer apply.<sup>2</sup> It is not clear why such a stringent approach, so challenging for fallible, forgetful humans, is necessary. Many have suggested that the Behag’s opinion differs from that of other rishonim in the consideration of the following question: Should the 49 days of *sefiras ha-omer* be seen as one big mitzvah, or as 49 separate *mitzvos*? If the entire *sefirah* is one mitzvah, it is understandable that any missing part disqualifies the whole. On the other hand, if the *sefirah* count actually entails 49 separate *mitzvos*, it would seem that each day is independent, and missing one day should not affect any other day.<sup>3</sup>

Rav Soloveitchik, however, understood the matter differently.<sup>4</sup> In his view, *sefirah* is made up of 49 individual *mitzvos*. If so, why is it an issue to miss a day? He explained



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that the concern is actually not that missing one part of the whole invalidates the whole. Rather, the issue involves the definition of counting. If one were to, for example, declare “five” on the fifth night, but not count the previous numbers, this would not be called counting, but rather “saying a number.” Counting, by definition, requires a deliberate process of marking all of the elements of a set. If earlier items are uncounted, then later items, even if a number is attached to them, are also uncounted.

Rav Soloveitchik’s explanation has a significant impact on how the mechanics of *sefiras ha-omer* are understood, and affects a number of issues. One major question begins as a theoretical/philosophical one but becomes practical. When one misses a day and may no longer count with a brachah, what does this say about all the previous days that had been counted with a brachah? If indeed all of *sefirah* is one mitzvah, and that is why a missed day invalidates the future countings, it should have this effect retroactively as well. It would seem, then, that all those *berachos le-vatalah*, unjustified, and this was

indeed the view of the *Chida*.<sup>5</sup> This question takes on a practical nature when considering one who knows he is likely to miss a day, for example, one who will be undergoing major surgery and will be unconscious for more than a day; perhaps one in a situation such as this has no right to begin counting with a brachah, even before the missed day.<sup>6</sup>

However, within Rav Soloveitchik’s approach, this is not a concern. The missed day only affects days that come afterward, when it is no longer considered “counting.” Every day counted before that point would still be valid.

A fascinating and complex question was posed by R. Ben Tzion Neshet.<sup>7</sup> What would happen if Reuven would choose to fulfill *sefiras ha-omer* one night through listening to the count of Shimon. A week later, he learns that Shimon missed a day, and may no longer count with a brachah. Perhaps all of Shimon’s countings that year are retroactively revealed to be non-*mitzvos*, and thus Reuven is disqualified also, as he used one of these invalid actions for his own counting, and is now also burdened with a flawed and incomplete mitzvah?



According to Rav Soloveitchik's approach, this concern is negated twice over. Once, because there is no retroactive disqualification; and twice, because even if Reuven did lose his mitzvah fulfillment that night, he would still have maintained the structure of the count, which allows him to continue, even without the mitzvah.

That split — maintaining the count structure without the mitzvah — could also explain the surprising ruling of the *Shulchan Aruch*,<sup>8</sup> that one who is praying with a *minyan* before dark, and is worried that he may forget later to count, may count the next day's count without a brachah, and if he does remember afterwards, may count with a brachah. This is difficult; if it is too early to count before dark, what is he accomplishing? If he does fulfill the mitzvah then, why is he allowed to count again later with a brachah?

According to Rav Soloveichik's approach, this ruling can be understood. The earlier count does not fulfill a mitzvah, as it is before the appropriate time, and thus does not prevent one from reciting a brachah on a later count. It is helpful, though, because it maintains the counting structure, and thus allows counting to resume the day after if he indeed forgets that night.<sup>9</sup>

This distinction between the mitzvah fulfillment and the maintenance of the counting structure is also helpful for a

number of other frequently discussed questions, such as allowing an *onen* (one who lost a relative and has not yet performed the burial), who may not perform *mitzvos*, to nonetheless preserve his ability to resume counting with a brachah after the *aninus*;<sup>10</sup> and to allow a bar mitzvah boy or a convert to join the *sefirah* count in the middle of the cycle, if they have established a structure by counting prior to their obligation in *mitzvos*.<sup>11</sup>

Rav Soloveitchik's halachic analysis may also be relevant, in a homiletic sense, toward understanding one of the more difficult aspects of *sefiras ha-omer*. While this is not described in the Torah, the observance of the *sefirah* period has taken on a character of mourning.<sup>12</sup> While there are many theories to explain this, the most well-known explanations link the observance to the statement in the Talmud (*Yevamos* 62b):

אמרו שנים עשר אלף זוגים תלמידים היו לו  
לרבי עקיבא מגבת עד אנטיפרס וכולן מתו  
בפרק אחד מפני שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה ...  
תנא כולם מתו מפסח ועד עצרת ... כולם מתו  
מיתה רעה מאי היא א"ר נחמן אסכרה.

*Twelve thousand pairs of students of Rabi Akiva died, and all perished in the same (segment of) time. This because they did not conduct themselves respectfully each with one another... They had died from the time of Pesach until Atzeret (Shavuot)... they died a bad death, what was it? R. Nachman*

*said from (that disease of) 'askara.'*

A slightly different version of the events appears in the *midrash* (*Bereishis Rabbah*, section 61a) that ends with the words, "So, set your minds not to conduct yourselves that way [like the students]."

This passage is always difficult to consider. The notion that Rabi Akiva, who held up "*v'ahavta l'reacha kamocho*," love your neighbor like yourself, as the crucial principle of the Torah,<sup>13</sup> should have so many students who treated each other so disrespectfully that they deserved to die, is a deeply painful thought that has caused many to struggle to understand. My father, Rabbi Dr. David M. Feldman, z"l, (*hareini kaparas mishkavo*), was pained at the thought of insensitivity on the part of holy Torah scholars, and brought to my attention the essay of R. Eliezer Levi in his work *Yesodot HaTefillah*, who builds upon the statement of Rav Sherira Gaon in his *Iggeret*, that the students of Rabi Akiva died as a consequence of resisting *shmad*, efforts to force conversion upon them, during the time of the rebellion of Bar Kokhba.

In this understanding, as Rav Levi displays, the Talmud is, out of political necessity, discussing the situation *b'remizah*, in hinted, coded language. Thus, the relevant passages can be read as essentially the opposite story: the students did treat each other

respectfully, and we are told to be like them, rather than to be unlike them. However, both versions, as different as they are on the facts, emerge as two different ways of saying the same thing: the mourning period of *sefiras ha-omer* is a time to focus on treating each other with proper respect.

Perhaps, the halachic perspective on the counting and the thematic perspective on the time period can be viewed as connected. The mitzvah of *sefiras ha-omer*, in Rav Soloveitchik's assessment, requires us to perform 49 independent, deliberate acts of counting, each separate from each other, but each unable to take place if any of the previous countings have not happened. Maybe the homiletic message is this: the *sefirah* is the countdown to the receiving of the Torah, the defining moment in the history of the Jewish people. That moment most certainly deserves tremendous focus, perhaps of the single-minded fashion. However, that comes with a risk.

Imagine a student in the shiur of Rabi Akiva, privileged to learn at the feet of one of the greatest sages of all time, one of the most accomplished scholars the Jewish people has ever seen. One who is on his way to this lecture might well run with such single-minded focus that anyone in his way, even a fellow student, becomes unimportant; and if that other student must be rudely pushed aside, isn't getting to the shiur a greater priority? It is possible to be so intently focused on the important "main event" that other important concerns are given short shrift. It is reminiscent of the 1973 experiment conducted at the Princeton Theological Seminary, in which seminarians in a hurry neglected to stop to help people — actually, actors — who seemed to be

in need, due to their rush to deliver a sermon about the topic of stopping to help people in need.

The message of *sefiras ha-omer* is that focusing on that which is most important can never allow us to miss all the other important steps along the way. We eagerly count down to the *kabala HaTorah*, but we do so by carefully marking every step of the process. We are trained to recognize that we cannot properly accept the Torah if these steps are neglected. Rav Yisrael Salanter, the revered founder of the *mussar* movement, was asked why he diverted talented students from the study of Talmud to spend time studying character development, and would respond that even more important than *gadlus*, Torah greatness, is *shleimus*, completeness of *middos* and personality.

The Mishna (*Avot* 3:17) teaches:

אם אין תורה אין דרך ארץ אם אין דרך ארץ אין תורה.

*If there is no Torah, there is no derech erez and if there is no derech erez, there is no Torah.*

Rabbenu Yonah suggests that *derech erez*, usually rendered as the possession of refined character traits, is necessary if the Torah's values are to take root; without *derech erez*, any Torah the individual studies "lacks a home."

Yes, absent-minded and distracted people are at a distinct disadvantage regarding the mitzvah of *sefiras ha-omer*. But perhaps that is the point: *sefiras ha-omer* reminds us that even the understandable distraction of the sharply focused scholar comes at a cost, and asks us to correct for that. Indeed, at the end of the path of *sefirah*, the main event, the *kabala haTorah*, awaits — but it is necessary

first to infuse that acceptance with the message of all of the days that lead up to it; the memory of Rabi Akiva's students demand nothing less.

## Notes

1. *Tosafos*, *Menachos* 66a and *Megillah* 20b.
2. *Orach Chaim* 489:8.
3. See *Pri Megadim* in *Eishel Avraham*, 489:13.
4. Similar approaches can also be found in *Shut Even Y'karah*, 176 and by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in *Shut*, 106, and *Chiddushim U'Biurim al HaShas*, I, 37; see also *Tiferes Torah*, 11, commenting on Mordechai, *Megillah*, 803.
5. *Avodas HaKodesh* 7:217. See, however, *Shut Chasam Sofer*, YD 320, who argues against the concept of retroactive *brachos le-vatalah* in a different context.
6. Regarding this question, see *Shut Kinyan Torah Bahalachah*; *Shut Even Pinah*, 38-39; *Ohr HaMoadim*, 10; *Shut Minchas Aviv*, pp. 50-56; *Mishmeres Chaim*, I, *Inyanei Sefiras Ha-Omer*, 2; *Marpei Lanefesh*, IV, 28:17; *Shut B'Tzel HaChokhmah*, V, 97-99; *Shut Teshuvos V'Hanhagos* III, 147.
7. *Shut Shavei Tzion* 14.
8. O.C. 489:3, from *Machzor Vitry*.
9. The alternative explanation is that the original count was conditional, and negated once the later count is performed (*Magen Avraham* 489:7). See *Shut Chazon Nachum* I, 32; *Beit Av*, 54; *Sdeh Elchanan*, 133; *Shut Divrei Or*, 17; *Knesses Avraham*, 26.
10. See *Shut Noda B'Yehudah*, kama, OC, 27; *Shut Ksav Sofer*, YD 181; *Shut Divrei Moshe*, 29; *Shut Divrei Sofrim*, 39; *Shut Kinyan Torah Bahalachah*, III, 99; *Shut Mishneh Shleimah*; *Marpei LaNefesh*, IV, 28:10; *Shut Chelkas Yaakov* OC 207; *Shut Teshuvos V'Hanhagos*, II, 611.
11. See *Minchas Chinuch* 306; *Shut Maharam Shick*, 269; *Shut Har Tzvi*, OC, II, 76; *Shut Eretz Tzvi*, II, 36; *Aruch Hashulchan*, 489:15; *Shut Minchas Elazar*, III, 356; *Tziyunim LaTorah*, 12; *Shut Avnei Nezer*, OC 539; *Birkei Yosef*, OC 489:20; *Shut Pri HaAretz*, III, 7; *Shut Tzitz Eliezer* XIV, 55; *Shut Chesed L'Avraham*, tinyana, OC, 56; *Shut Maharash*, VII, 112; *Shut Ksav Sofer*, OC 99; *Shut Shevet HaKehasi*, IV, 141; *Avnei Chefetz* II, 25; *Hod Tzvi*, 1; *Shut Yachel Yisrael*, I, 1; *Mishnat Rabi Gershon*, 21; *Shut Tehilos David*, I, 123; *Birkas Yosef*, II, 2.
12. See *Orach Chaim* 493.
13. *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Nedarim* 9:4.