



Active Anticipation • Parshat Emor

After counting seven complete weeks following the Omer offering, we are commanded to celebrate Shavuot. While the text connects counting to the agriculturally related sacrifices, later sources suggest a thematic link between Passover to Shavuot. Counting, as we will develop, assists the transition from the freedom from Egypt to the receiving of the Torah at Sinai.

In midrashic style, the Lubavitcher Rebbe identifies this threefold connection of Passover, *Sefirat HaOmer*, and Shavuot within the verse in Song of Songs, “Draw me, we will run after you; the king has brought me into his chambers” (1:4). “Draw me” refers to Passover; “we will run after you” to the counting of the Omer, and “the king has brought me into his chambers” to the giving of the Torah. Based on this imagery, counting symbolizes the pursuit of the Divine, an active seeking of connection. It is an act born out of longing and anticipation.

Song of Songs, according to the rabbis, is an allegory that engages passionate, interpersonal romantic language to the human/Divine encounter. It encapsulates the unbridled love between God and the Israelites in the desert articulated by Jeremiah: “I remember in your favor, the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride—How you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown” (Jeremiah 2:2). The rabbis in *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* make intertextual connections between the verses in Song of Songs and the Exodus narratives, culminating with the Divine encounter on Mount

Sinai as the Israelites received the Torah. Song of Songs is customarily read on Passover, setting the tone for the relational aspirations embedded within *Sefirat HaOmer*.

Counting is meant to both express longing and generate yearning for the rendezvous with God on Shavuot. *Sefer HaChinuch* writes that counting “gives guidance to our souls, to have great yearning for the honorable day in our hearts, ‘like a servant who longs for shade,’ constantly counting, when will come the time that he pines for, to go free, because the counting reveals that this person’s whole hope and yearning is to reach that day.” *Shibolei HaLeket*, quoted by Professor Nehama Leibowitz, frames our annual obligation to count by painting an emotional portrait of the Israelites in the desert: “Israel, in loving anticipation, counted the days which, in their eagerness to receive the Torah, seemed to pass slowly. Hence the counting of the days was commanded for all generations.” Every year, we are called on to recreate that emotional experience and the desire for connection.

Counting, however, is not just an expression of longing; it also demands active growth. In his article *Analyses of Longing: Origins, Levels, and Dimensions*, Swedish psychologist Olle Holm distinguishes between active and passive longing. It is one thing to passively desire a future event to occur, but it is a fundamentally different experience if we actively work on bringing about that desired result. Research by Andrew

MacLeos and Clare Conway point to a connection between well-being and anticipation of positive future expectations. However, this correlation is most potent when participants were able to communicate multiple steps of growth towards a positive future goal. Anticipating positive events without having a framework for growth towards those goals does not impact well-being.

Sefirat HaOmer is not meant to be a passive longing towards Shavuot, but an anticipation teeming with both motion and emotion. As Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg suggests, the word for “complete” in the verse is *tamim*, and not the related *sheleimut*, as “*sheleimut* denotes quantitative fullness and *tamim*

qualitative perfection.” Each individual must “count for yourselves” (Lev. 23:15), he adds, which “implies introspection and stock-taking in order to choose the true good,” requiring that we “preserve the quality of each day” with spiritual progress.

During *Sefirat HaOmer* we don’t just wait for God’s salvation, as we did on Passover. We run after God. We must make each day count towards developing that relationship. This active anticipation of connection enables our yearly reenactment of the Torah’s revelation, and God willing soon, a full reconnection through redemption.

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Character Challenge: To deepen your feelings of desire to relate to God during *Sefirat HaOmer*, take on the custom that some have to recite Song of Songs as we welcome in the Sabbath on Friday night.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “But the Omer is also part of historical time. It represents the journey from Egypt to Sinai, from exodus to revelation. This is, on the biblical worldview, an absolutely crucial transition... In this sense, the 49 days represent an unbroken historical sequence. There is no way of going directly from escape-from-tyranny to a free society – as we have discovered time and again in recent years, in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. Here, time is an ordered sequence of events, a journey, a narrative. Miss one stage, and one is in danger of losing everything” (“Counting Time,” *Covenant and Conversation*).