

Parashat Emor

The Controversy of Women and Counting the Omer

Counting the Ascending Pattern of Lights

I love the healing month of Iyar when the roses raise their glorious heads in full bloom and the lovely sun smiles down at us with its gentle, yet radiant face. *Rosh Chodesh* Iyar is traditionally the first day of the new Yeshiva semester, and I relish starting anew with increased energy and excitement after the extended Pesach vacation. Although we are back on track, we are reminded of the holiness of this season by how the month of Iyar is dotted with many special days dedicated for praise, prayer, nature enjoyment, bonfires and dance. At this time, we receive spiritual alignment and tune-up as we continue to integrate the holiness of Pesach by counting the Omer, which connects the dots and integrates the high surrounding lights of the Exodus into our everyday routine. What is counting the Omer all about? Counting of the Omer (ספירת העומר/ *Sefirat HaOmer*), is a verbal counting of each of the forty-nine days between the Jewish holidays of Pesach and Shavuot. This mitzvah derives from the Torah commandment to count from the day following Pesach when the Omer (a sacrifice containing an Omer measure of barley) was offered in the Temple, until Shavuot when two wheat breads were offered. Moreover, counting the Omer is a spiritual preparation for receiving the Torah on Shavuot. Counting the Omer heightens our sensitivity to the 'invitations of time.' At this time, we have the opportunity to integrate how each day of the calendar invites us to a particular depth and joy.

Making Every Day Count

The word ספירה/ *Sefirah*, which means to count, is linked with the Hebrew word מספר/ *mispar* – number, סיפור/ *sipur* – story and ספיר/ *safir* which means sapphire, brilliance and luminary. The fifty-day counting sprint begins on the night immediately following the Pesach storytelling. In an incredible chain of meaning, this סיפור/ *sipur* – storytelling ritual is followed by the ספירה/ *sefirah* – counting ritual, when we not only count the מספר/ *mispar* – number of the day, but moreover relate to the unique illumination of each day's special ספירה/ *Sefirah* permutation from the last seven *Sefirot*. Counting the Omer teaches us the concept of the ascending pattern, where one day builds upon the next. In effect, the whole point of the ritual is to collect days. By using a simple and short act of consciousness, we prevent our days from blurring into each other. We can make every day count, and remind ourselves that, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

Reliving the Purification Process of the Omer Offering

Each day of counting the Omer, from Pesach to Shavuot, we have the opportunity to add a new layer of refinement to our character. Counting the Omer is an elevating ripening process that culminates on Shavuot in our ability to receive the Torah and become complete. This time-period reflects the process of the budding and flowering of the surrounding nature, here in Israel where we, like the fruits, are gradually ripening to become the perfect crop, ready to be picked on Shavuot as Hashem's holy bride. This refinement process is embodied in counting from the Omer of barley, considered animal food, (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14a*), until the holiday of Shavuot, which is also called the First Fruit Festival (*Bamidbar 28:26*), when we would bring two whole-wheat challot, as it states in this week's parasha. By Divine guidance, while being in the midst of this purification process, we read about the counting of the Omer:

ספר ויקרא פרק כג

(טו) וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת מיום הביאכם את עמר התנופה שבע שבתות תמימת תהינה :
 (טז) עד ממחרת השבת השביעת תספרו חמשים יום והקרבתם מנחה חדשה להשם:
 (יז) ממושבתיכם תביאו לחם תנופה שתיים שני עשרנים סלת תהינה חמץ תאפינה בכורים להשם:

“You shall count for yourself seven complete weeks from the day after Shabbat from the day that you brought the Omer of elevation offering. You shall count fifty day until the seventh Shabbat. Then you shall offer a new meal offering to Hashem. You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an elevation offering. Each shall be made of one tenth of a measure of choice flour; baked after leavening as first fruits to Hashem” (*Vayikra* 23:15-17).

During the seven weeks between the holidays of Pesach and Shavuot, an Omer of barley was offered at the Temple daily. The word עמר/Omer is a biblical measure, roughly equal to two quarts or two liters. It is sometimes translated as ‘sheaf,’ as it was a large enough amount of grain to require bundling. When, the Israelites, had just left Egypt on Pesach,, they were still being purified from the influence of the animal-worshipping Egyptian culture. The barley offering reflects the low spiritual level of the Jewish people leaving Egypt, who were only fit to eat the less refined barley grain. (Rabbi Nachman, *The Outpouring of the Soul, Ot* 71). It would take the Jewish people forty-nine days of elevating themselves until they reached the level of wheat during the festival of Shavuot. This was the time to offer two wheat challot, reflecting the holy Torah received on this day, after being redeemed from the animal soul and *yetzer hara* (negative inclination). (*Shem M'Shemuel, Bamidbar, Shavuot*, year 5670 (1909). Every year, during the period of counting the Omer of barley, we relive this purification process until we reach the level of wheat. (The above paragraph is taken from my award-winning book [The Seven Fruits of the Land of Israel with their Mystical & Medicinal Properties](#)).

Women and the Mitzvah of Counting the Omer

Truthfully, I feel a bit as though I am missing out on this purification process since for the last several years, I no longer count the Omer. Beforehand, I would begin to count but never made it through the entire counting without missing a day. As the Chafetz Chaim writes,

משנה ברורה סימן תפט

מתחילין לספור וכו' - ונשים ועבדים (א) פטורות ממצוה זו דהוי מ"ע שהזמן גרמא וכתב המ"א מיהו כבר שויא עליהו חובה (ב) וכמדומה דבמדינותינו לא נהגי נשי כלל לספור וכתב בספר שולחן שלמה דעכ"פ לא יברכו דהא בודאי יטעו ביום אחד וגם ע"פ רוב אינם יודעים פירוש המלות:

Women are exempt from the mitzvah of counting the Omer, since it is a positive time-bound mitzvah. Likewise, in our countries the women weren't accustomed to count the Omer at all. *Shulchan Shlomo* writes that in any case, they should not recite the blessing, since they surely will miss one day... (*Mishna Berurah* 489).

Nevertheless, according to most halachic authorities, although women are exempt from time-bound positive mitzvot, if they wish they may perform them, such as counting the Omer. Thus it is the custom of many women to perform the mitzvah of sitting in the Sukkah as well as other time-bound mitzvot, from which they are exempt. This teaches us that women are absolutely permitted to perform the mitzvah of counting the Omer, just as they are permitted to shake the lulav and do other mitzvot. However, whereas generally Ashkenazi Halachic authorities hold that women recite the blessing before performing these mitzvot from which they are exempt, there is a difference of opinion among them whether women may recite the blessing before counting the Omer. In any case,

according to the Mekubalim, it is preferable for women not to count the Omer at all, even without reciting a blessing, as there is a Kabbalistic reason for them to abstain from doing so. Therefore, our custom is that women do not count the Omer at all ([Halacha Yomit derived from the halachic rulings of our leader, glory of the generation, Maran Rabbeinu Ovadia Yosef zt"l, Halacha Date: 24 Nissan 5771 April 28 2011](#)).

Counting the Omer – Entering the Masculine Realm

Several years ago, after reading an article by Rabbi Zecharyah Tzvi Goldman about the Kabbalistic Perspective on Women & the Omer, I decided to stop trying to count the Omer, because I connected with the notion that counting of the Omer is primarily a male process. This explains why the Kabbalist, Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad (Ben Ish Chai) prohibits women from counting the Omer (*Rav Pe'alim*, vol. 1, *Sod Yescharim*, para. 12). His ruling is possibly based on the following *Zohar*, "Since these days [of *Sefirah*] are days from the realm of the masculine this counting [of the Omer] was given over to males alone" (*Zohar, Parashat Emor* 98b). What is masculine about counting the Omer? Counting the Omer each week corresponds to one of the seven lower *sefirot* in the order of *Chesed, Gevurah, Tiferet, Netzach, Hod, Yesod* and *Malchut*. The first six of these *sefirot* embody the masculine archetype, *Ze'ir anpin*, while the last *Sefirah* of *Malchut* corresponds to the feminine (*nukvah*). Thus, the counting of the Omer includes the feminine *Malchut* as part of the archetype of the masculine *Ze'ir anpin*, rather than the union of the masculine and the feminine as two separate archetypes. ([Kabbalah online, Counting on the Torah, from the Teachings of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai](#)).

Even Ashkenazi halachic authorities hold that "Since these are the days of the male world this counting is incumbent upon men only (*Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim, siman* 489).

Arizal explains that during the counting of the Omer, the intention is to draw down spiritual energy from the masculine into the feminine *Malchut*... (Arizal, *Sha'ar Hakavanot Inyan Sefirat HaOmer Derush* 11). I'm in no way sharing these sources in order to denigrate the holy Torah women who meticulously count the Omer and work on elevating themselves spiritually. I'm positive that they receive great reward for their pure intention. My purpose is only to disseminate information, which may be less well known, so that we can all make our own informed choices.

Male Mission of Removing Impurity

I was thinking about a deeper mystical reason as to why women are exempt from many of the positive mitzvot, while charged with the negative mitzvot no less than men. The purpose of the positive mitzvot is to rectify and change reality, whereas the underlying reason for the negative mitzvot is to protect the holy and prevent the destruction of what is inherently worthy and good. Perhaps, we can say that it is the masculine mission to change reality and purify themselves. They must harness their inclination towards pride, anger, violence and excessive sexuality, while, the role of women is rather to guard and protect their inherently good and virtuous nature. This concept is reflected in the mitzvah of the male circumcision versus the female blessing where we give thanks for being created in accordance with the Divine will. Rather than refining ourselves by cutting off and breaking our nature, women's perfection consists in clearing the spiritual and emotional blocks, such as self-hatred, lack of confidence and various insecurities, in order to reveal our innate goodness. There is a subtle difference between unblocking the innate good nature and removing the bad. This may define the differentiation between masculine and feminine spiritual nature. The prayer that follows the counting of the Omer reflects the male mission to remove their impurity. As the prayer reads, "Master of the universe, You have commanded us through Moshe Your servant to count *Sefirat HaOmer*, in order to

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

purify us from our evil and uncleanness. As You have written in Your Torah..." This prayer may refer to the impurity of *keri* (seminal emission) which the mitzvah of counting the Omer possibly purifies. Likewise, the Omer of the barley seed offering, that we count at this time, may represent the rectification of emission of seed. Luckily, women don't need this kind of purification! Interestingly, the Hebrew word עמר/Omer has the numerical value of 310, which is the exact same *gematria* (numerical value) as קרי/*keri* – seminal emission.

Feminine Focus During the Omer Period

In conclusion, I believe it is important also for women to "live with the times" and connect with the progression of the purification process engendered by each of the *Sefirah* permutations that we count during the seven weeks between the physical freedom of Pesach and the spiritual freedom of Shavuot when we receive the Torah. This is especially true today, when working on integrating and balancing the various *sefirot* has become such a widespread and vital part of our emotional and spiritual healing and self-development. The many smartphone apps also aid us on our spiritual journey of character perfection through integration of the array of the *sefirot* illuminations. So, rather than being preoccupied with counting the numbers of days and weeks, I believe that the feminine focus during the Omer season is to meditate on the daily *Sefirah* combinations and internalize their messages. Instead of being immersed in מספר/*mispar* – number, women's rectification during the *Sefirah* period is to get in touch with our innate ספיר/*safir* related to sapphire, brilliance, and the illumination of each of the daily forty nine *sefirot* combinations. Isn't this, anyway, the best part of the סיפור/*sipur* – story?