



Is it Commendable for Women to Count the Omer?

Focused Self Refinement for Men and Women Alike

Throughout all my forty years of being Torah observant, I have never counted the Omer from beginning to end. Truthfully, I haven't even tried. I feel ambiguous about the many young women who ardently count the Omer with or without an app. On the one hand, I admire these devout women who want to take on this timebound, positive mitzvah, which is more than what the Torah mandates for women. On the other hand, I'm not an advocate of women taking on men's mitzvot, which at times comes at the expense of keeping the many obligatory mitzvot for women. Yet, it is not a black and white issue. As women's role evolves, the boundaries between men's and women's mitzvot become increasingly blurred. During the period of counting the Omer, both men and women need to work on character refinement, in order to be worthy to receive the Torah. The seven emotional sefirot (Divine emanations) that we go through, with their sub-sefirot, during each of the 49 days of the Omer, from *Chesed* (loving/kindness) of Chesed to *Malchut* (royalty) of Malchut teach us the spiritual and emotional focus of each day. No matter whether a woman counts the Omer or not, it is highly beneficial to meditate on the sefirah of the day and work on integrating it into our lives.

Is Counting the Omer a Positive Timebound Mitzvah?

Most halachic authorities hold that counting the Omer is a positive timebound mitzvah from which women are exempt (Rambam, *Hilchot Temidin U'mussafin* 7:20; *Sefer HaChinuch*, Mitzvah 306). However, Ramban, (*Novellae to Kiddushin* 33b) lists Sefirat HaOmer among the positive mitzvot that are not timebound, yet he doesn't address the issue of whether women are obligated to count the Omer. Ramban's deviation from the mainstream view that counting the Omer is a timebound mitzvah puzzles most commentaries. Perhaps Ramban holds that Sefirat HaOmer is rabbinic, instituted during post and pre-Temple times. The fact that the source for the binding nature of keeping the rabbinic mitzvot is clearly not timebound: "...you shall not turn aside from that matter that [the sages] tell you" (*Devarim* 17:11), explains Ramban's position on Sefirat haOmer.

Does Halacha Permit Women to Count the Omer?

The answer to this question is equivocal. According to the mainstream Rabbinical view, that women are exempt from counting the Omer, they are nevertheless permitted to perform this mitzvah voluntarily. This is similar to the way women may perform other positive timebound mitzvot such as sitting in the Sukkah and shaking the lulav. Magen Avraham (Rabbi Abraham Abele Gombiner, a prominent seventeenth century Polish Talmudist) goes as far as to claim that women have taken this mitzvah upon themselves:

ספר מגן אברהם על או"ח סימן תפט:

נשים פטורות מספירה דהוי מ"ע שהז"ג (רמב"ם וכ"כ בזוהר תצוה עמוד שי"ט) ומיהו כבר שווי' עלייה חובה:

Women are exempt from counting [the omer] because it is a positive timebound mitzvah. Nevertheless, they have already accepted it upon themselves as an obligation (Magen Avraham, *Orach Chayim* 489).

Many halachic authorities disagree with the Magen Avraham and state that there is no source for saying that women accepted this mitzvah upon themselves as an obligation (*Minchat Chinuch Mitzvah 306; Sha'ar Hatziyun* quoting the *Pri Chadash*, who makes no mention of women having accepted Sefirat Ha'Omer upon themselves). Likewise, the Chafetz Chaim holds that women aren't accustomed to count the Omer:

משנה ברורה סימן תפט מתחילין לספור וכו' - ונשים ועבדים (א) פטורות ממצוה זו דהוי מ"ע שהזמן גרמא וכתב המ"א מיהו כבר שויה עלייה 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:

In our countries, women did not count at all. It is written in Shulchan Shlomo that at the very least women should not recite the *beracha* [before counting the Omer] for certainly they will err on one of the days, and furthermore, women generally do not know the meaning of the words (*Mishna Berura*, 489:1-2).

According to [Shulchan Aruch HaRav](#), women are exempt from the Mitzvah of Sefirat HaOmer because based on Kabbalah, they are unable to fulfill this mitzvah. However, in those certain provinces where women have accepted this mitzvah upon themselves, they are obligated to count due to this custom. Practically, the Chabad custom is for women to recite Sefirat HaOmer. The husbands should remind their wives to recite the sefira each night (Rabbi Yaakov Goldstein, *The Laws and Customs of Counting the Omer...*).

Modern Halachic Rulings on Women and Sefirat HaOmer

According to Kabbalah, 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 ([Maran Rabbeinu Ovadia Yosef zt"l](#)).

During the last century, women's Torah learning has greatly intensified and *Mishna Berura's* two concerns no longer apply to most women who decide to take upon themselves the counting of the Omer. Therefore, a woman who knows that she can make it through the entire count, and even if she misses a day, she knows to continue counting without a blessing, may count with a blessing, according to Ashkenazi practice. This is especially true regarding a woman who prays ma'ariv every evening or whose family members are in the habit of reminding her to count. She may count with a blessing, if she is Ashkenazi and so desires, because the chances of her forgetting to count are relatively small ([Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, Peninei Halacha, Women and the Omer Count](#)). Nevertheless, since in this case the mitzvah of counting as well as the blessing are not obligatory, in the case where a wife's family has a minhag that differs from her husband's, a woman should follow her husband's minhag (Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah* vol. 4:3)

May Women Recite a Beracha When Counting the Omer?

The main halachic question is whether a woman who takes upon herself to count the Omer may recite a *beracha*. According to the *Shulchan Aruch*, a woman may not make blessings over any mitzvah from which she is exempt. If she does, she is reciting a blessing in vain (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 589:6). This is the prevalent custom among most Sefardic women ([Maran Rabbeinu Ovadia Yosef zt"l](#)). However, the Ashkenazi custom follows the Rama's opinion, that women who perform time-bound mitzvot are permitted to recite the blessing. Likewise, the nineteenth century Rabbi [Yechezkel Michel Epstein](#) holds that although women are exempt from counting the Omer, because it is a positive time-bound commandment, if they take upon themselves to count, they should recite a *beracha* like any positive time-bound commandment that women practice. (*Aruch Ha-shulchan, Orach Chaim* 489:3). Similarly, any woman who chooses to count the Omer may say a blessing prior to saying it [if they have not missed any previous days, as is the law by

men] ([Shulchan Aruch HaRav](#)). However, some Ashkenazi poskim rule that women should not recite a blessing over the Omer count because they do not pray [Ma'ariv] in the synagogue and are therefore more likely to miss a day. If anyone misses a day of counting the Omer, that person continues to count the Omer without a bracha. Thus, there is a concern that a woman may not realize that she forgot to count and will continue counting with a blessing (*Mishna Berura* 489:3).

One of the most renowned and respected halachic authorities of our time, Rav Asher Weiss Shlit"א, holds that women today are wise and know to read from the siddur. They also have access to calendars and newspapers, in which the day of the count is written daily. For this reason, our wives and daughters act correctly to recite a *beracha* over the count. Still, in my humble opinion, a woman who knows that she likely will not complete the count correctly, should not begin reciting a *beracha* over the count at all, since there are later authorities who maintain that if one skips a day, the earlier *berachot* were retroactively said in vain... but even in this case one who is lenient has not lost anything... (*Women in the Mitzvah of Sefirat Ha-Omer*). The numerous apps email and what's app reminders today only strengthen Rav Weiss's position.

The Kabbalistic Perspective

Although certainly permitted, the reason I personally do not count the Omer is based on the following *Zohar*: "Since these days [of *Sefirah*] are days from the realm of the masculine this count [of the Omer] was given over exclusively to the men alone" (*Zohar*, Part 3,98b). I connect deeply to the Kabbalistic perspective and act according to it, as long as it doesn't contradict the Ashkenazi halacha. While I was doing research on the topic of Women and Counting the Omer, I came across a scholarly article by [Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash, Sefirat Ha-Omer](#). It includes sources from early Rabbis such as Rambam, Ramban, Rabbeinu Tam, Tosafot etc. Among these classical commentaries, I surprisingly found the following unexpected paraphrase quote : *Uniquely, Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum, of Bat Ayin, who has personally relinquished fulfilling this mitzvah for Kabbalistic reasons, expresses the power she sees in the count, and in the Omer period, even when not counting:[13]*

Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum, The Controversy of Women and Counting the Omer

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... 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 building 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...I believe that the feminine focus during the Omer season is to meditate on the daily sefirah combinations and internalize their messages...

For further explanation on the kabbalistic perspective of counting the Omer see the full article <http://rebbetzinchanabracha.blogspot.com/2016/05/the-controversy-of-women-and-counting.html>