

The Counting of the Omer

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For the most part, Parashat Emor deals with the sanctity of the priests and the laws of the festivals. Mentioned among the festivals is the commandment to bring the Omer (i.e. sheaf of elevation) and an accompanying sacrifice on the second day of Passover, after which the Bible commands: “And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering... you shall count off seven weeks. They shall be complete: you must count until the day after the seventh week – fifty days...” (Lev. 23, 15-16).

Based upon a lecture by my mentor, the late Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, one can analyze this commandment: Is the essential commandment to count weeks, but in order to achieve a week, one must count days before hand? Or is the essential commandment to count days, but one must catalogue and classify the days into weeks? It would appear that this is a controversy between Alfasi and Maimonides. Alfasi wrote at the end of his Halachot to tractate Pesahim: “We are obligated to count the days of seven weeks from the evening of the 15th going into the 16th, as it is written “...you shall count...” . The Torah says “you must count 50 days”... and just like there is a commandment to count days so too there is a commandment to count weeks.” Alfasi emphasizes the days. In contrast, Maimonides wrote: “It is a positive commandment of count seven complete weeks from the day of bringing of the sheaf offering and it says ‘and you shall count... seven weeks,’ and the it is a commandment to the count the days with the weeks, and it is said ‘count fifty days.’” (Mishneh Torah, Hil. Temidim uMusafim 7, 22).

This controversy is reflected in how one actually counts, for R. Joseph Caro and R. Moses Isserlis (The Remah) disagreed on how one should count the Omer. According to the Beit Yosef: “Most places are stringent to say each day, today is so much in (or according to) the omer which are so may weeks...” (Beit Yosef, Orach Chaim, 489). The fact that the word “omer” follows the days, shows that the counting of the days is the essence of the commandment, like Alfasi.

In contrast, according to Remah on the eighth day one counts: “...until the seventh day and then he says today is seven days which are one week in the Omer” (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 489, 1.) Here, the word omer is placed after the weeks suggesting the essential commandment is to count weeks, like Maimonides.

A further interesting point is that Maimonides placed the law of the Omer and its counting in the laws of sacrifices as seen above. It would appear that here Maimonides viewed these laws as part of the Temple service, a continuation of the Omer sacrifice. However, in his Guide for the Perplexed (Part 3, chapter 43), he placed the counting of the Omer among the festivals: “The Feast of Weeks (Shavu’ot) is the anniversary of the Revelation on Mount Sinai. In order to raise the importance of this day, we count the days that pass since the preceding festival, just as one who expects his most intimate friend on a certain day counts the days and even the hours. This is the reason why we count the days that pass since the offering of the Omer, between the anniversary of our departure from Egypt and the anniversary of the Lawgiving. The latter was the aim and object of the exodus from Egypt, and thus God said, ‘I brought you unto myself’ (Exod. 19, 4).” Here, Maimonides offers a philosophical reason for counting the days of the Omer – in anticipation of the revelation on Sinai and the giving of the Torah which is the essence of Judaism.

The Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah #306) summarizes this quite beautifully: “Since the acceptance of the Torah was the goal of our redemption and serves as the foundation of

the Jewish people, and through it we achieved our greatness, we were commanded to count from the day after [the first day of] Pesach until the day that the Torah was given. This manifests our great desire for that awesome day which our hearts yearn for just as a servant yearns for shade. We count constantly – when will the day come that we yearn for, the day that we left slavery? Because counting [towards a certain date] shows a person that all his desire and longing is to reach that time.”

May we merit to count the days and weeks so that we can reenact the receiving of the Torah on Chag haShavu'ot.

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