

Torah for Turbulent Times

“Counting Our Blessings”



Hayley and I “went out” on our first date since the pandemic hit. Don’t get me wrong, we stayed home. Some friends invited us on a Zoom double date. She’s a Rabbi, serving a community outside of Dallas, TX, and he’s a rebbetzir, the equivalent of a rebbetzin, but for husbands. I was a bit skeptical at first. But, after an hour of sitting side by side with my loving partner and across from close friends, I was convinced. First, what a great idea! Second, as bad as things are, we have food on the table, we’re healthy, we see our kids (and some friends) more, and - we should count our blessings.

As you may know, in Jewish tradition this is truly a time for counting. Beginning on the second day of Passover in ancient times, our ancestors brought the first sheaf of barley (amounting to a measure called “an omer”) harvested as an offering to G-d. From that day, they began counting the 49 days to Shavuot, when they would celebrate the beginning of the wheat harvest by offering loaves made of the first wheat. Even after the Temple was destroyed and offerings were no longer brought, they continued to count the days from Passover to Shavuot. “And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering, the day after Shabbat, count off seven weeks. They must be complete. Count up to fifty days. Then, bring an offering of new grain.” (Leviticus 23:15-16) This ritual links Passover and Shavuot as occasions of gratitude for our bounty.

Like life and what we’re living through now, this time period is complex and has a dark side too. In the Middle Ages, “The Omer” became known as a time of mourning. Tradition teaches us that many of the students of Rabbi Akiva fell prey to a plague during this time. We read in the Talmud, “It was said that Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of disciples....all of them died at the same time, because they did not treat each other with respect. The world remained desolate of Torah until Rabbi Akiva came and taught others Torah.” (Yebamot 62b) It’s for this reason that some customarily refrain from activities traditionally associated with happiness, such as listening to music, getting haircuts or shaving, and holding a wedding celebration between Passover and Shavuot.

The Omer, both then and now, is a time of high anxiety. For our ancestors and for us, it's about the harvest, about sustenance, and about life. It's a time of mourning, sadness and loss, and simultaneously, it's a time for gratitude, respect, kindness and love. Despite it all, to the best of our abilities, we are to make each day count and to count our blessings. How do we do this? To our loved ones, friends, neighbors, teachers, and those on the "front lines" like our health care providers, food suppliers and clerks - We can say "thank you," more. We can write more letters and emails. We can cry, and we can laugh. Jewish tradition also has a suggestion. We can say a blessing and count each day, literally.

May we be blessed with life as we count down the days towards healthier times, returning to normal, and receiving the Torah - the personal truths that each of us need to get us through every day.

Happy 7th & 8th days of Passover!

Rabbi Mark