



Counting Up

Rabbi Ethan Tucker

In my house, the days of the Omer are some of the most exciting and neurotic of the year. Three children—the youngest of them five years old—and two adults, nervously check and remember each night to tick off another day. (So far so good!) It is an intense and dramatic mitzvah, forcing the audible marking of time on a daily basis. Not just a mental reckoning of time, the counting of the Omer is a ritual act, preceded with a blessing and given deep ritual significance.



The origins of this practice go back to the Torah and the earliest Rabbinic interpretation of it. In Vayikra 23, we read:

ויקרא כג:טו-טז

וספרתם לכם מחרת השבת מיום הביאכם את-עמר התנופה שבע שפלות תמימת תהינה: עד מחרת השבת השביעית
תספרו חמשים יום והקרבתם מנחה חדשה ליקח:

Leviticus 23:15-16

You shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the Sabbath, from the day when you bring the sheaf (*omer*) of waving; they shall be seven complete weeks. Until the morrow of the seventh week, you shall count fifty days and you shall offer an offering of the new grain to the Lord.



The timing here takes us from the morrow of the Sabbath—understood Rabbinically to be the day following the first day of Pesah, which is a day of a rest and a “Sabbath”—into seven full weeks of counting. The **Sifra** (Emor Parashah 10), an early Mishnaic-era midrash on Vayikra, emphasizes that this count is to be done by individuals: כל אחד ואחד—לכם / “You shall count for yourselves—each and every person.” The Sifra here seems to pick up on the plural form of the words וספרתם לכם / “You shall count (plural) for yourselves”. Why doesn’t the Torah use a singular form, such as וספרת לך—“You shall count (individual) for yourself”—which would indicate that some general, national counting is required?¹ The Sifra states that the use of the plural here indicates that this is not merely a communal marking of time, but rather something each person must mark individually. This is our source for regarding this mitzvah as something that each and every person must do.

The age-old assumption and practice has been that this counting is *articulated*, done out loud, as a speech-mitzvah, and that it is preceded by a blessing to boot. The excitement in my home is around this public act of blessing and recitation, which lies at the heart of this practice. Why? Does anything in the Torah or the Sifra suggest that anything more than mental record-keeping is required? And if not, why did the practice of counting aloud develop in the first place?

These questions are made even sharper when we consider that there are other instances of normative counting in the Torah that do not seem to have been understood as speech acts.

¹ Indeed, the formulation וספרת לך appears in Vayikra 25:8, describing the required count of seven sabbatical year cycles in order to reach the fiftieth year of Jubilee. The Sifra there (Behar Parashah 2) states that this count is done in a court, i.e. in a national institution that counts as an “individual.”



Specifically, when Vayikra 15 describes the purification periods for a *zav* and a *zavah* (a man or woman who have experienced unusual and pathological discharges from their sexual organs) it uses the language of וספר לו and וספרה לה / “s/he shall count for him/herself” to describe the mandatory waiting period of seven days after the cessation of the discharge before beginning purification. There is no indication that this counting of each of the seven discharge-free days must be pronounced in an audible fashion, much less done with a blessing. Indeed, the **Sifra** glosses both of those verses by saying לעצמו / “for himself” and לעצמה / “for herself”, perhaps indicating that this counting is specifically done privately, as opposed to the counting of the Omer, which is done aloud. Is there any way to justify our different treatment of such similar formulations? וספרתם לכם—“You shall count audibly”; וספר לו—“He shall count mentally and privately?”

This troubled medieval and modern authorities. **Tosafot** (Ketubot 72a) take our practice of counting the Omer aloud for granted. In light of that, they ask: Why do we not require the same of the *zavah*? Does not the Torah speak of these *mitzvot* with the same language?² We

² Tosafot’s answer is that there is a key difference between the two types of counting. The Omer proceeds inexorably with the passage of time, and it is fully within one’s control to keep up the count. Therefore we do it aloud, with a blessing, since we know that each day will follow on the one before. A *zavah*, however, needs seven *consecutive* days free of discharge. If her flow resumes, the count is wiped out and she begins again. Tosafot suggest that it is inappropriate to count in that sort of context, where it is not clear from the start that one will complete the seven day cycle. **R. David b. Zimra** (Eretz Yisrael/Egypt, 16th c.) offered another explanation. He suggests (in his responsa, IV:27) that counting the Omer is an essential mitzvah, one that cannot be legitimately evaded. Therefore, it is done aloud and with a blessing. By contrast, a *zavah* can choose to remain in a state of impurity if she wishes, as long as she abides by the restrictions that apply to her while in that state. Therefore, since the counting is, strictly speaking, optional, it is not vocalized and ritualized. Interestingly, others refused to accept that there was a compelling distinction here at all. **R. Yeshayah Halevi Horowitz** (Poland/Lithuania/Germany, 16th-17th c.) in fact says that a *zavah* indeed *must* count her discharge-free days aloud, in the same fashion that one counts the Omer! He understands the Tosafot above to eliminate only the blessing in this case, but not the audible counting. There are individuals and communities where this practice persists until today for women who are counting days after the cessation of their menstrual flow, even though most later authorities rejected this as a matter of law. See Noda Bi-Yehudah II:123 for one example.



can ask an even more basic question: Why *do* we count the Omer aloud with a blessing, especially since the comparison to the *zavah* would seem to lead us in the opposite direction? Where does that notion come from?

The **Netziv** (R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, Lithuania, 19th c.) attempts to answer this question by paying close attention to the biblical text. He notes that the passages discussing the counting of the Omer are doubled:

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת... שִׁבְעַת שָׁבוּתוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה: עַד מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׂבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם...

שִׁבְעָה שָׁבוּעֹת תִּסְפְּרֶנָּה מִמָּחֳרַת הַיּוֹם הַהוּא בְּקִמָּה תִּחַל לִסְפֹּר שִׁבְעָה שָׁבוּעֹת

You shall **count** for yourselves from the morrow of the Sabbath...they shall be seven complete weeks. Until the morrow of the seventh week, you shall **count** fifty days...

Seven weeks **count** for yourself, from when the scythe hits the standing grain, begin to **count** seven weeks.

The Netziv suggests (in Ha'amek Davar on Vayikra 23:16) that when the Torah speaks of counting, it generally refers to keeping track of time on a mental plane. That is why the cases of *zav* and *zavah* do not require any articulation of the time passed. The case of the Omer would have been similar, had the Torah not doubled the verb of “counting” in that context. This doubling transforms the mental count into a verbal one, both in terms of counting days and in terms of counting weeks.³

³ In a later note, Netziv points out an interesting consequence of this interpretation. Vayikra says that seven weeks must be counted and that fifty days must be counted. Therefore, only the first forty-nine days are doubled in the biblical command, and only they are counted aloud. But the fiftieth day of the Omer—the first day of Shavuot—even though it is not counted aloud, must still indeed be mentally registered, in the same fashion that the *zav* and the *zavah* must keep track of the passage of time.



The Netziv thus provides us with an anchor in the biblical text for what makes the counting of the Omer different from the counting of the *zav* and the *zavah*. But we can push even farther. Even if we posit the correctness of his textual analysis, why does the Torah choose to express these *mitzvot* in this way? Given that there are other instances where the Torah does *not* double its language, *why* does the Torah double its language of counting around the Omer, thus resulting in an audible count? The Netziv may have given us a textual anchor, but what is the value that stands behind the literary feature he has pointed us to?

I would like to suggest that the answer can be found by thinking about two different kinds of counting. There are times when we count to get away from something. We might be counting the number of years we have been sober, or the number of years since we escaped a country where we were oppressed. Such counting is about leaving something behind. This is the counting of the *zav* and the *zavah*. Their counting is nothing more than making sure that a pathological state has ended so that full life can begin again. Such counting, even though it may be critical and spiritually meaningful, fundamentally looks backwards and expresses gratitude for escaping illness or oppression.

By contrast, there are times when we count towards a destination. In our general culture, these are often “countdowns” to a top song, to the new year, or to the end of a process. We face forward in these counts, with tremendous anticipation of what awaits at the end.

Counting the Omer is this sort of count, but it is a “countup”.⁴ We are heading towards

⁴ I referred earlier to another “countup” of this sort: Vayikra 25’s command to count seven sets of sabbatical years in order to reach the fiftieth year of Jubilee. In keeping with the model we are suggesting here, Maharam of Rothenberg, in Responsa IV:292, suggests that members of the court would actually count these years aloud and with a blessing!



Shavuot, towards the giving of the Torah, towards our first real opportunity to do something meaningful with the freedom we were granted on Pesah. This sort of counting is about seeking blessing, and as such, the Torah indicates through its doubled language that we must do it aloud, with the language of blessing.⁵

This is why counting the Omer is so exciting. We are leaving nothing behind—it is all anticipation, ending one day before Shavuot, when the preparation has reached its peak. It is a reminder of what true blessing looks like: the opportunity to look forward to things in life and to plan how we will use our energy and passion to make the most of the gifts we have been given. May our countings always be for and with a blessing.

Hag Sameah.

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⁵ This also makes sense of the Netziv's silent count of the fiftieth day. This last mental count is important, but we do not do it aloud, for we have already arrived at the destination.