

# FORTY-NINE PORTALS TO TRANSFORMATION

R. Goldie Guy

**W**HAT ARE WE counting towards? In Parashat Emor, God commands us to bring the *omer*, a grain sacrifice of barley, on Pesah to the *mishkan*. From that day, God commands us to count seven complete weeks until the holiday of Shavuot, when we are commanded to bring another offering, this time of new grain (of wheat).<sup>1</sup>

Our tradition sees significance in the 49 days we count from the *omer* offering until we can offer new grain, which also mark the 49 days from the Exodus until we received the Torah at Har Sinai. The Zohar teaches that during our servitude in Egypt, Benei Yisrael descended to the 49<sup>th</sup> level of spiritual impurity—and had we descended further to the 50<sup>th</sup> level, that would have been a spiritual point of no return.<sup>2</sup> Hasidic masters teach, therefore, that each of the 49 days we count during the Omer parallels our emergence through those 49 levels of impurity, serving to gradually elevate us from *tum'ah* (impurity) to *kedushah* (sanctity). The Maggid of Kozhnitz<sup>3</sup> teaches:

עבודת ישראל לפסח  
בליל פסח האירו כל התיקונים והגדלות ברגע  
אחד כדי להוציא עמו בני מכור הברזל ממ"ט  
שערי טומאה למ"ט שערי קדושה. ... אחר יצ"מ  
הוצרכו לברר המדות מעט מעט עפ"י עבודתם עד  
חג השבועות.

## *Avodat Yisrael on Pesah*<sup>4</sup>

*On the [first] night of Pesah, all of the repairs and grandeurs were illuminated in one moment, in order to take out the Israelites from the "iron furnace" of the 49 levels of impurity to the 49 levels of sanctity. ... After yetzi'at mitzrayim, they needed to purify their character traits little by little through their spiritual work, until Shavuot.*

According to this understanding, the transformation we had to undergo as a people, from slavery to freedom, and from Egypt to Har Sinai, needed to be gradual. As in any transformation we undertake as individuals, change doesn't happen overnight. If we desire change in ourselves, in our communities, and in the broader world, we know it will be a product of many small steps to get there. For Benei Yisrael to transform from a nation of slaves to a nation of God, we needed to do critical spiritual work on each of the 49 days. Each day brought us one step closer to being able to receive the Torah, and become vessels for translating divine will into the world.

R. Hayyim Vital<sup>5</sup> teaches that, just as the Jewish people as a whole underwent a gradual process of transformation during these 49 days, the Omer also presents a unique opportunity for each of us to embark on journeys of

1 Vayikra 23:15-16.

2 Zohar Hadash, Yitro, 39a.

3 R. Yisrael Hopstein, 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Poland, was a student of the Maggid of Mezritch and R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk.

4 Translated by R. Daniel Raphael Silverstein.

5 R. Hayyim Vital, 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century Safed and Damascus, was the leading disciple of the Arizal, R. Isaac Luria (a founding figure of Kabbalah).

transformation on an individual level. Echoing teachings of the Arizal, R. Vital understands that each day of the Omer corresponds to specific divine attributes (*sefirot*), and so each day contains unique potential for us to practice self-refinement in those areas of our lives:

שער הכוונות, דרושי הפסח יא  
טוב לאדם לכוין במ"ט ימים אלו לתקן כל  
אשר חטא בכל הז' ספירות והמשל בזה  
בהיותו בשבוע א' יכוין לתקן את אשר חטא  
ופגם בספי' החסד ובשבוע הב' יכוין לתקן את  
אשר חטא ופגם בספי' הגבורה וכעד"ז בד'  
השבועות.

### *Sha'ar ha-Kavanot, Pesah 11*

*During these 49 days it is good for a person to intend to repair any missteps in relation to the seven [lower] sefirot. For example, during the first week they should intend to repair where they have missed the mark in relation to the attribute of hesed. In the second week they should intend to repair where they have missed the mark in relation to the attribute of gevurah (strength), and so on through the seven weeks.*

In this way, throughout the Omer, there is a heightened sense of potential inherent in each day. Every day of the seven-week count represents another portal to greater introspection and self-knowledge. The Omer lays out 49 days of intention and mindful action, resulting in a seven-week-long path to walk toward personal transformation. Each day, each action, each step along the path is critical to the effectiveness of the process.

The Omer is a *mitzvah* that orients us toward greater awareness of time and of the potential inherent in each day. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his essay “Sacred and Profane,” argues that the *mitzvah* was given to Benei Yisrael after the Exodus because being conscious of time and in control of one’s own time is fundamental to the experience of freedom.<sup>6</sup> Counting the Omer was thus an initial expression of our freedom: we could not miss a day of counting (“seven complete weeks”), and

so had to develop an appreciation for each day, and all seven weeks in their accumulation. A person who can sense the power of their days is a free person, a person who is ready to choose a life of commitment to Torah.

The spiritual journey—from slavery to freedom and from the Exodus to receiving the Torah—that is built into the seven weeks of the Omer is also reflected in the offerings that bookend the Omer count. The *omer* offering, which marks the start of the Omer period, is made of ground barley flour. Barley is seen as the simplest and roughest of grains, and flour is a simple, unbaked product. We offer this gift to God at the start of the Omer because it represents where we are in the process of liberation: at the very beginning, having only basic ingredients in our hands. Over the course of the Omer and our journey from Egypt to Sinai, we evolve. We make the choice each day to develop ourselves a little more, to dedicate ourselves to making mindful choices and taking mindful action in the world. When we arrive at Shavuot at the end of the seven weeks, we are able to offer the two loaves of bread baked from our harvested wheat. That *korban* is a complex product born of human investment and ingenuity, one that wouldn’t have been possible without the process of evolution over the Omer, the daily introspection and growth of 49 days.<sup>7</sup>

The Omer is a 49-day story of our daily choices. After we had fallen to the 49<sup>th</sup> level of spiritual opacity, God still redeemed us from Egypt, granting us an unearned chance at a new start. Then God told us to count the Omer, offering us with this *mitzvah* an invitation to begin a new story. If at the Seder we tell a story of unearned liberation, counting the Omer is a story of what we choose to do with each day, and the power to craft our own narrative by committing to growth, and to giving back to God and to the world.

On Pesah, God granted us the gift of freedom, and through the Omer we make a statement of what we intend to do with our freedom. In this journey of transformation, we see the potential each day holds. Each day is a door to open, a threshold to cross, a chance to make mindful choices and take chances. The liminal space of the Omer offers us a space to transform. What will we make of the gift God has given us? Who will we be in seven weeks? What kind of world do we want to shape? ♦

6 *Gesher* 3:1 (1966), p.16. See also the essay of R. Michael Rosensweig, “Reflections on Sefirat ha-Omer,” available here: [http://torahweb.org/torah/1999/moadim/rros\\_sefira.html](http://torahweb.org/torah/1999/moadim/rros_sefira.html).

7 This framing of the *korbanot* is based on the writing of R. Rebecca Blady, <https://rebeccablady.wordpress.com/category/the-omer/>.