

BETWEEN GRIEF AND ANTICIPATION: COUNTING THE OMER¹

R. Shai Held

OVER THE COURSE of Jewish history, a time of breathless anticipation becomes simultaneously a period of profound grief. To understand why is to discover Judaism's deepest yearnings as well as its greatest disappointments.

Parashat Emor describes a period of anticipation leading up to Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, so called because it takes place seven full weeks after the offering of the first fruits of the barley harvest.² The Israelites are instructed: "And you shall count off seven weeks from the day after the sabbath,³ from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation⁴; they shall be complete. You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to God" (Leviticus 23:15-16). On Pesah, the Israelites celebrate having been redeemed from a foreign, oppressive land (23:4-8); on Shavuot, they celebrate what God has

bestowed upon them in the new, promised land (23:15-22). The biblical holiday of Shavuot is purely agricultural, "a celebration of [God's] provision in the harvest."⁵

But for our Sages, Shavuot takes on another, historical dimension: if Pesah commemorates the Exodus from Egypt, Shavuot commemorates the revelation on Mount Sinai (Talmud Bavli Pesahim 68b); *Hag ha-Shavuot*, the Festival of Weeks, becomes, in Rabbinic idiom, *z'man matan torateinu*, the season of the giving of our Torah. Though the association of Shavuot with Sinai lacks any explicit biblical basis, there is something theologically profound about it. On Pesah the Israelites were liberated from slavery—but for what purpose? God does not demand simply that Pharaoh "let My people go," but rather that the king "let My people go that they may serve Me" (Exodus 7:26). For Jewish tradition, so committed to the ideal of freedom for a sacred purpose as opposed

1 Originally published for Parashat Emor 5775, available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/between-grief-and-anticipation-counting-omer>, and published in *The Heart of Torah*.

2 Actually, the festival in question is not named in Leviticus, but is referred to as *Hag ha-Shavuot* in Exodus 34:22 and Deuteronomy 16:10. Elsewhere it is called the Feast of Harvest (*Hag ha-Katzir*, Exodus 23:16), and the Day of First Fruits (Yom ha-Bikkurim, Numbers 28:26).

3 "The sabbath" is understood by Jewish tradition to refer, in this context, to the first day of the holiday.

4 The *omer ha-tenufah*, or "sheaf of elevation," is an offering consisting of two loaves of leavened bread from the new wheat crop. They are "elevated" before God in order to sanctify them (cf. Leviticus 23:11).

5 Jay Sklar, *Leviticus* (2014), p. 283. Scholars disagree over whether the festival actually celebrates the end of the harvest or the beginning. See, e.g., Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus*, p. 265 and Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27* (2001), pp. 1991-1992. Rabbinic tradition seems to side with Milgrom.

to mere freedom **from** external constraint,⁶ Pesah needs to lead somewhere, and Sinai-Shavuot is that destination. Counting the 49 days of the Omer thus becomes an exercise in anticipating revelation.

This idea is beautifully expressed in the medieval *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*:⁷ “The very essence of the Jewish people is only the Torah... and it is the essence of why they were redeemed from Egypt—so that they would receive the Torah at Sinai and fulfill it.” Receiving the Torah, the author insists, is an even greater good for the Jewish people than freedom from slavery; the purpose of the latter is to lead on to the former. We count 49 days in order to demonstrate the immense yearning we feel for the great day when we will receive the Torah, “because counting shows a person that all of his longing and all of his yearning are focused on getting to that day” (*Mitzvah* #306). In counting these days each year, in other words, the Jewish people re-experience the excitement and anticipation that the first generation of liberated Israelites felt: we are no longer slaves, and soon we will receive the Torah, the greatest gift imaginable.

Over time, however, these days of anticipation became mingled with sadness, and even mourning. Beginning in the Geonic period, marriages were discouraged, then haircutting, and eventually, the use of musical instruments.⁸ Tradition associates the sadness of the Omer with the death of the students of R. Akiva. As recounted in the Talmud, R. Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of disciples, “all of whom died at the same time.... It was taught: All of them died between Pesah and Shavuot. Rav Hama bar Abba, and some say R. Hiyya bar Avin said: All of them died a cruel death. What was it? Rav Nahman said: Diphtheria” (*Yevamot* 62b). Historians

have long struggled to reconstruct just what might have taken place to cause the death of so many students in such a short time. One common view was that, in a veiled way, the Talmud is describing the fact that R. Akiva’s students followed his guidance and joined Bar Kokhba’s revolt against the Romans (132-136 CE). The revolt was unsuccessful, and thousands of students died.⁹ More recent scholarship casts doubt on the connection of this story to the Bar Kokhba revolt—and, more fundamentally, questions whether literary sources can be reliably mined for historical information.¹⁰ Historically accurate or not, the idea that R. Akiva’s disciples died in a revolt against Roman oppressors, and the suggestion that they began to die on Pesah, are enormously powerful and instructive. They offer a window into the promise and peril, the hope and the tragedy, of Exodus theology.

When God creates the world, God separates water from water (*Genesis* 1:6) so that life may emerge. Strikingly, when God redeems the Israelite slaves from Egypt, God again separates water from water, establishing a piece of dry land so that life may emerge from the hands of its enemies (*Exodus* 14:21-22). This enormously significant (yet easy-to-miss) parallel offers a crucial window into biblical theology. The Exodus from Egypt is not a fleeting moment in history; it is, rather, part of God’s struggle to have cosmos prevail over chaos, to have life triumph over death, and to have goodness overcome cruelty and tyranny. Creation in Tanakh does not mean that God creates something out of nothing, but rather that God subdues the forces of chaos, enabling order to emerge and life to flourish.” In Tanakh, Pharaoh is seen as both a historical figure and a mythological one: the cruel tyrant’s arrogance and murderousness represent an assault on

6 Regarding positive and negative freedom (including the political dangers of invoking the former) see my essay on Parashat VaYakhel, “Whom Do We Serve? The Exodus Toward Dignified Work,” published in *The Heart of Torah* and available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/whom-do-we-serve>.

7 An anonymous work from 13th century Spain.

8 Cf. B. M. Levin, ed., *Otzar ha-Geonim*, vol. 7 (1936), pp. 140-41; *Arba’ah Turim*, *Orah Hayyim* 493; *Shulhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayyim* 493:1-4.

9 For a classic example of this interpretation, cf. Shmuel Safrai, *R. Akiva ben Yosef: Hayyav u-Mishnato* (1970), pp. 27-28. For a summary presentation of the historiographical debate, cf. Haim Licht, “Al Motam shel Talmidei R. Akiva,” *Tura* 1 (1989), pp. 119-134.

10 Cf., most importantly, Aaron Amit, “The Death of Rabbi Akiva’s Disciples: A Literary History,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 56 (2005), pp. 265-284.

11 See my essay on Parashat Vayikra, “Order Amidst Chaos: Connecting to Leviticus,” published in *The Heart of Torah* and available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/order-amidst-chaos-connecting-leviticus>; and cf. also Jon Levenson’s magisterial exploration of creation in Tanakh, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (1988), pp. 3-127.

creation itself.¹² The prophet Ezekiel imagines Pharaoh brazenly announcing, “My Nile is my own; I made it for myself.” Tellingly, God refers to Pharaoh, whom God is about to slay, as “the mighty sea monster (*ha-tannim ha-gadol*)” (Ezekiel 29:3; cf. 32:2).¹³

The Israelites refer to themselves in the Song of the Sea as “*am zu kanita*,” this people You have *k-n-h*. Some translations render: “ransomed” (JPS), others: “acquired” (NRSV), still others: “made yours” (Alter). But in biblical Hebrew, the root *k-n-h* can also mean to create. In the Song of the Sea, then, the Israelites jubilantly proclaim that, in scoring this massive victory for life over death, and for cosmos over chaos, God has **created** them.¹⁴ The prophet Isaiah explicitly ties God’s splitting of the sea to God’s defeat of primal, cosmic forces of chaos. “Was it not You who hacked Rahab [a primeval monster] into pieces, who pierced the Dragon? Was it not You who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a road for the redeemed to walk?” (Isaiah 51:9-10). The redemption of the Israelites thus represents an epic victory for creation.¹⁵

For Isaiah in this passage, the Exodus is not an episode lost in the mists of a long-ago past; it is, rather, a recurrent possibility. It has happened before, and it—or its equivalent—will happen again.¹⁶ If anything, what will yet come to pass will far transcend what transpired in the past. The prophet proclaims: “Thus said God, Who made a road through the sea and a path through mighty waters, Who destroyed chariots and horses . . . Do not remember what happened of old, or ponder what happened of yore!

I am about to do something new . . . I will make a road through the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (43:16-19). In the past God made a road through the sea; in the future God will make one through the wilderness. But what matters most is that, just as despotic Egypt was defeated, so, too, will oppressive Babylon be subdued. Here again, creation language is employed: God refers to the people as “*am zu yatzarti li*,” “this people I created for Myself” (43:21).¹⁷

Dreaming of the people’s departure from Babylon, the prophet again invokes Exodus imagery: “Go forth (*tze’u*) from Babylon . . . Declare with loud shouting, announce this, bring out the word to the ends of the Earth! Say, ‘God has redeemed (*ga’al*) God’s servant Jacob!’” The terms *yetzi’ah* (going out) and *ge’ulah* (redemption) are unmistakably associated with the Exodus. But Isaiah pushes the connection further: “They have known no thirst, though [God] led them through parched places; [God] made water flow for them from the rock; [God] cleaved the rock and water gushed forth” (48:20-21; cf. Exodus 17:1-6). Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann nicely captures the intent of Isaiah’s words: “*This event is that event. The journey of the wilderness sojourn is from Egypt/from Babylon . . . As Israel remembers the gushing of the rock, so the exiles are now assured of gushing, life-giving waters on the way (see 41:18).*”¹⁸ The past, in other words, is not really past at all; it is, also, imminent future.

It should be obvious in light of all this that, in reciting the Song of the Sea each morning, Jews do not merely recall a long-past event, buried in an unrecoverable

12 Terence E. Fretheim, “The Plagues as Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110/3 (1991), pp. 385-396. See especially, p. 385, n.4.

13 For a fuller discussion, see my essay on Parashat Bo, “Pharaoh: Consumed by the Chaos He Sows,” published in *The Heart of Torah* and available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/pharaoh-consumed-chaos-he-sows>.

14 Everett Fox translates “this people You fashioned,” and Richard Elliot Friedman, “the people you created.” Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Notes* (1995), p. 338, and Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah: With a New English Translation of the Hebrew Text* (2001), p. 220.

15 Michael Fishbane writes that “the historical representation of past and future in terms of cosmogonic paradigms discloses the deep biblical presentiment that all historical renewal is fundamentally a species of world renewal.” Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts* (1979), p. 136.

16 That Exodus was understood to have happened more than once already is evident from a close reading of Joshua 3-5.

17 Fishbane goes so far as to label Isaiah’s choice of words a “pointed allusion” to Exodus 15. Fishbane, *Text and Texture*, pp. 133-134.

18 Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (1998), p. 108.

past. Rather, we summon the past into the present, and implicitly ask God to act in the same way again.¹⁹ What I am suggesting, in other words, is that, in Jewish liturgy, the Song of the Sea functions at once as a hymn and as a not-quite-spoken petition. What is implicit in reading the Song is made explicit during the repetition of the Musaf Amidah, when we affirm that God, “in God’s mercy, will let us hear a second time [God’s promise] ‘To be your God.’” The allusion is probably to the verse that concludes the liturgical recitation of the Shema: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God” (Numbers 15:41). We recall the Exodus, we tell God, but we also yearn to re-experience it.

So why do Jews mourn when we count the Omer? As we’ve seen, for Jewish theology the Exodus is, in a sense, built into the universe. At any rate, the fact that God has risen up to liberate God’s people instills the hope—and the confidence—that God will do so again. No claim could be more comforting to a people downtrodden by implacable foes. But now imagine R. Akiva’s students: afflicted by a merciless enemy (Rome), they take God’s promise into their own hands and attempt to cast off the yoke of oppression. And they fail spectacularly. God is silent, seemingly unmoved either by their suffering or by their longing. The Exodus may be a paradigm for how Jewish history is supposed (indeed, destined) to look, but for now—tragically, inexplicably—history makes a mockery of that paradigm. Rome is triumphant; a renewed Exodus remains but a dim hope.

And so we mourn. We mourn because our experience falls so unbearably short of the redemption we have been promised and assured will come. There is a stunning degree of audacity—and honesty—in starting to grieve as *Pesah* begins, because in fundamental respects, *Pesah* resides in the future rather than the present. And yet grief does not have the final—or even the loudest—word, because we affirm that the God who redeemed us once will, despite all evidence to the contrary, redeem us “a second time.” ♦

19 In a similar vein, Fishbane writes of biblical prayers that appeal to the Exodus that “the same prayer which requests divine action at once reminds God of [God’s] former deeds, and so gives the people strength in their abyss of historical despair.” Fishbane, *Text and Texture*, p. 139. Reuven Kimelman writes in the same terms about the third blessing of the Shema (*ga’al yisrael*). Kimelman, “The Shema’ Liturgy: From Covenant Ceremony to Coronation,” in *Kenishta: Studies of the Synagogue World* (2001), pp. 9-105; relevant passage is on pp. 52-53.