



Recounting the Omer

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Every year, by good calendrical fortune, we read in Parashat Emor the commandment of Sefirat ha-Omer, the “Counting of the Omer,” during the period in which we actually count the Omer. This moment of sync between reading and ritual presents us with an opportunity to recognize our contemporary practice as continuous from the words of the Torah. Yet when we begin to read through those words, we quickly see that our counting ritual today looks very different from the original *mitzvah*.

Parashat Emor tells us that when the Israelites one day enter the Land and begin to plant new crops, they are to bring the first collected *omer* (a unit of volume) of grain to the priest, and then begin counting “seven complete weeks,” and then, on the 50th day, to bring “a new grain offering to the Eternal” (Leviticus 23:15-16).

Throughout most of Jewish history, however, there has been no active Beit ha-Mikdash (Temple) and no agricultural access to the Land of Israel. Yet we kept up the ritual of counting. Detached from its original agricultural significance, Sefirat ha-Omer became a practice of just counting for counting’s sake. The Talmud (in *Menaḥot* 66a) already records that the 4th-5th century sage, Ameimar, was not so scrupulous about counting both days and



weeks—as is the standard custom—because, he said, the counting is now only done “זכר למקדש - in memory of the Temple.” The Kabbalistic tradition of attaching two *sefirot* (divine qualities) to each day has valiantly provided some meaningful content to a *mitzvah* that might otherwise feel a little empty.

Yet an earlier story in the Torah’s narrative can provide our counting ritual with a symbolic meaning that endures far beyond the Temple service. The first “*omer*” measurement in the Torah appears in chapter 16 of the Book of Exodus, in Parashat BeShallah. The Israelites have just completed the exodus from Egypt, escaping the Egyptian armies by crossing the Reed Sea. As they wander out into the desert, they begin to complain of hunger. God responds with the offer of a miracle, promising to rain down manna—daily bread from heaven!

This miracle, however, is framed from the start as a “test” to see: הֲיִלְכוּ בְּתוֹרָתִי אִם-לֹא, “if they will follow my Torah or not” (Exodus 16:4). That concern is well placed, since the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai is soon to come in the narrative. Before that revelation, God seems to want some indication that these people will be able to follow instructions.

So they are given some collection guidelines, which include one very specific measurement:

שמות טז:טז

זֶה הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לְקַטוּ מִמֶּנּוּ אִישׁ לְפִי אֲכָלוּ עֹמֶר לְגִלְגֵּלֶת מִסֶּפֶר נַפְשֵׁיכֶם אִישׁ לְאִשָּׁר בְּאֹהֶלוֹ תִקְחוּ.

Exodus 16:16

This is what the Eternal has commanded: Gather as much as each of you requires to eat, an **omer** per person, for as many of you as there are, every man shall gather for those in his tent.

Here, in this first mention of an *omer*, it seems to represent a basic unit of sustenance—the amount of food that one fully-grown person needs every day.¹ So the *omer* measurement is used to ensure that everyone has enough to survive. The people seem to be able to follow these instructions precisely, for in the next lines we read:

שמות טז:יז-יח

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּלְקְטוּ הַמִּרְבָּה וְהַמִּמְעִיט. וַיִּמְדוּ בַעֲמֹר וְלֹא הָעֲדִיף הַמִּרְבָּה וְהַמִּמְעִיט לֹא הִחְסִיר אִישׁ לִפִּי אֲכָלוּ לֶקֶטוֹ.

Exodus 16:17-18

And the Israelites did so, some gathering more and some gathering less. And when they measured by the *omer*, the one who gathered more had no excess and the one who gathered less had no lack, everyone had gathered what they needed to eat.²

They demonstrate an immediate ability to carefully measure out resources, and an intuitive appreciation of the underlying principle that everyone in society should have at least their basic needs met. So far, it seems, they are passing the test.

The next two instructions, however, the Israelites do not so readily adopt. First, Moshe tells them not to save any of the food for the next morning (אִישׁ אֶל יוֹתֵר מִמֶּנּוּ עַד בֹּקֶר, Exodus 16:19). They are to eat their fill for that day, and then trust that more manna will come the next day.³

¹ See Ibn Ezra on the verse: “זה בדרך הסברא כי עומר לגולגולת למי שהוא גדול בשנים ולקטנים כפי אכלם.”

² There is some debate over how to understand these verses, summarized nicely by the Ibn Ezra: “המרבה והממעט לפי מספר נפשות אהלו וקדמוניו אמרו כי הוא דבר פלא על דרך הפשט כי:” I am following what he calls the “*derekh hapeshat*” interpretation, that everyone honestly took an *omer* for each fully-grown member of the household, and that amount was exactly sufficient for all their needs.

³ Again, Ibn Ezra: “הטעם שלא יותירו ממנו לאכלו מחר. רק יבטח בשם כי מחר ירד.” He adds, however, that one wasn’t required to eat the whole *omer*, but just to throw what was left outside the tent (ישליכו מחוץ לאהלו). I tend to think that the *pshat* is that everyone had—more or less—exactly what they needed for one day’s full sustenance. Either way, Ibn Ezra is right: this test is clearly one of food security (in his language: *bitahon*).



But, the next verse says: “וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּתֵרוּ אָנָשִׁים מִמֶּנּוּ עַד בֹּקֶר” - they did not listen to Moshe, and kept some over until morning” (16:20).

Perhaps we can sympathize with their instincts: these were newly freed slaves, after all—on the run and not sure where their next meal was coming from. So they were anxious about the coming day’s hunger, and they hoarded. But to no avail: the next day, the hoarded manna becomes immediately worm-infested and rotten. Moshe is furious at their disobedience, and they seem duly chastened, for they then begin going out “every morning to collect their daily rations (וַיֵּלְקֻטוּ אֹתוֹ בַּבֹּקֶר בַּבֹּקֶר אִישׁ כְּפִי אֲכָלוֹ), Exodus 16:21).

Another kind of test comes on the sixth day when they go out to gather and are surprised to find that some extra manna awaits them:

שמות טז:כב

לָקֻטוּ לָחֶם מִשָּׁנָה שְׁנֵי הָעֶמֶר.

Exodus 16:22

They collected double their bread: two **omers**.

They are uncertain what to do with the surplus, having just been told not to keep any manna for the next day. So they go and tell Moshe, who explains that they are receiving a double-portion because the next day is Shabbat. This sixth-day manna, they are told, is to be kept for the next day. Morning comes, and indeed, the manna has not gone bad. By now, surely they have enough verification to trust in God’s power and Moshe’s messaging. So Moshe explains to them, for the first time, how to observe Shabbat:

שמות טז:כה-כו

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֲכָלוּ הַיּוֹם כִּי שַׁבָּת הַיּוֹם לָהּ הַיּוֹם לֹא תִמְצָאוּהוּ בַשָּׂדֶה. שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תִּלְקֻטֻּהוּ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי

שַׁבָּת לֹא יִהְיֶה בוֹ.



Exodus 16:25-26

Moshe said, “Eat it today, for today is a Shabbat of the Eternal, and you will not find any in the field. For six days you will collect it, and the seventh day is Shabbat, and there will be none.”

But some of the Israelites once again ignore the restriction, and—ever scavenging for more provisions—they go out the next morning hoping to collect a little extra on Shabbat. Of course, no manna comes. This time it is God who is furious, and now explicitly and emphatically commands them to stay put on Shabbat. Once again, after being chastised, they seem to learn their lesson and begin observing the seventh day as a day of rest (וַיִּשְׁבְּתוּ הָעָם בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, Exodus 16:30), following a protocol that will continue for the rest of their 40-year journey.

If we now return to the Sefirat ha-Omer ritual in Parashat Emor, we will find that its structure replicates many key features of the Exodus narrative we have just described. First, of course, there is the prominence of the *omer* itself. Like their ancestors 40 years earlier, the first Israelites to arrive in the new Land begin by collecting—very precisely—an *omer* of grain.

Then, the counting itself begins and, as we noted above, it is described in two time units: days and weeks. Here is the language from our *parashah*:

ויקרא כג:טו-טז

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאְכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעַת שָׁבוּעוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה. עַד מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה.

Leviticus 23:15-16

You shall count for yourselves, from the day after the holiday, **from the day you brought the *omer*** as an elevation offering, will be **seven complete weeks**. On the day after the **seventh week, you shall count the 50th day**, and then bring a grain offering to the Eternal.



Recall that the Israelites in the desert also received instruction to follow a regular daily counting (בִּבְקֹר וּבִבְקֹר) and then, layered upon that, they were instructed to follow a regular weekly counting, in measurements of seven (שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תִּלְקֹטְהוּ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת). This was their first introduction to Shabbat, an observance so prominent among the commandments that it will merit inclusion as the fourth of the Ten Commandments spoken at Mount Sinai. The practice of a seven-day Shabbat rhythm is surely one good way to see if they can “follow [God]’s Torah or not.”

The language in the commandment of Sefirat ha-Omer, then, echoing the earlier narrative, not only picks up on those two forms of counting, but also gives great emphasis to the word, *shabbat*, using it repeatedly, to describe both weeks (שַׁבְּתוֹת תְּמִימוֹת) and specific days (מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת), even when there are other, more common words the Torah might have used (*shavuot*, for weeks, as appears in Deuteronomy 16:9; and *hag* for holiday).⁴

Finally, consider the placement of this counting ritual in the calendar. It comes just after Pesah and leads—seven weeks later—into Shavuot. This parallels the placement of the story in chapter 16, which picks up just after the actual Exodus (a crossing over onto dry land), begins with one *omer*, and then seven days later culminates in Shabbat. And just as the generation of the desert was given “משנה לחם - two portions of bread” for Shabbat, so Shavuot in our calendar culminates with an offering of the same:

וּיקרא כג:יז

מִמּוֹשְׁבֵיכֶם תָּבִיאוּ לַחֵם תְּנוּפָה שְׁתֵּי עָשָׂרִים סֹלֶת תִּהְיֶינָה חֶמֶץ תֹּאפִינָה בַּכּוֹרִים לָהּ.

⁴ I am following the Rabbinic understanding here, that ממחרת השבת means, “the day after the Pesah holiday,” and not the Second Temple tradition that it means, “the day after the first Shabbat after Pesah.” But in any case, the השבת here clearly refers to a particular day, and in the other usage (שַׁבְּתוֹת) to weeks.



Leviticus 23:17

From your settlements you shall bring **two loaves of bread** as an elevation offering, each shall be made of two-tenths of a measure of choice flour, baked after leavening, as first fruits to the Eternal.

Sefirat ha-Omer, then, is meant to take us back to the moments after the Exodus, when we were finally free, but suddenly terrified, wondering how we would survive. We retrace those first days and weeks of learning by reenacting a daily and then a weekly counting. When on Shavuot we conclude by offering two loaves of bread, we are giving special gratitude for the two portions of manna that came in the desert for Shabbat.

The need for this memorialization was already anticipated back in Parashat BeShallah. Before the story there concludes, Moshe delivers one last instruction from God:

שמות טז:לב-לג

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה זֶה הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' מִלֵּא הָעֹמֶר מִמֶּנּוּ לְמִשְׁמֶרֶת לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם לְמַעַן יֵרְאוּ אֶת הַלֶּחֶם אֲשֶׁר הִאֲכַלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּהוֹצִיאִי אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם. וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אַהֲרֹן קַח צִנְצָנֶת אַחַת וְתֵן שָׁמָּה מִלֵּא הָעֹמֶר מִן וְהִנֵּחַ אֹתוֹ לִפְנֵי ה' לְמִשְׁמֶרֶת לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם.

Exodus 16:32-33

“Let one *omer* [of manna] be kept throughout the ages, so that they will see the bread that I fed them in the desert, when I brought you out from the land of Egypt.” So Moshe said to Aharon, “Take a jar, put one **omer** of manna in it, and place it before the Eternal, to be kept throughout the ages.”

So Aharon collects this *omer* of manna and places it, the Torah says, “in front of the Testimony.” Because of this language, which will eventually describe the Tablets with the Ten



Commandments, our Sages conclude the Ark of the Covenant contained not only the tablets, but also a jar with an *omer* of manna.⁵

That image boldly suggests that this *omer* of manna was as sacred to our people as the tablets themselves—and so that the story of learning to gather food in the desert is as important as the great revelation at Mount Sinai.

So what lessons are we meant to recall from those first days of gathering manna? The first, symbolized by the *omer* itself, is the basic premise that every person in this new society should have enough to survive. That much, even then, we seemed to grasp intuitively. But the other two lessons were more difficult to integrate: to trust that God would provide enough for us on a daily basis, and then to trust that God would even provide enough for us that we could risk taking a day of rest. These were not easy concepts for a bunch of newly-freed slaves to grasp.

Nor are they such easy concepts for us to grasp even now, all these generations later. Are we willing to take only what we need, to let go of our anxieties about the future, and trust that we will always be given enough? Are we willing to take a day off work every week to invest in our spiritual and communal lives, and to trust that we will still make enough to survive?

These have never been easy questions. Our ancestors grappled with them during their first days and weeks of freedom. And we, too, as we count the days and weeks of the Omer, in our journey to receiving Torah, we remember the first *omer*, and ask ourselves again and again הֲיִלֵּךְ בְּתוֹרַתִּי אִם-לֹא, if we are ready yet to follow the path of Torah.

⁵ See Rashi and the Mekhilta on Exodus 16:32 (va-Yassa 6).

