

Waiting Gracefully: The Omer for Our Time
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Shabbat Drash
April 24, 2020/30 Nisan 5780

I have high hopes of planting some fresh herbs in my garden this weekend: basil, cilantro, mint and a few chives. I tried to do it a few days ago but the weather wouldn't cooperate. We'll see what happens this week.

You see, for our ancestors in the land of Israel, the months of April and May marked the time when certain crops in the temperate Mediterranean climate would now be ready, or almost ready for harvesting. As you may recall, we observed *Tu B'Shevat*, the new year for trees--at the end of February this year--and while still frigid winter for us, *Tu B'Shevat* heralds the start of the growing season in the land of Israel. So now, with the beginning of May just around the corner, certain crops are nearly ready.

In antiquity, this early stage of the growing season was also a time of intense agricultural anxiety, because our ancestors didn't know how their crops would turn out--and they *needed* crops to live. So this time period grew to have heightened hopes amidst anxious waiting. The questions had to have been tough ones. Will there be enough rain? Will insects destroy my crops? Will scavenger animals get in and wreak havoc on the young shoots? And most importantly, will I have enough food to feed my family?

It just so happens that this time of agricultural anxiety has a name on the Jewish calendar. It's called "the Omer." The Omer is the period of time between the holidays of Passover and Shavuot. It's approximately 7 weeks long or 49 days. Tonight marks the 15th day of the Omer.

An Omer has another meaning. It is also a unit of measure, as in a small measure of barley brought to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem as an [offering](#). This grain offering was referred to as the Omer.

And finally a third meaning: The Omer is also a time of sadness or semi-mourning. This is because we are taught that during this time (during the first century of the Common Era) a plague struck the students of the great sage, Rabbi Akiva. Many of Rabbi Akiva's students were said to have died. As a side note, our minds are no doubt drawn to the modern day plague of COVID-19 we face right now, and we hope that lives will be

spared unlike during the time of Rabbi Akiva. As such, many observant Jews follow the customs associated with mourning during the Omer: men refrain from shaving, celebrations are put on hold and communities of faith recall this story of loss.

So this period of time, this otherwise uneventful set of weeks between Passover and Shavuot, has come to have heightened spiritual significance. So much so, that we are instructed to count the days of the Omer in a contemplative practice known as *sfirat haomer*. In accordance with practice, tonight marks the 15th day of the Omer.

So what value does counting the Omer hold for us? Most of us do not subsist on agricultural livelihoods, although I know many of us garden, or actively mourn the students of Rabbi Akiva, or bring small barley offerings to Temple. What lessons then can we draw from this practice?

Well for starters, I suspect everyone of us here knows a little something about waiting: waiting for test results, waiting to start a treatment, waiting for a college acceptance, waiting to start or grow a family, or waiting simply for a reprieve from a burden too heavy to name, except in the quiet places of our hearts. The Omer reminds us that to be human is to wait--to wait for outcomes over which we often have so little control.

Counting the Omer also reminds us that so much in our lives demands patience. In Hebrew the word for patience is "savlanut" Sav•la•noot comes from the root word 'sevel,' which means pain or suffering. However, patience has another word in Hebrew which is also biblical: *E•rech Ru•ach* (literally, 'long breath'). If we put those two meanings together we get a more nuanced understanding of patience: yes there is often suffering in patience, but there is also an opportunity for a long breath, a sustained practice of inhale and exhale which can lead us to feel more centered, and allow us to tolerate the demands we must face.

On a lighter note, an online resource known as "The Jerusalem Prayer Team" notes, "in the early years of the State of Israel, patience or 'savlanut' was the first word new immigrants to Israel learned upon arrival when they experienced the snail-slow speed at which things were done. For example, up to the early 1980's, the only phone company in Israel was the government. During those years, it took between 5 to 8 years to get a phone line from the day you placed the order. You surely needed much 'sav•la•noot' in Israel during this time. And a sense of humor was definitely a real plus..."

But perhaps this poem, by contemporary author, Kay Ryan, entitled "Patience," says it all:

*Patience is
Wider than one
once envisioned
With ribbons of rivers and distant ranges
And tasks undertaken
And finished with modest relish by
Natives in their native dress.
Who would have guessed
It possible
That waiting
Is sustainable
A place with
Its own harvests
Or that in
Time's fullness
The diamonds of patience
Couldn't be distinguished
from the genuine in brilliance
or hardness.*

For some of us, though, patience may not be the central challenge. Some of us may be blessed with more patient temperaments or constitutions. But for most of us, accepting our own lack of control over certain outcomes, calls us to draw deep on our deepest emotional reserves. And for our ancestors who anxiously awaited the ripening of fruits, we know that they too knew that rain and sunshine were not a given.

Counting the Omer reminds us that being patient is a central component of human experience. Counting the Omer reminds us that most of us live in anticipation of some outcome that has yet to fully materialize. And while counting the Omer reminds us of our limited control, the act of counting the days, reminds us that we must not let days just pass by; we are meant, I am sure, in the teaching of the Omer, quite literally, to make each day count. Amen.