

S'firat Ha-omer (Counting the Omer)

Pesach is connected to Shavuot by a 49-day period marking the beginning of the barley harvest. In Biblical times, Jews would bring an *omer* (sheaf) of newly harvested barley to the Temple each day as a thanksgiving offering. Over time, the term *omer* was applied to the seven-week period itself.

The Torah commands us to, “... Count for yourselves from the morrow of this festival [Pesach] ... you shall count fifty days” (Lev. 23:15-16). This is *s'firat ha-omer* (the counting of the *omer*), a ritual beginning the second night of Pesach. According to *halacha* (Jewish law), one performs the ritual in the evening, standing to recite the *b'racha* (blessing), “Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has set us apart with your commandments and commanded us to count the *omer*.” Then each day is counted off (“Today is the ___th day of the *omer*”). The ritual closes with a plea that counting the *omer* will help us overcome our failure to observe fully the Torah's commandments.

Rabbi Abraham Twerski (1930-2021; American chassidic rabbi and a psychiatrist specializing in substance abuse) observes that *s'firat ha-omer* does more than just keep track of how many days are left before Shavuot. It reminds us of the importance of living life one day at a time. The Israelites who leave Egypt are abused, oppressed, and spiritually bereft, yet 50 days later at Mt. Sinai, they achieve an unprecedented spirituality. This is because Moses guides them each day to a new level of spirituality, which empowers them to take another step the next day. Over time, the steps add up and bring the people to a state of readiness to receive the Torah. This day-by-day approach to spiritual growth (or mastery of any challenging task) is as applicable in today's “hurry-up” world as in Moses' time.

Gut Shabbos/Shabbat Shalom