



By: Rabbi Ben Shull

Shull to Shul

And Counting...

Allow me to share a column that I wrote for the May edition of *The Jewish News of Sarasota-Manatee*...with a few final comments directed to you, my congregation.

"Counting days and counting lives...as I write this column on the last day of March, we are counting the days of the Coronavirus pandemic and counting the lives lost to its horrid disease Covid-19. As you read this column, you will hear of a much different count. I can only hope that by the beginning of May, we will have reached the beginning of the end of this dark and difficult time.

Counting is an important part of the season we have entered, *Sefirat Ha'Omer*- the counting of the days between the second day of Passover and the upcoming holiday of Shavuot (a two-day festival which begins on Thursday evening, May 27). This counting, a tradition with Biblical/agricultural origins, ties together the holiday of freedom, Passover, with the holiday of responsibility, Shavuot, *z'man matan Torateinu* (the time of the giving of the Torah). Freedom and responsibility are inextricably bound. Freedom without responsibility leads to self-indulgence and anarchy. Responsibility without freedom is a type of imprisonment.

And so, we "count up", day 1, day 2, day 3 (rather than "count down") gathering up the days like precious gems to place in our treasure chest of life. We count days to remind us that we must use our time well, to grow in wisdom and grow in kindness. We count days to make our lives count. Understandably, this time of sober assessment is a time when, traditionally, we refrain from rejoicing and self-indulgence.

In addition, there is a special day during this time of counting, *Lag B'Omer*, the 33rd day of counting (this year beginning on the eve of Monday, May 11) when we relax the prohibitions of the Omer period. Weddings are held and the mood is light. Why do we have this reprieve? According to an ancient tradition, on the 33rd day of the Omer, a plague that afflicted the students of the great Rabbi Akiva lifted and life triumphed over death. This plague, according to the Talmud, had taken the lives of 24,000 of his followers. The plague was God's way of punishing Akiva's students for the disrespect they showed for one another.

I have never before in my lifetime attached any personal meaning to this explanation of the origins of Lag B'Omer. This year, of course, is different. We have come to know the terrible price of this deadly pandemic. Whether this is punishment from God, the result of human wrongdoing, or just the "roll of the evolutionary dice", we all know that the cost is terribly high. We can only hope that on this Lag B'Omer, we too can lift the prohibitions and move from mourning to gladness, from darkness to light. We can only hope that, like our ancestors of old, we can learn to show greater respect to our neighbors, our fellow Americans, our fellow Jews, our fellow human beings. We must learn lessons from this modern-day plague that has shaken the foundations of our world. We cannot afford to let this moment pass without becoming better and wiser and stronger. As the Psalmist said long ago, "Teach us to number our days, that we too may get a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).

My dear friends of the JCV, I hope that, individually and collectively, this crisis helps us to "get a heart of wisdom". Rather than merely "getting through" these days of confinement or wishing the moments by, I pray that this time of "social distancing" will teach us about the importance of "social connecting" and about taking better care of one another. As we gradually emerge from quarantine, let us become a better people. Our congregants have learned much about using technology to connect with others, particularly those who are homebound or have difficulty with getting out. Let's continue using that technology to our advantage. We have set up buddy systems and neighborhood connections. Let's continue with these efforts to keep in touch.

As we "count up" the precious days to Shavuot, we pray for comfort for those who have experienced loss during this time, health for those who have experienced illness, and wisdom for us all to grow in kindness and in love!

B'shalom,

Ben Shull