

Counting the Days

Rabbi David A. Cantor | Temple Beth Shalom



With Shavu'ot comes anticipation and anxiety: anticipation, because of the counting of the Omer; anxiety, for the same reason.

And you shall count you from the morrow of the sabbath, from the day you bring the elevation sheaf, seven whole weeks shall they

be. Until the morrow of the seventh sabbath you shall count fifty days, and you shall bring forward a new grain offering to the LORD.

(Leviticus 23:15-16, Robert Alter trans.)

The anticipation flows from the nature of the counting: if, every evening, one makes a ceremony of counting the day with a blessing, a sense of anticipation will begin to develop, waiting for that fiftieth day, Shavu'ot, where we celebrate our receiving of God's Torah. The anxiety flows from the rules governing the ceremony: if one forgets to count a day, one is no longer authorized to count the rest of the days with the blessing. It is the only mitzvah that carries with it a penalty for non-compliance: if one neglects any other mitzvah, the Tradition's response is "try again next time."

The day is counted with a blessing: *Praised are you, LORD our God, who has sanctified us with commandments, and commanded us to regarding*

the counting of the Omer. Ironically, we are blessing our counting, not counting our blessings.

This year has brought a new kind of anticipation, anxiety, and counting of days for me and, I suspect, for many others. Will I contract the disease? How many days has it been since the stay-at-home order was imposed? How many days until my appointment to be vaccinated? Will I manage to avoid infection between now and then? How many days until June 15, when (at the time of writing) the stay-at-home order is due to be lifted?

In Temple times, at the end of the counting of the Omer, the Israelites would bring a basket of first fruits to the Temple, present it to the priest, and say,

My father was an Aramean about to perish, and he went down to Egypt, and he sojourned there with a few people, and he became there a great and mighty and multitudinous nation. And the Egyptians did evil to us and abused us and set upon us hard labor. And we cried out to the LORD God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our abuse and our trouble and our oppression. And the LORD brought us out from Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and with portents. And He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, look, I have brought the first yield of the fruit of the soil that You gave me, LORD.

(Deuteronomy 26:5-10, Robert Alter trans.)

June 15 has been set aside as the date for our collective return to normal. Perhaps we should be

This year has brought a new kind of anticipation, anxiety, and counting of days . . .

counting down The Return: "Today is so many days until June 15 when we will return to normal." On June 15, what will be the declaration that we should make to mark the occasion?

I was a person who was free to wander. With the arrival of the novel coronavirus the government imposed a stay-at-home order and I was subject to rules of social distancing. By the miracle of science a vaccine was developed that could prevent infection by the disease. When my turn came I was vaccinated, and the government began to lift restrictions in stages. Now on this date of returning to normal I will celebrate my freedom.

At the end of your counting of the days of social distancing and physical isolation, how will you celebrate? Will you bless the ending of the counting of days or count your blessings? What will be the fruits of your experience? 