

Behar 5771 - Making Our Days Count
Rabbi David Lerner

J'ai le grand honneur de saluer le consul général de France. I have the high honor of greeting the Consul General of France – Christof Guilhov who has joined us for Clara's Bat Mitzvah! Soyez bienvenu!

Shabbat Shalom.

A confession: I have been dabbling in social media. It has been fascinating to experience Twitter, which connects me to people around the globe with whom I share interests and/or other connections. I often find links to fascinating articles and information and see what others are thinking about.

Of course, I have to admit that it's not always productive time.

As I was looking at my account a few days ago, I stumbled upon a tweet, a short message from one of our former students who is now in college. As this person's freshman year had just concluded, the tweet said: "One down, three to go!"

Apparently, finishing a year of college is cause for celebration – though over time, I would say that college is a special time to enjoy, and I would not want to speed it up or count it down as we, as human beings, are wont to do.

We keep track of things by counting. I heard one of our students say recently that there are 29 days left of school, and others are counting down until their Bar/t-Mitzvah or counting down the days to camp or a trip to Israel. It's natural to count. It builds anticipation and excitement.

We Jews are big on counting, especially at this time of year. The Torah teaches us to count the days from *Pesah* until *Shavuot*. This is known as the *sefirah* or the counting of the *Omer*, since our ancestors would bring an *omer* (a unit of measure) of barley from the beginning of the harvest and then count the days until they reached the next festival.

Scholars teach us that these weeks were vital to the ancient Israelites' survival. If this period produced a good yield of barley, then it would be a good year, a year of plenty. We can understand their anxiety and thus how these rituals brought them comfort, focusing them on the significance of this time of the year.

Our rabbis also understood this time as the period between the Exodus, celebrated on *Pesah*, and *Shavuot* when we remember and reenact the Israelites' experience at Sinai. Thus, we count the days, anticipating receiving God's revelation anew.

We count seven weeks of seven days – 49 days and then the 50th day is Shavuot. And seven times seven is not accidental – seven is perfection and seven times seven

ultimate perfection. Seven represents creation, the week, Shabbat, the core days of two holidays, the circles and blessings at a wedding, the *tefillin* straps around the arm, and the stops at a funeral procession. Seven and 49 are very significant.

So, we count to 49.

Now, what day of the *Omer* is today?

25.

Yes, it does help to have the *Omer* counter right here.

So, we find ourselves just past the half-way mark of the *Omer*. We have passed the midway point on our annual march from the Exodus to Sinai, from the beginning of the barley harvest to bringing our first fruits to the *Beit Hamikdash*, to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

This is a reminder of just how land-based our tradition really is. Our ancestors were farmers working the land – dependent on it and tied to it for their food and lives. To express thanksgiving and gratitude for the fruits of the earth was an act that elevated their lives, imbuing the mundane with values and holiness.

This week we read in *Parashat Behar* of two year-long observances that helped elevate agriculture, allowing the land to rest. Both the *Sh'mitah* (the Sabbatical) and the *Yovel* (Jubilee) year provided an opportunity for the earth to lie fallow and rejuvenate, not unlike the way we rest each week on Shabbat.

This deep connection to the land is something many of us have lost in recent generations as we moved into cities and suburbs, and most of us do not grow our own food. As we see in the phenomenon of recent blogs and books like *Farm City*, people are trying to reconnect to the earth and to what they eat by growing it or raising it themselves.

As I was recently reading some of these writings, I was struck by the complexity and intensity of the work; for example, to raise chickens for fresh eggs requires numerous steps that are done at regular intervals almost every day. There are many key details and rules to follow to make this a success.

This moment during the *Omer*, just past halfway, is closer to *Shavuot*, to Sinai, than to *Pesah* and the Exodus. So if *Pesah* recalls the Exodus, which represents freedom, and *Shavuot* is Sinai, which provides structure to that freedom, we are not just passing a halfway marker, we are now closer to something of great importance.

One of my favorite teachings is that of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the great Boston Orthodox leader and scholar, who taught that there is freedom from and freedom to.

On Passover, we received freedom from slavery in Egypt, and on Shavuot, we receive God's revelation, freedom with purpose and meaning.

So this period is waiting, anticipation, and filled with some anxiety. We are wandering and counting. Thus, we are now moving closer and closer to that sense of purpose. Freedom without guidelines is meaningless; it is not really freedom. It is simply aimless. But freedom with structure, with direction, now that is what provides meaning to our lives.

The parallels between the *Omer* and the 50-year cycle of the Jubilee year mentioned in today's Torah reading are clear. They both count seven sevens, and the day or year of the 50th day or the 50th year is the one that is marked in a unique way.

Both conclude with a 50th that heralds freedom: in the case of *Shavuot* – freedom with purpose, and in the case of the Jubilee, literal freedom for those who had fallen into slavery or become too rich or too poor.

The *Yovel* was a remarkable innovation of social justice. Though it is difficult to determine if it was ever practiced (it is not that economically viable) and Hillel was able to subvert it with his invention of the *Prozbul*, the Jubilee year stands a beacon of an idealized world where those on the fringes of society were protected.

During the *Yovel* year, all land that one had accumulated or had been lost reverted back to its original owners – in an attempt to lift up those in need and prevent a significant income and wealth gap among people – a gap that is on the rise in our country and throughout the world today, to deleterious effects.

It is fascinating to note another parallel, which is the Shofar. At Sinai, the Shofar sounds pierced the air, and the Shofar was utilized to herald the start of this *Yovel* year of social justice. This is another parallel between *Shavuot*, receiving God's revelation, and its being implemented as a system of law and justice in the world, and it serves to teach us how these two ideas are related.

Rashi, the great 11th century Jewish and French commentator from Troyes, understands the *Yovel* and *Shmitah* years as giving the land a rest, as Shabbat does for us each week. It is unclear if he understood the natural benefits of natural fertilization and regeneration when the ground is allowed to lie fallow, but he, like many others, knew that the ground produced more after it rested – an early forerunner to modern environmental concerns. Rashi, a viniculturist, who grew grapes for wine production, was clearly sensitive to the land and its needs.

Maimonides, living in the following century in Egypt, also understood that the ground is strengthened by rest (akin to crop rotation), but he stresses a different benefit: the social and ethical side of these mitzvot. These laws provide food for the poor, free slaves (those who had fallen into being slaves by becoming bankrupt), cancel debts, and return land to its original owners. According to Maimonides in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, the Torah is teaching us “sympathy toward others and promoting the well being of others” (Guide 3:39)

That is what the Torah is trying to teach us. The laws try to open ourselves to others – to care for them, to cry out for social justice, and the system constitutes a paradigm of an idealized world toward which we should aspire.

That is freedom; that is freedom with purpose and that is what Clara spoke of in her thoughtful *d'var Torah* – we are inspired by the Torah to live in a caring manner that speaks of how we tend to the world.

The message of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years is that we are not the permanent owners of anything – even our land. Only God – Eternity itself – is the true owner. We are all temporary landlords of ourselves and anything else. Once we understand that ownership of anything is transitory, then we hopefully approach it in a different manner.

We are asked to aspire to be stewards of the earth and its inhabitants. Just as we are stewards of earth, so should we make our days count. That is not simply by counting the *Omer*, but also by understanding what this period means, thinking about how we can better implement the Torah's values in our world.

We must not simply count days, but make our days count – treating the earth and its inhabitants with respect, working to bring the Torah's ideas of social justice into the world more fully.

Societies are to be judged by the way they treat those who are marginalized, the old, the sick, the poor, the different.

When we treat those on the fringes of society better, we can then sound the Shofar in celebration, bringing the values of the Jubilee and Sinai more fully into our world.

Shabbat Shalom.