

Exploring the Nightly Ritual for the Counting of the Omer

Compiled by Rabbi Chava Bahle, for Makom Shalom
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“Keep your eyes on the prize ...”

When we fix our eyes on the stars of spiritual greatness, when we turn our heads Heavenwards, Hashem draws us close to Him and the distance between Heaven and earth is a mere seven weeks.

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Let us awaken to the mystery of Torah, musing on her day and night ... Look! The Torah is the root of supernal wisdom -- hidden and concealed, perceived only through its wondrous pathways. How wondrous are the offshoots! That is why the Israel's sweet singer [King David] sang, “Open my eyes, so I can see the wonders of your Torah!”

Moses De Leon, Sefer HaRimmonim

So it is with a word of Torah: she reveals herself to no one but her lover. Torah knows that one who is wise of heart hovers about her gate every day. What does she do? She reveals her face to him from the palace and beckons him with a hint, then swiftly withdraws to her hiding place.

No one there knows or reflects - her lover alone does, and heart and soul and everything within flows out to her. This is why Torah reveals and conceals herself. With love she approaches her lover to arouse love within.

Come and see the way of Torah. At first when she begins to reveal herself to someone, she beckons with a hint. If he perceives, good! If not she sends him a message calling him simple.

Torah says to her messenger: “Tell that simple one to come closer, so I can talk with him.” He approaches.

She begins to speak from behind a curtain she has drawn, words he can follow, until he reflects a little at a time. Then she converses with him through a veil, words riddled with allegory.

Once he has grown accustomed to her, she reveals herself face to face, and tells him all her secrets, all the hidden ways, since primordial days secreted in her heart.

Now he is a complete human being, spouse of Torah, master of the house. All her secrets she has revealed to him, withholding nothing, concealing nothing.

She says to him, “Do you see that word, that hint with which I first beckoned you? So many secrets there! This one and that one!” ... Human beings should become aware, pursuing Torah to become her lovers.

Zohar II, 99b

Setting Your Kavanna: It is clear from the traditional liturgy that the purpose of the counting of the omer is to effect tikkun (repair, completion, harmonious restoration) in the intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal realms and to ready the soul to receive Torah on every level at Shavuot. Begin by setting your intention for the counting of the omer.

You may wish to draw on one or several of these reflections. Looking closely at the Hebrew words from the seven elements of the Counting the Omer liturgy, we might explore:

- 1) **Invocation:** the unification of the Holy One and the Shekhina (bringing masculine and feminine together harmoniously, reconciling opposites in a harmonious whole)
- 2) **Bracha:** experiencing and channeling the flow of bracha/blessing
- 3) **Sefirat HaOmer/Counting the Day:** counting the day; allowing all that we know, all that we have and all that we are (“omer” - collected gleanings) to shine radiantly (*sapir*) with that week’s particular energy (sefirah).
- 4) **Tefillah:** for restoration of the temple, “a reminder of our capacity to receive being pure and holy”.
- 5) **Psalm 67**
- 6) **Ana B’koach:** the 42 first letters of these words spell a name of G-d. A deeply mystical, cryptic piece -- chanting it carries considerable spiritual power.
- 7) **Ribbono shel Olam/Petition**

1) Invocation

If you make use of a yichud (unification) have in mind that through it you are transmitting light and sustenance to all universes. Keep in mind that you too will receive your portion in the end.

Rabbi Chayim Vital, *Shaarei Kedusha*,
The Eighth Gate: Methods of Sanctifying One's Self

When a person meditates through a Yichud (unification), souls of the righteous attach themselves to him and reveal themselves. Sometimes a soul will do this because it comes from the same root as the person meditating. At other times it is because the individual does some good deed that pertains particularly to that saint ...

The Ari, Gate of the Holy Spirit

הִנְנִי מוּכָן וּמְזֵמֵן לְקַיֵּם מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה שֶׁל סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר: לְשֵׁם יְחִוּד
קְדוּשָׁא בְרִיךְ הוּא וְשִׁכְנִיתָהּ, בְּדַחֲלוֹ וּרְחִימוּ, לְיַחַד שֵׁם י"ה בְּר"ה
בְּיַחְוּדָא שְׁלִים, בְּשֵׁם כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Here I am right now, ready and mindful to participate in the mitzva/connection of counting the Omer, for the sake of the unification of the Transcendent Holy One with the Immanent Shekhina in love and compassion, for the sake of the unification of the yod-hey with the vav-hey in complete oneness, in the name of all Yisrael.

Michael Kagan and Chava Bahle

2) Bracha

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ עַל
סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר.

**Bo-ruch A-toh Ado-noi E-lo-hei-nu Me-lech Ho-olom
A-sheer Ki-de-sho-nu Be-mitz-vo-sov Ve-tzi-vo-nu
Al Se-fi-ras Ho-omer.**

Translation (partly from R Marcia Prager):

A fountain of blessings are you, the eternal breath-of-life-beyond and within, divine expansiveness concentrated within our world, channeling creative power to manifest as the mystery of consciousness becoming Time-Space that makes us whole-y and connects us through (this act of) counting the omer.

3) Counting of the Omer

Note: the middot/spiritual qualities listed below are drawn from Alan Morinis' *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*. These middot are loosely connected with the weekly sefirah, but reading that book in small weekly chapters tied into the holy calendar might be helpful. The affirmations are from Tamar Frankiel's *The Gift of Kabbalah: Discovering the Secrets of Heaven, Renewing Your Life on Earth*. For deeper reading on the sefirot, try the advanced text, *Inner Space*, by Aryeh Kaplan.

Week One: Chesed

Loving-kindness, generosity
Expansiveness

I am in touch with the support of the universe, the unconditional love of God. I join in the outpouring of divine love by performing acts of chesed and thinking kind thoughts.

Recommended reading for the week: The Art of Compassion by the Dalai Lama or Rabbi Rami Shapiro's The Art of Loving Kindness.

Week Two: Gevurah

Moderation
Humility

My limitations and challenges are divine gifts. What happens is all from the Creator. Now I have an opportunity to re-examine my connection to the spiritual path.

Week Three: Tiferet

Compassion

Where your will and divine will meet; being in harmony with the divine
I am a free being, choosing to align my will with God's will. God connects to the world through me; my purpose on earth is being fulfilled even though that may not be apparent to me.

Recommended reading: How to Expand Love by the Dalai Lama.

Week Four: Netzach

Enthusiasm
Perseverance

I am a giver, wholeheartedly contributing my effort to creating the world by tending my little part of the universe. My creativity is valued and cherished in the ultimate scheme of divine unfolding.

Recommended reading: The Art of Amazement: Judaism's Forgotten Spirituality by Rabbi Alexander Seinfeld

Week Five: Hod

Honor
Silence
Simplicity

I am grateful, appreciating and honoring the world of others. I am willing to sacrifice my personal desires for the general good and for the glory of the Divine.

Recommended reading: *Radical Acceptance* by Tara Brach.

Week Six: Yesod

Patience
Responsibility

I am a channel of transmission, gathering and passing on all that comes to through me for the good, to other living being and to the next generation. God is Master of time, creator of coincidences and Lord of history - whether I can see it or not, there is an evolving design.

Week Seven: Malchut

Faith
Yirah

I am part of the greater whole, joining with all other beings to express gratitude and praise to the Creator of the universe. God is manifesting right here and now.

Everything is exactly as it is supposed to be.

Recommended reading: *The Empty Chair* (collected sayings of Rabbi Nachman)

4) Tefillah

“When someone puts on tefillin or shakes his lulav, he doesn’t say, Master of the world, I am ready for the Holy Temple.” I’m sure it is important, but we don’t say it. There is only one mitzvah in the world that after doing it we say, “Master of the world, take me back to the Holy Temple.” That is when we count the omer.

Shlomo Carlebach, *The Carlebach Haggadah*

הַרְחֵמֵנוּ הוּא יִחְזִיר לָנוּ עֲבוֹדַת בַּיִת הַמְּקֻדָּשׁ לְמִקְוָמָה, בְּמַהֲרָה בְּיָמֵינוּ
אָמֵן סֵלָה.

May the Compassionate One return us to the heights and depths of service that existed in the time of the Holy Temple, speedily in our days, amen.

Michael Kagan, *The Holistic Haggadah*

5) Psalm 67

לְמִנְצַחַּ בְּנִגְיֹנוֹת מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר. אֱלֹהִים יְחַנְּנוּ וַיְבָרְכֵנוּ, יָאֵר פָּנָיו אֶתָּנוּ סֵלָה.
 לְדַעַת בְּאֶרֶץ יִדְרָכָהּ, בְּכֹל גּוֹיִם יִשׁוּעָתָהּ. יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים, אֱלֹהִים, יוֹדוּךָ
 עַמִּים כָּלָם. יִשְׂמְחוּ וַיִּרְנְנוּ לְאֻמִּים, כִּי תִשְׁפּוּט עַמִּים מִיִּשׂוֹר, וּלְאֻמִּים
 בְּאֶרֶץ תִּנְחַם סֵלָה. יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים, אֱלֹהִים, יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים כָּלָם. אֶרֶץ נְתַנָּה
 יְבוּלָהּ, יְבָרְכֵנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵינוּ. יְבָרְכֵנוּ אֱלֹהִים, וַיִּירְאוּ אוֹתוֹ כָּל אֲפִסֵּי
 אֶרֶץ.

The word psalms (tehillim) is usually related to the root “to praise”. The root halel has two other meanings as well. The first is “brightness” or “shining”, and the second connotation is that of madness. According to Aryeh Kaplan, this “denotes a state where one leaves a normal state of consciousness and at the same perceives spiritual light ... [it further indicates] that the Psalms were specially designed to help one attain this exalted state.”¹

Traditional translation:

For the conductor, on neginoth; a psalm, a song. God will be gracious to us and bless us; He will cause His countenance to shine with us forever. That Your way should be known on earth, Your salvation among all nations. Peoples will thank You, O God; peoples will thank You, yea, all of them. Kingdoms will rejoice and sing praises, for You will judge peoples fairly, and the kingdoms-You will lead them on earth forever. Peoples will thank You, O God; peoples will thank You, yea, all of them. The earth gave forth its produce; God, our God, will bless us. God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will awe Him.

1. Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, pages 137-8.

6) Ana B'Koach

אב"ג ית"ץ	אָנָא, בְּכַח גְּדֵלֶת יְמִינֶךָ, תִּתִּיר צְרוּרָה.
קר"ע שט"ן	קִבַּל רִנַּת עַמֶּךָ, שְׁגַבְנוּ, טַהַרְנוּ, נוֹרָא.
נג"ד יכ"ש	נָא גִבּוֹר, דּוֹרְשֵׁי יַחֲוּדֶךָ, כְּבַבְתָּ שְׁמֵרָם.
בט"ר צת"ג	בְּרַכָּם, טַהַרְם, רַחֲמֵם, צַדִּיקְתָּהּ תִּמְיֵד גְּמִלָּם.
חק"ב טנ"ע	חֲסִין קְדוֹשׁ, בְּרוּב טוֹבָךָ, נְהַל עֲדִתְךָ.
יג"ל פז"ק	יַחֲיד גְּאֹה, לְעַמֶּךָ פְּנֵה, זִוְכְּרֵי קִדְשֶׁתְךָ.
שק"ו צי"ת	שׁוֹעֲתָנוּ קִבַּל, וּשְׁמַע צַעֲקוֹתֵנוּ, יוֹדֵעַ תַּעֲלָמוֹת.
	בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֵד.

*Please, with the might of your right, untie the bundle:
 Accept your people's prayer song, heighten, purify us, Mighty one:
 Please hero, your uniqueness worshippers, guard them closely:
 Bless them purify them, your righteousness mercies, always reward:
 Immune, proud, with your good will, manage your people:
 Single, proud, address your people, who remember your holiness:
 Accept our plead, and hear our cry, he who knows all mysteries*

This is an ancient Hebrew prayer that sounds very cool. Of course, the special thing about this prayer is not the meaning of it, rather that it contains the 42 letter name of God. It is a very important prayer for Kabbalists as this prayer is linked to the power of creation and the ability to transcend all mortal limitations . It removes obstacles, guarding against evil and helps to establish the link to primordial energies. (Aaron Chia)

This mystical poem consists of seven lines with six words per line, 42 words with 216 letters. The total of 42 words corresponds to one of the Holy Names of GOD. The initial letters of each word also refer to this Holy Name. Interestingly, the Jewish people made 42 stops on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Each step represented another step on the ladder of holiness. According to the founder of the Chassidic movement, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, each individual must make the same spiritual journey during his/her lifetime. Perhaps saying this mystical poem is a way of asking for God's assistance and protection during these 42 stages of one's life. The number 216 is gematria numerical value of gevurah - meaning strength. The power of this prayer "ana bekoach" gives everyone the spiritual strength of divine protection with a strength from ones guardian angels. (Yartzeit.com)

7) Petition

“Each man has an infinite sphere of responsibility, responsibility before the infinite. He moves, he talks, he looks, and each of his movements, each of his words, each of his glances causes waves to surge in the happening of the world -- he cannot know how strong and how far-reaching. Each man with all his being and doing determines the fate of the world in a measure unknowable to him and all others; for the causality we can perceive is indeed only as tiny segment of the inconceivable, manifold, invisible working of all upon all. Thus every human action is a vessel of infinite responsibility. (*Hasidism and Modern Man*, by Martin Buber)

רבונו של עולם, אתה צויתנו על ידי משה עבדך לספור ספירת העומר, כדי לטהרנו מקלפותינו ומטמאותינו, כמו שכתבת בתורתך: וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת מיום הביאכם את עמר התנופה, שבע שבתות תמימת תהיינה, עד ממחרת השבת השביעת תספרו חמשים יום, כדי שיטהרו נפשות עמך ישראל מזהמתם. ובכן יהי רצון מלפניך יי אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו, שבזכות ספירת העומר שספרתי היום, יתקן מה שפגמתי בספירה (ספירה השייכת לאותו הלילה) ואטהר ואתקדש בקדשה של מעלה, ועל ידי זה ישפע שפע רב בכל העולמות, ויתקן את נפשותינו ורוחותינו ונשמותינו מכל סיג ופגם, ולטהרנו ולקדשנו בקדשתך העליונה, אמן סלה.

Master of the universe, you connect with us through Moses your servant to count sefirat ha-omer in order to purify us from our klippot and the places where we are bound, as it is written in the Torah (Leviticus 15:17):

“and you are to number for yourselves, from the morrow of the Sabbath, from the day that you bring the elevated sheaf, seven Sabbaths-of-days, whole (weeks) they are to be; until the morrow of the seventh Sabbath you are to number - fifty days ..”

in order that our souls be purified from self-loathing, and then may it be your will God and God of our ancestors that through the merit of this counting of the omer that I count today, there will be a tikkun of anything I have damaged in the sefirah of _____, that I may be purified and made holy through the supernal holiness; and through this may the divine flow be plentiful in all the worlds, to repair our souls (nefesh, ruach and neshama) from all lowness, and may [this action of counting] purify and sanctify us through your supernal holiness.

(Etymological translation/interpretation - R Chava)

Sources and Other Cool Places to Look

Michael Kagan, *The Holistic Haggadah*

Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* and *Meditation and the Bible*

Marcia Prager, *The Path of Blessing*

Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*

Tamar Frankiel, *The Gift of Kabbalah: Discovering the Secrets of Heaven, Renewing Your Life on Earth*

The Carlebach Haggadah

chabad.org

yartzeit.com

Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*

Simon Jacobson, *A Spiritual Guide to Counting the Omer*

Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*

Matityahu Clark, *An Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew*

Daniel Matt, *Essential Kabbalah*

Avram Davis, *Judaic Mysticism*

Check these out too:

<http://www.mucjs.org/webomer/index.htm> beautiful images for counting the omer

http://neohasid.org/audio/ana_bekhoach_mp3s/ chants of Ana B'koach

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=UQq4mBhCBy0&feature=related> absolutely awesome version of Ana B'Koach with Hebrew on screen