YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT EMOR**

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Dedicated in memory of Fred Horowitz z"l

Shraga ben Menachem Mendel HaLevi

whose yahrzeit is 12 Iyar, by the Horowitz Family

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Dedicated in memory of Rav Hanoch ben Aaron Eliyahu Singer z"l

whose yahrzeit is 12 Iyar, by his granddaughter Vivian Singer

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**"And You Shall Count for Yourselves"**

**I. The Counts in the Torah**

Our *parasha* contains the mitzvaof counting the *omer*:

And you shall count for yourselves, from the morrow of the *shabbat*, from the day you bring the *omer* of waving; they shall be seven complete weeks. (*Vayikra* 23:15).

This is not the only count in the Torah; commandments to count are found in other places as well. For instance, in *Parashat Metzora*, we are told that a *zav* or *zava* – one who has had abnormal genital discharges– must count seven days with no flow before their purification process:

And when he that has a discharge is purified of his discharge, he shall count to himself seven days for his purification, and wash his clothes; and he shall bathe his flesh in running water, and shall be pure. (*Vayikra* 15:13)

In *Parashat Behar* (*Vayikra* 25:8), we are commanded to count fifty years in order to sanctify the Jubilee year. And in *Parashat Re'eh* (*Devarim* 16:9) as well as in our *parasha*, we are commanded to count the *omer*.

The Ran notes that the Torah’s various counts are not all governed by the same laws:

"And you shall count for yourselves" – every individual. The Rabbis learned by tradition that this instance of *u-sefartem* means an actual count, which is not the case regarding the rest of the counts written in the Torah. (Ran, *Pesachim* 27b in the pages of the Alfasi)

In contrast to the counting of the *zav* or of the Jubilee year, when it comes to the *omer*, each and every individual must verbalize the count with his own mouth. This point is also made by the Ramban, with an added explanation:

The meaning of "and you shall count for yourselves" is similar to the meaning of "and you shall take for yourselves" (*Vayikra* 23:40), that the counting [of the forty-nine days of the *omer*] and the taking [of the *lulav, etrog*, etc. on Sukkot] be done by each and every person. Thus, the counting must be done by mouth, and he should mention the number, just as our Rabbis have received it by tradition. This is unlike the expressions "and he shall count for himself" (*Vayikra* 15:13) and "and she shall count for herself" (*Vayikra* 15:28) regarding a *zav* and a *zava*, because if they so wish, they may remain in their impurity; they must only beware not to forget their impurity [and enter the Sanctuary or eat holy food in a state of defilement, which Scripture strongly forbids]. Similarly, "and you shall count for yourself" (*Vayikra* 25:8) regarding the Jubilee year means [only] that you shall be heedful of the number so that you should not forget [when the Jubilee year falls]. (Ramban, *Vayikra* 23:15)

The difference between the counting of the Jubilee year[[1]](#footnote-1) or of the *zav* and the counting of the *omer* lies in the question of whether there is a command to count or whether it is simply that a certain amount of time must pass.

We can see this difference in the Rambam's counting of the *mitzvot.* Regarding the mitzva of counting the *omer*, the Rambam lists the mitzva"**to count** from the harvest of the *omer* forty-nine days" (positive commandment no. 161). In contrast, regarding the *mitzva* of a *zava*, there is no *mitzva* to count, but rather a *mitzva* that "the *zava* should offer a sacrifice after she becomes purified, as it is stated: 'If she is purified from her discharge" (positive commandment no. 75). Thus, in the case of a *zava*, the count is only a way of knowing when it is time to offer her sacrifices, while in the case of the *omer*, the count itself is important. So too in the words of the Ramban above: in the case of counting the *omer*, the counting must be done by mouth, and the person must mention the number, because the mitzvais to count – whereas in the case of the *zava*, we do not find such a mitzva; there no importance is attached to the counting itself, other than as a way to determine when to offer a sacrifice.

**II. To Bring a Bride into Her Bridal Canopy**

The *Or Ha-Chaim*, in contrast to the *Rishonim* we have seen thus far, sees the count of the *omer* as similar in essence to the count of a *nida* – a menstruating woman – and a *zava*:

"And you shall count for yourselves." It says "for yourselves" because God commanded to count for seven weeks. And they said (*Zohar*, III, 94a) that because they were impure with the impurity of Egypt, and God wanted to couple with this nation, He considered them like a *nida* who must count seven clean days, and so He commanded that they should count seven weeks and then they will be ready to be brought in like a bride to the bridal canopy. Though there it is seven days, and here it is seven weeks, that is because of the extraordinary degree of their impurity…. See also what I explained regarding the verse (*Shemot* 19:1): "In the third month after the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt." This is the meaning of what is written here: "And you shall count for yourselves," that is to say, the reason for this count is because of you, so that you should purify yourselves – for if not for this, God would have given them the Torah immediately. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Vayikra* 23:15)

According to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, the process of counting the *omer* after the exodus from Egypt served as a "purification" from the impurity of Egypt, which rested upon Israel until the day of their wedding with God, i.e., the day of the giving of the Torah. The *Or Ha-Chaim* refers us to his comments on *Parashat Yitro*, where he expands further. There, he opens with a question:

"In the third month." Considering God's intense love for Israel and His urgent desire to give them their betrothed, i.e., the Torah, it is difficult to understand why God waited until the third month after the exodus. For one of the signs of love is that one does not allow obstacles to stand in the way of joining with the beloved. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 19:1)

In his answer, he cites the same *midrash* in the *Zohar* that he quotes in our *parasha*, according to which the delay was due not to a lack of love, but to the need for purification:

God therefore gave an explanation – that the fact that the giving of the Torah was delayed somewhat was not to be interpreted as a lack of ardor but was due to the need for the groom to properly prepare. For the people of Israel were not yet prepared, since they had been in a land of impurity and it was as *nida* among them and they needed to count seven weeks toward their purification, like the count of seven clean days that God commanded for a *zava.* (Ibid.)

If we accept the *Or Ha-Chaim's* comparison between the counting of a *zava* or *nida* and the counting of the *omer*, we can take it in two different directions: On the one hand, it may be suggested that the goal and purpose of counting the *omer* is in fact simply to calculate the time of the people of Israel's purification, like we said above regarding a *zava*,and nothing more. On the other hand, we might look at the comparison in the other direction and conclude, based on the commandment to count the *omer*, that there is meaning to the counting itself in the case of a *zava* or *nida* as well.

We will explore how the *Or Ha-Chaim* continues in this direction, and then we will attempt to understand its essence, ramifications, and foundation.

**III. The Count of a *Zava***

We mentioned three *mitzvot* of counting – the counting of the *omer*, the counting of the Jubilee year, and the counting of a *zav* or *zava.* A cursory examination of the Torah reveals that there are many more *mitzvot* that depend on time: Shabbat depends on six days, the seclusion of a *metzora* lasts seven days, the holidays depend on counting months and days, etc*.* Regarding these *mitzvot*, however, the Torah does not use the term "count," a term found only with respect to the *mitzvot* mentioned above. This raises a question: If the purpose of counting in these commandments is indeed only to know when the seventh day has arrived – why are they formulated in terms of counting?[[2]](#footnote-2)

It would seem that this linguistic difference indicates that the set of *mitzvot* that involve counting (*omer*, Jubilee year, and *zav* and *zava*) stand apart from the other *mitzvot* that depend upon time. In the case of these *mitzvot*, time does not only function as a means to reach a goal, but has importance in itself.

In the laws of a *zava*, we find several expressions, some of which have practical ramifications, of the fact that the counting itself bears significance.

The Shela, Rabbi Yeshaya Horowitz, in his *Shenei Luchot ha-Brit* (cited in *Pitchei Teshuva*, *Yoreh De'a* 196), writes: "During the period when she counts her clean days, she should count every day and say: Today is such-and-such day, as it is written: 'And she shall count for herself.'" According to the Shela, the same *mitzva* that exists in the counting of the *omer* applies in the counting of the clean days of a *zava* as well: the *zava* must count out loud each day, and even recite a blessing over her count. We find allusions to this understanding among the *Rishonim*; they reject it in practice, but only for side reasons. For instance, the *Tosafot* in *Kiddushin* ask why a *zava* doesn't recite a blessing on her count, and they answer:

It may be suggested that a blessing is recited only for the count of the Jubilee year, which the court can recite every year, for they can always count consecutive years, and the same is true regarding the counting of the *omer*. But a *zava*, who interrupts her count if she sees [bleeding], should not count [with a blessing]. (*Tosafot*, *Ketubot* 72a, s.v. *ve-safra*)

The Radbaz offers another explanation:

It seems to me that the mitzvaof "And you shall count for yourselves," is a necessary mitzva, there being no escape from it, and therefore it requires a blessing, and counting, and standing. But the counting of a *zava's* seven clean days is not a necessary *mitzva*, for if she does not want to engage in relations with her husband, or enter the Temple, or eat sacrificial meat, but rather remain her entire life in her impure state, she may do so. And therefore she does not recite a blessing, nor does she articulate her count with her mouth, nor must she stand, even according to you who liken the term, "for yourselves" [regarding the *omer*] to the term "for her" [regarding a *zava*]. This is correct. (Radbaz, IV, no. 27).

These two explanations, of the *Tosafot* and of the Radbaz, assume that fundamentally, a *zava* should also count aloud and recite a blessing, except that for one reason or another, this counting is not done in practice. It follows then that in principle, there is a mitzvaof counting here as well.

In *Responsa Me'il Tzedaka*, Rabbi Yona Landsofer was asked about a *zava* who mistakenly thought that she had experienced bleeding during her seven clean days and could no longer continue to count. It later became clear that she had not seen blood and that her count had not been interrupted. The *Me'il Tzedaka* discusses whether she can continue to count her seven clean days. Initially, he suggests that the question can be divided:

Now, this question can be divided into several aspects. The one, is she permitted to count the first days, that had at first dropped in her [mistaken] opinion… (*Me'il Tzedaka*, no. 63)

After he resolves this first issue, he explains that the other questions are now irrelevant:

Now that we have said that since she assumed she was impure, she cannot count those days, the other questions have no practical ramifications. (Ibid.)

It follows from what he says that a woman must be conscious of the fact that she is in her seven clean days; if not, they cannot be included in the count of the days.

Both the obligation to verbalize the count and the requirement that the woman maintain awareness of being in her seven clean days suggest that the counting of a *zava* is indeed similar in essence to the counting of the *omer*, and there is significance to the counting itself – not only as a goal that must ultimately be reached.

**IV. The Idea of the Countings**

It seems that we can gain some understanding, from the law that emerges from *Responsa Me'il Tzedaka*, about the nature and essence of the *mitzvot* of counting that we are discussing here. The obligation to be aware of the count demonstrates that counting involves a certain process.

The *Rishonim* offer many approaches to the essence of the mitzvaof counting the *omer*. We will discuss a few of them, and from them, we will see that the essence of the special counting of the *omer* is deeply connected to the process a person is supposed to go through in this count.

The *Sefer ha-Chinukh* explains the roots of the mitzvaas follows:

Since the entire essence of Israel is only the Torah, and because of the Torah were the heavens and earth created, as it is stated (*Yirmeyahu* 33:25): "Were it not for My covenant day and night, etc.," and it is the essence and the reason that they were redeemed and that they left Egypt — in order that they should receive the Torah at Sinai, and fulfill it. And [it is] like God said to Moshe: “And this will be the sign for you that I have sent you; when you take out the people from Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain" (*Shemot* 3:12). And the understanding of the verse is [that] your taking them out from Egypt is a sign for you that you shall worship God on this mountain – meaning, that you shall receive the Torah, which is the great principle for which they were redeemed and is their ultimate good. And it is a great matter for them, more than freedom from slavery; therefore, God made their exodus a sign for Moshe for the receiving of the Torah, as we always make what is secondary into a sign for what is the essence.

And because of this – that it is [the] essence of Israel, and because of it they were redeemed and elevated to all of the greatness to which they rose – we were commanded to count from the morrow of the holiday of Pesach until the day of the giving of the Torah; *to show about ourselves the great desire [we have] for the honored day*, which our hearts yearn [for] “like a slave seeks shade” [*Iyov* 7:2] and he always counts when will come the yearned-for time that he goes out to freedom. As the count shows about a person that all of his deliverance and all of his desire is to reach that time. And that which we count to the *omer*, meaning, "Such-and-such days have passed from the count," and we do not count "Such-and-such days do we have to the time," is because all of this shows us the great desire to reach the time [of Shavuot]. Therefore, we do not want to mention at the beginning of our counting the large number of days that we have to reach the offering of the two breads of [Shavuot]. (*Sefer ha-Chinukh* 306)

According to the *Sefer ha-Chinukh*, the count demonstrates longing and yearning. When there is only a technical need for a certain period of time to pass, the person does not count it – he simply waits for the time to pass. But when a person looks forward to a special event, he counts day after day towards when that event will arrive. The counting of the *omer* is intended to create a process of excitement in anticipation of the revelation at Mount Sinai and receiving the Torah, and therefore it is important to emphasize the process involved – the intensification of the excitement the closer we get to the event itself.

It is possible that this is also part of the purification process mentioned by the *Or Ha-Chaim.* It stands to reason that apart from the halakhic purification process connected to the days that pass by, there is also an inner purification process related to the excitement and yearning for receiving the Torah. The *Sefat Emet* writes that the preparation also affects the quality of the receiving of the Torah itself:

And as it was then, this is preparation for receiving the Torah, as it is written: "The king has brought me into his chambers" (*Shir ha-Shirim* 1:4). Likewise, in accordance with the measure of the clarification, search, and desire for Him in the days of the count [of the *omer*] in Israel as a whole, and also for the individual, so one merits afterwards on Shavuot to receive new illumination from receiving the Torah. (*Sefat Emet, Emor*, 5644)

The ability to say "we shall do and we shall hear" with a full heart is connected to the earlier process of longing and anticipation that is undergone during the days of the counting of the *omer*.

Rabbi Dessler, in his *Mikhtav mei-Eliyahu*, expresses himself differently and sees the days of the counting of the *omer* as days of searching for the flaws in one's soul.

And similarly, in the redemption from Egypt, which involved going out from another authority into the authority of the Holy One, blessed be He, they needed for their ascent to the supreme holiness of the revelation at Mount Sinai the count of seven times seven, *in order to review and observe each and every day, lest the impurity penetrated again through some crack in the heart*. This is implied in their saying: "'And she shall count for herself' – to herself." And the law that is learned from this is well-known, that she is trustworthy about herself. And at its root, the reason for the law is that the examination must take place in herself, in her innermost place. And similarly we find regarding the counting of the *omer*: "And you shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the *shabbat*"… But it is clear that the Torah alludes to the substance of the matter, and the word "*shabbat*" alludes to the cessation of impurity, just like the *zava* must be sure every day that the impurity has ceased from her before she continues to count further. (*Mikhtav mei-Eliyahu*, II, p. 24)

The connection here between the days of counting the *omer* and the days of the *zava* is clear: in both, we conduct a search. In the days of *ziva*, the man or the woman check their physical bodies for further emissions, and in the days of counting the *omer*, an examination is conducted within our spirituality.

This idea is expressed in clearest fashion in the Ramchal's *Ma'amar ha-Chokhma,* according to which each day of the *omer* is another step upwards on the way to the fifty gates of holiness:

The idea of counting the *omer* is that fifty gates of wisdom were created in the world, and Moshe Rabbeinu's comprehension reached the forty-ninth gate, but the ultimate understanding, the fiftieth gate, he did not comprehend. These are the forty-nine days of the counting of the *omer*, and on the fiftieth day, the Torah was given.

For just as there are forty-nine gates of wisdom and holiness, so there are forty-nine gates of impurity, and God made the one corresponding to the other, creating good and creating evil, one in its purity and the other in its impurity, the forces of impurity against the forces of holiness.

And when the people of Israel were in Egypt, they were immersed and filthy in forty-nine gates of impurity, and they had to come out of them, and the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to bring Israel out of them and subjugate the forty-nine gates of impurity gradually, by shining against each gate of impurity the corresponding gate of holiness, every day between the first day of Pesach and Shavuot.

And this repair is reawakened every year by counting forty-nine days to the *omer* from Pesach, the day of the exodus, to Shavuot, the day of the giving of the Torah, which is the shining of the fiftieth gate of understanding and holiness on Israel. (*Yalkut Yedi'ot Emet*, *Ma'amar ha-Chokhma*)

All of the explanations of the counting of the *omer* that we have seen require full awareness of each day that passes – for increasing longing and excitement, for testing the cracks of the soul, and certainly for ascending from one step to the next. In the *mitzva* of counting the *omer*, each day has importance as part of the process in itself and not only as part of the whole on the way to the goal.

May it be God's will that we take these ideas and experience this process together during the days of the counting of the *omer*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The Ramban himself, regarding the counting of the years of the Jubilee, is uncertain as to whether there is a mitzva to verbally count the years. This was also a matter of disagreement between Rabbi Akiva Eiger and his uncle in *Responsa Rabbi Akiva Eiger*, 1st series, no. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to some of the *Rishonim* (see, for example, *Tosafot*, *Gittin* 2b, s.v. *ed echad*) we learn from the verse, "And she shall count for herself," that a single witness is trustworthy in ritual matters, and thus we can understand why the Torah uses this wording in the mitzva of a *zava.* But a question still remains regarding the use of this wording in the mitzvaof a *zav.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)