

Counting the Days from “Is” to “Ought” - by Rabbi Tom Heyn – May/June 2016

During the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot, Jewish tradition prescribes a daily practice that may seem trivial to some and radically insightful to others. This tradition is called “*sefirat ha-omer*” or “counting the *omer*.” It presents us with an opportunity and a challenge.

An *omer* is a unit of measure for grains, best translated as a “sheaf”. On the second day of Passover, in ancient Jerusalem, an *omer* of barley was to be brought to the Temple as an offering. They would then count forty-nine days to Shavuot, a festival to celebrate the beginning of the wheat harvest. After the Temple was destroyed and the agricultural significance of the holidays was lost, our ancestors continued to count the days in keeping with a biblical injunction in Leviticus 23:15.

As Passover had been an occasion to recall our journey from slavery to freedom, Shavuot became an occasion to commemorate a seminal moment in that journey -- the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The early rabbis determined that it took the Israelites seven weeks to travel from Egypt to Sinai. Hence, the tradition of counting the days became a symbolic way to connect past and future in the context of a journey -- from physical well-being to spiritual well-being; from freedom to responsibility; from “is” to “ought.”

Celebrated rabbi and author, Harold M. Schulweis (1925-2014), once wrote a brief essay suggesting that we consider embarking on a journey toward “ought” by thinking or asking...“not what *is* a Jew, but what *ought* a Jew to be. Not what *is* a synagogue, but what *ought* a synagogue to be. Not what prayer *is*, but what prayer *ought* to be. Not what ritual *is*, but what ritual *ought* to be.”

This is a simple exercise that can have an immediate impact. Rabbi Schulweis explains that when we shift our focus from *is* to *ought*, our mindset is affected. “*Is* faces me toward the present; *ought* turns me to the future. *Ought* challenges my creative imagination and opens me to the realm of possibilities and responsibilities to realize yesterday’s dream.”

The practice of *sefirat ha-omer* presents us with an opportunity to reflect on the journey from *is* to *ought*. While Passover celebrates the initial liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, Shavuot symbolically marks the culmination of the process. Counting the days and events in between reminds us that we are all on a journey, moving from a slave mentality to a more liberated one, from “is” to “ought.”

I am grateful for this opportunity and this challenge, knowing that we are on this journey together.