

On Sefirat Ha'omer: Qualities in Conflict

April 21, 2017

On the second night of Pesach, we began the practice of counting the Omer. In Torah, this counting connects the first grain offering to the offering made at the peak of the harvest. When our later rabbinic tradition identified Shavuot with the giving of Torah, the Omer transformed, coming to symbolize the passage of time between Passover and Shavuot, and the experience of a people from attaining freedom to receiving Torah.

In Jewish mystical sources, the counting of the Omer became a time for spiritual elevation and the cultivation of personal middot, meaning attributes or spiritual qualities. Based on the seven lower "sefirot," which, in Jewish mystical sources, represent the unveiling of manifestations of the Divine Presence into the universe, the Omer became a map for the cultivation of 7 cycles of 7 spiritual qualities.

This Shabbat, Friday evening through Saturday night, is called "netzach she'b'gevurah." We might define the qualities that we are asked to put into practice on Shabbat as "ambition" or "endurance" within "discipline."

You might ask: aren't these qualities sometimes in conflict? This is precisely the point! Spiritual elevation lives in tensions among different emotions and qualities that we feel all the time. There are rarely moments of purity in our lives. Our feelings and experiences are complex, often in tension. Naming the experience of "ambition within discipline" leads us to consider whether we are truly giving ourselves over to the discipline, or boundaries, that we need in order to be healthy and feel spiritually alive.

Further, as we conceive the relationship between these qualities, we might also begin to discover the corollary: the importance of the limitations of our ambition. (This Omer practice falls on May 2 this year). On that day we begin to cultivate acceptance, peacefulness, and even forgiveness of ourselves and others.

Take this opportunity to consider how this Omer period can bring meaning to you and your family, helping you feel uplifted as we travel the path towards Sinai.