

This study sheet is about the COUNTING OF THE OMER – the span of forty nine days which form a thread between the Jewish festivals of PESACH (Passover) and SHAVUOT (also known as Pentecost).

WHAT IS THE COUNTING OF THE OMER?

The Torah teaches that the days between Passover and Shavuot are to be counted (Lev. 23:15-16; Deut. 16:15-16). These days of “counting” refer to the period within which the obligation to bring an omer of barley from the harvest as a “first fruits” offering to the Temple was to be fulfilled. The days of counting, which lasted a period of seven weeks, are called, in Hebrew, *Sefirat Ha'Omer* and are likened to a connecting thread between the Passover from *Mitzrayim* [biblical Egypt] and the giving of the Torah at Sinai. According to the *Sefer HaChinuch* [Book of Education, 13th Century, Spain*] the purpose of the redemption from Egypt was the giving and reception of the Torah at Sinai. Counting the Omer between Passover and Shavuot 50 days later signifies the commitment of Jews to the promise of Sinai.

Because Shavuot marks the end of the 49 days of [the counting of] the omer Shavuot is also referred to as the Feast or FESTIVAL OF WEEKS. Shavuot, being the 50th day after Passover, was named Pentecost by Hellenic Jews. [Pentecost is Greek for “Fiftieth.”]

THE SPIRITUAL IMPORTANCE OF SEFIRAT HA'OMER

A spiritual understanding of the counting of the days of offerings of the omer is connected to the physical exodus from *Mitzrayim* and the spiritual freedom received in the giving of the Torah at Sinai, which is celebrated at Shavuot. The physical bringing of barley sheaves during the 49 days period between Passover and Shavuot helps make a spiritual connection between the two festival events.



THE REDEMPTION FROM SLAVERY IS NOT COMPLETE
WITHOUT THE RECEPTION OF THE TORAH AT SINAI.

Midrash Rabba on Parashat Emor explains that the Children of Israel were told as they left Egypt that 49 days after the Exodus they would receive the Torah. Their joy was so great that they began to count the days excited by the fact their physical emancipation would shortly be completed by a spiritual emancipation at Mount Sinai. Thus Shavuot, marks the giving of the Torah to the Children of Israel on the 6th day of the Hebrew month of Sivan and the establishment of a covenant between two active participants: Israel and God.

Rabbinic literature draws upon a spiritual teaching related to the offerings which define the beginning and the end of the counting of the omer. Barley, considered a simpler grain than wheat reflected the simple nature of the Children of Israel who subjugated and beaten had reached the status of total dependence and unable to develop their full potential without Divine help. To them the Exodus came as an unearned gift of God. During the next 49 days, however, the people worked hard so as to be able to receive the Torah on their own merit. To receive the Torah, the Rabbis taught required spiritual elevation and active cooperation. Thus the wheat offering (perceived as a more complex grain) after Shavuot symbolized a people with a more developed spirituality.

The prayers in the liturgical cycle switch after Passover from prayers for rain to prayers for dew. The Days of the Omer coincide with the growth period for the seasonal fruits which are being ripened to perfection. Shavuot is the time for the bringing of the First Fruits [*bikkurim*] —fruits will now be at their best. Similarly Jewish spirituality sees the days of the Omer as a time for developing one's inner and outward growth to be at one's best.

The period of *Counting the Omer* is traditionally observed as a time of mourning. It is a time when Jewish law forbids certain activities, i.e., haircuts, shaving, listening to instrumental music, weddings, parties, dancing. Different communities differ in what mourning customs are observed. The mourning is associated with events in history [see below].

LAG BA'OMER AND ITS ORIGINS

Lag Ba'Omer (falling on 18th of the Hebrew month of Iyyar) is the 33rd day of counting the omer.

According to a tradition recorded in the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (120:1-10), Lag Ba'Omer signals a small break in the counting of the omer to celebrate the ending of the “great plague”, a perceived “divine sent” plague experienced during the Counting of the Omer in Rabbi Akiva’s time (2nd Century CE). The Talmud relates (Yebamoth 62b) that 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva’s disciples died at the same time because “they did not treat each other with respect” and subsequently the “world” remained desolate of learning until R. Akiva taught new masters. These new masters [R. Meir, R. Judah, R. Jose, R. Simeon, and R. Eleazar b. Shammua] revived the Torah.

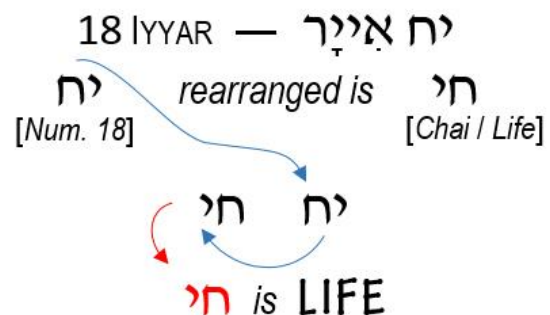
Another tradition suggests that R. Akiva’s students died at the hands of the Romans during the Bar Kochba revolt. The celebration of Lag Ba'Omer with a break in fasting and the lighting of bonfires is, perhaps, a reflection of this tradition.

Yet another traditional celebration by some Jews at Lag Ba'Omer is the memorial of the death of R. Shimon, one of R. Akiva’s five students who survived the plague. It is a kabbalistic belief that through one of R. Akiva's five students who survived the plague, R. Shimon ben Yohai Israel received the mystical Torah, *The Zohar*. This hidden and mystical Torah transmitted through R. Shimon is a complement to the revealed Torah given through Moses. Lag Ba'Omer is remembered as the anniversary of R. Shimon ben Yohai [aka. Rashbi; R. Simeon,] who referred to the day of his (future) passing as “the day of my happiness,” instructing his disciples to observe the day as a day of joyful celebration.

THE MEANING OF "LAG"

The word “lag” is a shorthand way for writing 33, a number which is written in Hebrew as *lamed gimel* [לג]. Lag Ba'Omer is thus the 33rd day of the counting the omer. An omer (sheaf) is a biblical measure of barley. The counting of the days in the omer [ba'omer: “in the omer”; Shephardic Jews call the days la'omer meaning “of the omer”] is a practice which dates from biblical times (Lev. 23:15-16) when, from the second day of Passover through to Shavuot [seven weeks], a sheaf of barley the size of an omer was brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. Following Shavuot the offering changed from barley to wheat, signaling the start of the wheat harvest.

A Kabbalist’s approach to Lag B’Omer finds a day to celebrate life and hope amidst days of mourning. On the Jewish calendar, Lag B’Omer is on 18th of the month of Iyyar. Eighteen, written *yod, bet* [יח]. The letters, rearranged spell, Chai [חי]. The Hebrew word Chai means LIFE. Lag B’Omer gives life to the month of Iyyar, and by extension infuses our life with a healthy measure of joy, optimism, and hopefulness.



**The Sefer HaChinuch* is an anonymous work published in 13th Century in Spain, which discusses the 613 mitzvot (commandments) of the Torah from legal and moral perspectives, drawing upon their biblical sources and developing their philosophical meaning and their understanding as *halakhab* (law).

