

Parshat Emor, *Mah Nishma*, Leffell School Newsletter, 2012

It is Thursday afternoon, and the Upper School's Lag Ba'Omer festivities are just ending. We had a fabulous Tug-of-War and a barbecue to mark the special day. We are 33 days into the Counting of the Omer, and by the time you read this, we will be even further along. But what exactly are we counting? As my colleague Rabbi Josh Cahan suggests, the Omer is sort of a no-man's land between Passover and Shavuot. It's not exactly clear whether we are counting *away* from our redemption from Egypt or counting *towards* the receiving of the Torah at Sinai. On the one hand, we don't count *down* the days of the Omer; we count *up* (yesterday was 32, today is 33), so it seems as if our focus is the past, having left Egypt. On the other hand, we look forwards to Shavuot, knowing that as we draw closer to the holiday, we draw closer to the peak experience of standing at Sinai.

So which is it? Is counting the Omer about the gift of Passover, or is it about the treasure of Shavuot? Should we be spending our time feeling free from bondage, or should we be preparing for our new master, as we take on the obligation of receiving the Torah?

As with most interesting questions in our tradition (thanks Rabbi Cahan!), we have several possible answers. Consider the fact that so many of our prayers call upon us to "remember the Exodus from Egypt." From this perspective, it seems as though we are meant to spend our lives reflecting on our past. Our history—as redeemed slaves—is our most precious possession. Still, however, we are warned by our people's story not to stare too closely at our past. Indeed, as we were being cared for in the wilderness, we fantasized about the "fleshpots of Egypt" and the "bread we ate to satisfaction." And isn't this human nature? Far too easily, we can get stuck lavishing attention on what came before, losing focus on the gifts we have.

If looking back is laden with problems, looking ahead brings challenges, as well. We can have no way of knowing what the future holds, and there is inevitable anticipation, if not anxiety, about coming events. Imagine for a moment our people's experience in the desert. They were, of course, being prepared for a great event, but they had no idea what receiving the Torah would mean for them. How could they know what a gift they were about to receive at Sinai?

One answer might lie in the actual mitzvah of counting which appears in this week's Parshat Emor. *U'Sfartem Lachem... Sheva Shabbatot Temimot*. And you should count for yourselves...seven whole weeks. The counting of the Omer holds us in the in-between, reminding us always of both our past and our future. In the end, of course, as with most Jewish questions, both are equally important.

Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, the 19th century Chassidic master known as the *Mei HaShiloach*, brings a beautiful parable to teach the power of counting the Omer. He teaches that the light of redemption which was revealed during the Exodus was only a small fraction of the unbelievable eternal light and redemption that the Torah holds within it. God knew we wouldn't be able to handle it when we first left Egypt, so He gave us 50 days of counting to prepare ourselves for the light of the Torah. The *Mei HaShiloach* suggests that we liken God to a father walking with his son who finds a beautiful treasure stash of valuable stones and gems. He realizes that his son is too young to recognize the value of such a treasure, so he decides to give his son just one stone. His son asks his father what the value of the stone is, and his father answers him: "don't worry about the value of it. Just hold as much as you can carry."

So too God didn't tell the people the value of the gift He was about to give us at Sinai... he just told us, 'take a bit at a time.'

When we count the Omer, we are moving from holding one gem at a time to owning an entire chest of precious jewels. So in fact, we are *gifted* with both the past and the future; we are both counting *up* and counting *down*. Our past—our *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt—is a true gem, but our future—the Torah—is our treasure trove. The counting of the Omer demands that we stay precisely in between the two. In fact, Jewish law tells us that we must remain on the day itself. I can only announce that today is 33 days. I cannot say yet what tomorrow will hold. As Jews, we are particularly blessed that our history is a proud one, and our future holds promise, as well. The Omer reminds us, however, that it is ultimately the present that matters most. Shabbat Shalom.