



Counting Old and New

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According to a midrashic tradition, the counting of the Omer (that may have seemed to be nothing but a calendrical counting of the days from Passover to Shavuot) expresses the anticipation of the Israelites for the giving of the Torah.¹ The biblical commandment, however, appears in an agricultural context.

Upon arriving in the land of Israel, every spring before eating from the new produce the Israelites are to bring the *omer* offering—a grain offering of barley from the new produce. Only after this offering may the new grain be eaten, and from that point fifty days are counted. At the end of this counting period, the following must take place:

ויקרא כג:טז-יז

¹⁶וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה: ¹⁷מִמּוֹשְׁבֵיכֶם תָּבִיאוּ לֶחֶם תְּנוּפָה שְׁתֵּי עָשָׂר כֹּמֶת סִלַּת תִּהְיֶינָה חֶמֶץ
תֹּאפִינָה בַכּוֹרִים לַיהוָה:

Leviticus 23:16-17

¹⁶You shall present a new grain offering to God. ¹⁷From your dwellings you shall bring two loaves of bread as a wave offering, made of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven as

¹ See, e.g., Ran on the Rif Pesahim 28a, and see Sefer ha-Hinukh #306.



first fruits to God.

The phrase “a new offering” is understood as an offering made from the new produce,² and from here our Rabbis derived that until this point the new grain was forbidden for ritual use in the Temple.³ The offering brought on Shavuot—the two loaves—is the first offering from the new **wheat** crop, after which the new produce may be used in the Temple service. Outside of the temple it was permitted after the *omer* barley offering.

To sum it up, there are three halakhic periods with regard to the new produce:

1. Pre-*omer* offering (Pesah)—New produce is forbidden
2. Post-*omer* offering and throughout the Omer count—New produce is permitted for consumption only outside the Temple.
3. After the two bread offerings (Shavuot)—New produce is permitted everywhere

It turns out, then, that the halakhic definition of the period of the Omer counting is the period in which the new grain of the year is permitted for consumption, but still forbidden for use in the Temple.⁴

But if the *midrash* is correct in inferring that the counting is meant to express a longing, the following question arises: what interest is there, for the common Israelite sitting in their home, which grain is used for the temple offering? What is the source of their anticipation that causes them to count the days?

² See Rashi on Leviticus 23:16.

³ Expressed in Mishnah Menahot 10:6.

⁴ Although new grain is permitted for consumption outside the Temple after the *omer* offering, the wheat harvest typically begins only around Shavuot (unlike barley, which ripens near Pesah). Thus, the practical gap during the Omer is limited: new wheat is scarce, and barley, though available, is rarely used in Temple ritual (aside from the *omer* and the *sotah* offerings). Nevertheless, the halakhic distinction remains: during the count early-ripening wheat may be eaten outside the Temple but not used within it, and the *sotah*'s barley offering must come from the old crop even once the new barley is available.



I would suggest this is actually very dramatic—the Temple is falling behind! A new spring has arrived, nature renewed, new crops in the field—and instead of leading the path of renewal, the sacred space is lagging.

Just like if someone is connected to their *shul*, it should be difficult for them if they change yet their *shul* stays the same, an individual that is really connected to the Temple should hurt when they feel the gap between their renewed world and the old Temple. It is fascinating that at the very same place in which the Torah tells that we must wait until we bring the “new” to the Temple (perhaps, because the sacred is sacred and we must be very cautious with bringing new things into it), it also tells us that we must count the days in which it is so, longing for it to change.

Although we talk about it this way, receiving Torah is not actually a one time event. Every year, the world is renewed. New ideas, new values, new energies, emerge to the world and impact our lives. In the Omer, we wait patiently, counting the days until we can receive a new Torah for a new year.

The “new” arrives in many forms—technological innovations such as electricity, ideas such as the Enlightenment or liberalism, or social and political transformations like the feminist revolution or the establishment of the State of Israel. Like new grain, these forces first break into our lives, reshaping our behavior and even our sense of self, and in doing so, they create a gap between our lived reality and our religious practices.

That gap presses us to ask questions. Some are halakhic—may one use a Shabbat hotplate? can a woman be counted in a *minyan*? Others are more abstract—Who is the God I believe in? what is the Torah’s stance toward minorities in a 21st-century world?⁵

⁵ I am not the first to make an analogy between “new grain” and the new ideas and realities of our world. The Hatam Sofer (R. Moses Schreiber, 1762-1839), often seen as a founding figure of ultra-Orthodox resistance to



The Torah's command to count each and every day of this period expresses how incomplete this state of lagging behind is and shows that the world we strive to live in is one that belongs to the third phase in which the "new" is present in the Temple and in ordinary life. As R. Tzadok ha-Kohen of Lublin⁶ writes:

מחשבת חרוץ אות י

דברי תורה צריכים להיות כל יום כחדשים וחביבים כל שעה כשעה ראשונה... והחידוש שאחר ההעלם הוא דבר חדש ולא מה שהיה מקודם... ועל כן סופר הימים כדרך אדם המתגעגע על איזה דבר שנקבע לו זמן דסופר הימים שיש עד אותו זמן מרוב תשוקתו וגעגועיו להגיע לאותו דבר.

Mahshevet Harutz #10

Words of Torah must be new every day, and beloved every hour as in their first moment.

The renewal that comes after concealment is truly something new, not simply what existed before.... And therefore one counts the days like a person who longs for something for which a time has been set, and counts the days remaining until that time out of great desire and yearning to reach it.

The counting of the Omer, then, is a counting of a condition. We count the days in which the world is already new, but the Temple is still old; in which life has changed, but Torah has not yet caught up. This counting expresses a refusal to accept the gap as permanent, and a longing to receive Torah anew: a Torah capable of meeting the newness of our world, and a world ready to be gathered into Torah.

modernity, famously grounded his opposition to innovation in the mishnaic phrase: "חדש אסור מן התורה" - the new is forbidden by Torah law" (Mishnah Orlah 3:9). Extending a law about the period before Pesah and the omer offering (in which the new grain is forbidden for consumption even outside the Temple), he and his followers treated the "new" as suspect even beyond the sacred domain, in everyday life (Hatam Sofer Responsa A, 98,148 and many more).

⁶ Russia/Poland, 1823-1900.

