

How to Count the Omer — A guide.



The *omer* refers to the forty-nine day period between the second night of Passover (*Pesach*) and the holiday of Shavuot.

This period marks the beginning of the barley harvest when, in ancient times, Jews would bring the first sheaves to the Temple as a means of thanking God for the harvest. The word *omer* literally means "sheaf" and refers to these early offerings.

The Torah itself dictates the counting of the seven weeks following *Pesach*:

"YOU SHALL COUNT FROM THE EVE OF THE SECOND DAY OF PESACH, WHEN AN OMER OF GRAIN IS TO BE BROUGHT AS AN OFFERING, SEVEN COMPLETE WEEKS. THE DAY AFTER THE SEVENTH WEEK OF YOUR COUNTING WILL MAKE FIFTY DAYS, AND YOU SHALL PRESENT A NEW MEAL OFFERING TO GOD."¹

In its biblical context, this counting appears only to connect the first grain offering to the offering made at the peak of the harvest. As the holiday of Shavuot became associated with the giving of the Torah, and not only with a celebration of agricultural bounty, the *omer* period began to symbolize the thematic link between *Pesach* and Shavuot.

While *Pesach* celebrates the initial liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, **Shavuot marks the culmination of the process of liberation, when the Jews became an autonomous community with their own laws and standards.**

Counting up to Shavuot reminds us of this process of moving from a slave mentality to a more liberated one.

When to Count the Omer

The counting of the *omer* begins on the second night of *Pesach*. Jews in the Diaspora generally integrate this counting into the second seder.

The *omer* is counted each evening after sundown. The counting of the *omer* is generally appended to the end of *Ma'ariv* (the evening service), as well.

What to Say. . . and What Not to Say

One stands when counting the *omer*, and begins by reciting the following [blessing](#):

*Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'Olam
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tizivanu al
sefirat ha'omer.*

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who has sanctified us with your commandments and commanded us to count the *omer*.

After the blessing, one recites the appropriate day of the count. For example:

Hayom yom echad la'omer

Today is the first day of the *omer*.

After the first six days, one also includes the number of weeks that one has counted. For example:

*Hayom sh'losa asar yom, she'hem shavuah
echad v'shisha yamim la'omer*

Today is thirteen days, which is one week and six days of the *omer*.

The inclusion of both the day (thirteen) and the week (one week and six days) stems from a

¹ [Leviticus 23:15-16](#)

rabbinic argument about whether the Torah mandates counting days or weeks. On the one hand, the biblical text instructs, "you shall count fifty days;" on the other hand, the text also says to "count . . . seven complete weeks." The compromise position, manifested in the ritual, is to count both days and weeks.

The blessing for counting the *omer*, as well as the language for each day of counting, appears in most prayer books at the end of the text for the evening service.

Because the blessing should precede the counting (and not the other way around), many Jews will not say what day of the *omer* it is until after the ritual counting. Thus, the reminder about what day to count is often phrased as "yesterday was the fifth day of the *omer*."

Many people precede the counting of the *omer* with a meditation that states one's intention to fulfill the commandment. This meditation serves to focus the individual on the task at hand and to remind him/her of the biblical basis of the commandment:

*Hineni muchan um'zuman l'kayem mitzvat aseh shel s'firat ha'omer k'mo shekatuv baTorah:
Us'fartem lakhem mimaharat hashabbat miyom havi'echem et omer hat'nufa, sheva shabbatot t'mimot tihiyenah. Ad mimaharat hashabbat hash'vi'it tisp'ru chamishim yom.*

Behold, I am ready and prepared to fulfill the *mitzvah* of counting the *omer*, as it says in the Torah: You shall count from the eve of the second day of Pesach, when an omer of grain is to be brought as an offering, seven complete weeks. The day after the seventh week of your counting will make fifty days.

Whoops. . .

One rabbinic debate considers whether there is one cohesive *mitzvah* to count seven weeks and fifty days or whether each night of counting constitutes a separate *mitzvah*. This debate would seem immaterial, if not for the proscription against reciting a blessing "in vain"--that is, not for the purpose of doing a *mitzvah*.

If there is a separate *mitzvah* to count each night, then forgetting one night would have no effect on one's ability to count subsequent nights. If, however, there is one collective *mitzvah* to count the entire period, then missing one night disrupts the entire count.

The rabbis effectively split the difference, and conclude that a person who forgets to count the *omer* on a particular night may count the next morning without reciting a blessing, and then may continue counting as usual--with a blessing--that night.

If, however, one forgets to count the *omer* at night and also forgets to count in the morning, one should still count the *omer* on every subsequent night, but should no longer recite a blessing before counting.