

Me-avdut la-cherut. From slavery to freedom. Counting the Omer and the journey to Har Sinai.

In my last column I talked about my Pesach haggadah, but now we are in a different stage of the story. We left Egypt, crossed the sea, and are in the desert on our way to Mount Sinai. There we will receive the G-d's Torah from the hands of Moshe Rabbenu. But in order to shed our slave mentality from Egypt we have to wait 49 days—that is 7 weeks—till the Festival of Weeks, Shavuot. Every day we count the Omer (*Sefirat ha-Omer*) for 49 times until we are ready to exclaim as free people at har Sinai: “We will do and we will hear.”

Counting the Omer is simple. After a brochah (blessing) one says: “Today is the [fill in number] day of the Omer, that is x days and x weeks of the Omer.” But the concept of the Omer is not simple. There is a book of Rabbi Simon Jacobson, *The Counting of the Omer - The Forty-Nine days of Sefirah. Forty-Nine Steps to Personal refinement According to the Jewish Tradition* (1996) which I use every year (or the website). In this book the rabbi connects the weeks of the Omer with the kabbalistic Sefirot, the ten Attributes of G-d. He uses seven of them: 1 Loving Kindness, 2 Justice (or discipline), 3 Beauty and Harmony, or Compassion, 4 Endurance, ambition, 5 Foundation, bonding, and 7 Nobility, leadership. Each sefirah (counting) connects two of these: one is for the week, and one is for the specific day, e.g., the second week emphasizes *gevurah*, discipline, but the first day is dominated by *chesed*, Loving Kindness, benevolence. The second day of that week is governed by discipline, *gevurah*, the third by Compassion, etc. In combination that is Compassion in Discipline. Rabbi Jacobson explains what this encompasses and gives us and exercise for that day, like, be compassionate to someone you have reproached. (disciplined). These are important exercises for a Jew, of course, but what do they mean for an artist?





I decided after writing my blog of the Haggadah that I should create a sequel to this haggadah, and take up the challenge to add images to my counting the Omer. But how? Be creative. One way to do it is by meditating on which person from Tenakh, the Midrash, the Talmud, or even chassidic stories would be a good example of the two divine Attributes which are combined at a given day in a given week. For instance, day one of week one is Loving Kindness in Loving Kindness. Who would be more suitable than Avraham Avinu? He is known to have welcomed and accepted all people benevolently, to love all people. His tent had four openings, one in each direction, to spot travelers from afar and invite them and serve them refreshments and spiritual nourishment and inspiration.

Even when he was in great pain after his circumcision at the age of ninety-nine, he did not hesitate when (angelic) visitors appeared at his tent. He prepared them a good, home cooked meal. His reward was great. The angels in disguise announced the birth of his son Yitzchak and gave him and his wife many blessings. Avraham is the role model for the kindness Jews must show others.

But for the second Omer days, Loving Kindness and Discipline, another role model is needed. Maybe Yitzchak Avinu? He was very disciplined and studious and had qualities an artist needs as well. I just started this project and it will be a lot of research to find suitable persons for every day, I need that discipline.

For Loving Kindness and Nobility (week 1, day 7) Ruth is the perfect choice. She came from a good family in Moab, but after the death of her (Jewish) husband she followed her widowed mother-in-law Naomi from Moab, where they both

lived at the time, back to Naomi's home town, Bethlehem in Israel, where Moabites were not held in esteem because of hostilities in the past. Her chances to remarry there as a poor widow of Moabite descent were slim, although Ruth had converted to Judaism. She supported here destitute mother-in-law and herself by gleaning ears in the "poor section," (the edge) of the fields of the well-to-do man Boaz. She was both humble and loving, mature and aware of her own good qualities despite the circumstances. She could have returned to Moab to live a better life, but the love and loyalty towards her mother-in-law and her choice to worship the One G-d prevented her from doing this. Her reward was great, because in the end she married Boaz and became the foremother of nobility and even royalty, King David.



Now I have to think of 46 more suitable people for my Omer project. I usually start big projects with simple India ink drawings. Some of these I work out in colorful ink and pastel drawings, and in a later stage some drawings might be used as inspiration for oil paintings. Every medium is different and it also depends on my mood.

Because of many other projects going on in my life I did not test extend the Omer beyond the stage of the ink drawings you see in this blog. But in the future I hope to show you the whole project and make some oil paintings as well.

Bivrakhah,

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