



# TEMPLE BETH ABRAHAM

## From Rabbi Holtz's Study



Dear Friends,

Eleven years ago, we began a social action project we dubbed, "Every1Counts." It started as a reimagining of a biblical custom known as the "counting of the *omer*."

The 49 day "counting" began as a period of thanksgiving for the spring barley harvest in Israel. It later merged with the belief that there were exactly seven weeks between the Exodus from Egypt to the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. In other words, 49 days between the second day of Passover and the beginning of Shavuot.

The Torah says that on the second day of Passover, the priest would lift an *omer* (sheaf) of barley before God to signify thanks for the harvest which had just begun. We read: "And from the day on which you bring the sheaf...you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: you must count until the day after the seventh week- fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Lord."

Once the Temple was destroyed and the Jews exiled, the counting of the *omer* changed. The rabbis of the Talmud (4th-6th centuries) understood it as a period of semi-mourning. Traditional Jews will not get married during the fifty days between Passover and Shavuot, and won't even cut their hair. The only exception you may recall from your own religious school days: the holiday of Lag b'Omer - the 33rd day of the *omer*. On that day, say the sages, a plague in Israel was lifted, so it is a day of joy.

The Kabbalists of Safed (16th century) had a different take on the counting of the *omer*. They understood it as a season of serious introspection and preparation that each person goes through in order to receive the Torah on Shavuot. The period begins with Redemption (the Exodus at Passover) and ends with Revelation (the giving of Torah at Shavuot). Each day of the counting represents a different aspect of our personality and our relationship with other people and with God.

Today, traditional Jews add a special prayer to the evening service between Passover and Shavuot, and each night they announce which day of the *omer* it is. We move, as did the Israelites, toward Mt. Sinai and our covenant with God. For many this is a very powerful period of time. But as important as the run-up to Shavuot is in Judaism, this simple daily counting in and of itself is hardly inspiring.

(over)

But here's another possibility: Rabbi Jacob Milgrom says that in the Bible just as today, the harvest - and therefore the farmer - was totally dependent on the weather. He suggests that the ancient Israelites were terrified that the harvest would be destroyed by bad weather, so they made a barley offering of thanksgiving each day to God, and counted the days until the harvest was successfully completed. Those of us living in Westchester are not farmers, but the economic gyrations due to the pandemic have reminded us all that it does not take much to make our own fiscal situation pretty precarious. And just as our ancestors gave thanks for the harvest, we can and should give thanks for our own blessings. And that's where Every1Counts comes in.

We are going to do a completely modern, liberal Jewish remake of the counting of the omer. I hope that you will all participate. We will make available to every Temple family an Every1Counts "kit" to help you count the Omer. It will consist of a very large bag which we want you to place in a conspicuous place in your home, a sticker to use on a tzedakah jar, and blessings for you to say, among other things. If you are a Religious School family, your (youngest enrolled) child will receive the kit. If you don't have a child in the religious school you will need to pick up your kit at TBA. We will also make everything in the kit (except the large bag!) available to you to print at home on our website at: [tba-ny.org/every1counts](http://tba-ny.org/every1counts).

Every day for fifty days, from the second day of Passover until Shavuot, we want you to put one can, box, or jar of food for the hungry into the bag. If you don't have the room for that, put a set amount of tzedakah aside each day - actual cash each day, not a lump sum at the end! As you do it, recite the blessing we'll send you, giving thanks for having enough to eat and enough to share. At the end of seven weeks, you will have fifty items to bring to Temple for donation to the local food pantry. And as a result of your daily offering, you may very well have a much stronger sense of gratitude, of appreciation for your blessings.

This is a brilliant way for us to do Judaism: re-purpose an ancient ritual, have it remind us of the important connection between the Exodus and the giving of Torah, have it provide us with a deepened spiritual sense of gratitude, and have it provide a way for our entire family to celebrate and participate in repairing the world. Please, give it a try. I think it's going to be amazing.

Peace and Blessings,

Rabbi David Holtz

