

Change the Omer?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Pesach is over; normal service resumes! But what is “normal”? We are now into a period of mourning called “the Omer”. It’s a time of mourning—no weddings or parties (and for those decadent ones amongst us, no public entertainment, opera, concerts, theater, or cinema).

None of these restrictions are mentioned in the Torah. All it says there is that the Omer was the first sheaf of the new barley harvest. Until it was brought and dedicated at the Temple on the morning after the Pascal sacrifice, one was not allowed to eat any of the new agricultural produce of that year. Then one had to count seven weeks (49 days) until the festival of Shavuot, when the wheat harvest began. This time of the Omer is now an integral part of our Jewish calendar. But as a period of mourning. The only clue we have, is that quite separately, without seemingly any connection, the Talmud (Yevamot 62a) says that 12,000 pairs of Rabbi Akiva’s pupils died during this period, because they did not treat each other with respect.

In the post-Talmudic period Geonic (the Jewish community in Babylon was led by men called the great ones, the Geonim, up until the beginning of the second millennium), LaG BaOmer (the 33rd day of the Omer) is mentioned as a happy day, because the plague that was killing off the pupils of R. Akiva stopped. And that was all. No suggestion of any lengthy period of mourning or not listening to music (although some communities refrained from music altogether, in memory of the destruction of the Temple).

The legal code the Shulchan Aruch (R. Yosef Caro 1563) takes this up and says, “We have the custom not to get married from Pesach until the 33rd day of the Omer because of what befell the pupils of Rabbi Akiva.” It then goes on to add that one also does not get one’s hair cut until the 33rd day. However, the Ashkenzi version adds that one does not start the period of mourning until Rosh Chodesh Iyar, a week after Pesach, stopping for the 33rd day, then resuming until three days before Shavuot.

So how did we get to our current period of strict public mourning? Here’s a theory. We know the mainstream rabbis opposed fighting the Romans in 70 CE and that R. Akiva died supporting the failed Bar Cochba revolt 132-135 CE. This in itself was a highly controversial. Almost all the other mainstream rabbinic leaders disagreed with him. Both rebellions led to massive loss. Was the story about his pupils dying a sort of code? A cover to discourage the idea of rebellion because of so many casualties on both occasions? The whole issue reminds us how we were divided into rival camps and political parties once upon a time. Things haven’t changed that much. Religiously, for certain, we are as split now as we were then. Perhaps it is this split that we need to mourn, as much as the violence and death.

Here’s another theory. Throughout the Middle Ages, Easter time was a period of disaster, murder, and suffering for the Jews. Christian preachers in their

Easter sermons called for vengeance for the death of Jesus. Easter ("Good" Friday indeed, but also a "black" one) was when the Blood Libel regularly reappeared—the myth that Jews needed Christian blood for the Passover Matzahs (ironic, given the Christian belief that the wine of the eucharist turns into the blood of Jesus).

The Crusades were a time of constant horror for European Jews and indeed for those living in the Land of Israel. The days of the Omer coincided with the spring, peak marching time for hordes of murderous anti-Jewish fanatics. The incredible loss of life reminded us of the earlier Roman disasters. Of the trials of exile.

But if the period of mourning during the Omer was just to record that, one would need to explain why it also extended to the whole of Oriental Jewry as well. Perhaps it was because there too the spring was a time when armies started to march, religious fanatics came out in force, and for however many Muslim overloads there were who tolerated the Jews, there were just as many who oppressed them or tried to coerce them into converting. Regardless of where you lived, this time of the year was a fraught and dangerous one.

What about the deaths of R. Akiva's students? Can we really argue that in itself it was so cataclysmic? Why is it still relevant? One answer might be the emphasis on the loss of Torah students and it is this loss which is as crucial as the numbers killed. The other answer usually given is that however relatively safe we are nowadays, still, we Jews are constantly made aware of how much Jews are still hated in many parts of the world—be it through fascist, leftist, or Islamic demonstrations. We are still abused and attacked. Anti-Semitism is alive and well and sadly growing, not diminishing.

But if that is the message, why not make the Holocaust its symbol, more than R. Akiva's students? Why is the Holocaust not regarded by the religion as a far greater catastrophe than Akiva's students? Some will say that the Holocaust is deeply embedded in our psyche, anyway—certainly in the Haredi world, which sees its very existence as a response to Hitler, although some refuse to accept it because it was established by the secular State of Israel. On a public level, many Jews include a Holocaust Day within this period of the Omer. It is mentioned in our synagogues and in our prayers all the time, often at our celebrations. Why don't we formally restructure this whole period of the Omer as one of mourning the Holocaust? And if the argument is that we should respect tradition, then what about all those other local tragedies over the past 2,000 years that for a period of time were turned into public fast days but now are forgotten or ignored?

The Prophet Zecharia said, "The fasts of the fourth (month), the fifth, the seventh, and the tenth will be turned, for the houses of Judah and Israel, into days of happiness and celebration."

We were prepared to consider adapting to changing circumstances then, why not now? Is this both the strength of tradition and its inertia—that our fractious religion and rabbinate seem incapable of flexibility, leniency, anything other than making life more difficult, intolerant, and obscurantist? Sometimes accommodation is the better part of valor.

If logic plays any part, this mindset makes no sense. But then you could say that the whole point of religion is not to make sense! Indeed, the world itself does not seem to make much sense nowadays, institutionally! Only we as individuals might. Some of us, sometimes!