

What is an Omer?

No, not the town in the Negev! The Biblical *Omer* refers to the sheaf of barley that was brought to the Temple, the day after Pesach, to mark the beginning of the new agricultural year. The first crop was the start of the harvest season. The Torah commands counting seven weeks, forty-nine days, from the day after *Pesah* until the wheat and first fruit festival of *Shavuot*.

Produce grown in this new agricultural year is called *Chadash*, the new. One was forbidden to eat the new produce until the Omer was brought and God was thanked for it. The law only applied to produce of the Land of Israel. Produce grown outside Israel did count. The law lay dormant until Zionism revived Jewish agriculture in the Holy Land. This recondite law would have disappeared with the Dodo, were it not for completely different events in Jewish History.

The days of the *Omer* have now been transformed into a period of mourning. Yes, another one. We are overloaded with post-Biblical days of sadness to record the almost endless persecution we suffered after the Roman destruction. But it has always been a challenge to explain why these days should be given such a role. The Talmud (Yevamot 62b) only mentions enigmatically that 24,000 pupils of Rabbi Akiva died during this period because they did not treat each other with respect. Things haven't changed much over 2,000 years, have they?

However, we know that Rebbi Akiva (in opposition to moderate and less nationalistic rabbinic leadership) led his pupils in support of Bar Cochba's rebellion against Roman occupation. He was martyred together with them. Given the ongoing Roman persecution, particularly under Emperor Hadrian, the rabbis wanted to record the disaster. But it was considered politic to find some other explanation for the memorial that would not offend them.

When Christianity began to persecute Jews everywhere they could, Easter was a particularly dangerous time because it recorded their myth of Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion.

Easter was when clerics spewed out hatred in their sermons calling for vengeance. Inflamed, primitive peasants (and nobles) would pour out of the churches to seek out and murder the nearest Jewish families.

Easter was also when the Blood Libel regularly reappeared, the myth that Jews needed Christian blood for the Matzahs. At long last, the Christian world has officially given up on that one. Sadly, it is still believed in many parts of the Muslim world. Easter was also when the Crusades began because the weather was more suited to marching off looking for spoil, encouraged by pious indignation. Constant persecution, under Christianity and Islam over such a long period reinforced this sense of doom and sadness. If the memory of past Jewish agonies were the reason for mourning during the *Omer*, then frankly we should be in mourning every day of the year now!

So here we are today, the *Omer* has changed from being a period of joy to one of sadness. No weddings, no parties or festivities, and for those men for whom it is relevant, no shaving or haircuts. To complicate things there are divergent customs here as on *Pesah* as between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews when Ashkenazi Jews, in addition to not being able to eat bread, etc also cannot eat beans, pulses, and rice, whereas Sephardi Jews do. The days of mourning differ. Sephardi Jews observe mourning from *Pesah* to *Lag BaOmer*. Whereas Ashkenazis do not start until *Rosh Hodesh Iyar*. They take a break for *Lag BaOmer* and continue through to *Shavuot* (and some exclude the three days before the festival). Any good reason? No, it's custom. All this perfectly illustrates the way Jewish law and custom have evolved with all its inconsistencies and varying customs.

We are constantly adding more and more special days and customs. The Torah says that "You should not add." Yet we keep on adding. Each Hassidic dynasty has its extra special days when it celebrates some good or bad event that is peculiar to it. Does it matter? Why not? What is wrong with doing extra because one wants to? But when one fears being considered a backslider if one does not conform, that surely undermines the beauty of it.

On the one hand, we have certain principles such as "A universally accepted custom has the force of law." And on the other "Customs that are stupid, should be abandoned." Yet silly customs, like baking *Challas* with or in the shape of keys after *Pesach* to ensure economic success.

The fact is that we have whole slews of local customs and special days when different communities around the world recorded their tragedies. Just as we remember our own happy and sad events. Just as many customs and days have been lost or abandoned as have been added. Not many Jews fast on Mondays and Thursdays nowadays. We do change, subtly and slowly. So, now the Days of the *Omer* take their place in our post-Biblical world. But given that we also have weeks of mourning for the destruction of the Temple in *Tammuz* and *Av*, do we need more?

This is why celebrating Israel's Independence Day during the *Omer* is so significant for me. We commemorate the miracle of our return after two thousand years, to show how it is possible to be proactive and to influence our destiny, with Divine help. We do not only have to look backward to tragedy.

We are a strange people. Some of us won't even recognize the miracle of Israel's existence while others seem to regret it! I observe the *Omer* because of tradition and the need to preserve our unique way of life in all its facets. I also add Israeli Independence Day to my list of Holy Days. But I certainly don't bake *Challas* in the shape of keys. We choose our priorities. And it saddens me that so many Ultra-Orthodox Jews do not celebrate it.

Religious tradition is a remarkable, complex phenomenon. The Talmud is as full of obsolescence as it is of innovation. It is both conservative and radical. I cannot explain why some customs survive and others do not. But in the end, we as individuals decide how far and to which group we wish to conform or not.