

What's the Omer?

Those of us who are loyal to tradition 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 among us, no public entertainment, opera, concerts, theater, or cinema).

None of these restrictions are mentioned in the Torah or indeed in the Talmud. All it says in the Torah 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. From this moment 49 days were counted until Shavuot and the second harvest festival. And that's all.

If the Torah says quite explicitly "Do not add to it" (*Deut.4:2*) when referring to its laws, how come, we have added too much over the past millennia including mourning during the Omer? One answer is the rabbinic aphorism "Build a fence around the Torah" (*Avot.1.1*). Which is all well and good and makes sense, but a fence is not Hadrian's Wall or an atomic shelter! Have we gone too far, and does it matter? After all, we are autonomous, and we do all choose what and how much to do most of the time. If some of us want to do more why not?

The only clue as to why the Omer is so significant is the Talmud (*Yevamot 62b*) which says that twelve thousand pairs of R. Akiva's pupils died during this period because they did not treat each other with respect. In the post-Talmudic era *Lag BaOmer* (the thirty-third day of the Omer) is mentioned in Geonic literature (around the ninth century in Babylon) as a happy day, because the plague that was killing off the pupils of R. Akiva stopped. But no one suggested any lengthy period of mourning.

The legal code of the *Shulchan Aruch* (R. Yosef Caro, 1563) over a thousand years after, says that "We have the custom not to get married from Pesach until the 33rd day of the Omer because of what befell the pupils of R. Akiva." It then adds that one also does not get one's hair cut until the thirty-third day. However, the Ashkenazi version adds that one does not start the period of mourning until Rosh Chodesh Iyar, a week after Pesach, stops for the thirty-third day, then resuming until three days before Shavuot.

So how and why did we get to our universally observed period of strict public mourning? One theory is that the mainstream rabbis opposed fighting the Romans in 70 CE and that R. Akiva died supporting the failed Bar Kochba revolt (132–135 CE). Both rebellions led to massive losses. Was the story about his pupils dying a sort of code? To discourage the idea of rebellion.

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. Then came the Blood Libel that Jews needed Christian blood for the Passover *matzahs*. Which coincided with the Crusades which started up after Easter during the spring, peak marching time

for hordes of murderous anti-Jewish fanatics on the rampage through Europe to regain the Holy land. As well as the regular assaults on Jews under Islam even if occasionally, as under the early Ottomans the Jews were welcomed and protected. We had to be on our lookout and defensively prepared. No time for celebrations.

Others suggest this custom did not become universally accepted before the Kabbalists who fled Spain after 1492 saw a parallel between the expulsion from Spain and the loss of the Temple and celebrated *Lag BaOmer* as the anniversary of the death of the greatest mystic of the Talmud Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai.

Can we really argue that the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's students were so cataclysmic as to warrant such an extended period of mourning? Why is it still relevant? One answer might be the emphasis on the death of so many Torah students, and it is this academic loss as much as the numbers that matter. But why then is the Holocaust not regarded as a far greater catastrophe and worthy of a specific religious date?

If the argument is that we should respect the tradition, then what about all those other local tragedies over the past two thousand years that for a while were recognized as public fast days but now are forgotten? And contrast them with the positive innovations in Israel where we celebrate *Yom HaShoah*, Memorial Day *Yom haZikaron*, and *Yom HaAtzmaut*, all within this timeframe of the Omer. Does change now only go one way, to increase?

There are two aspects to this legend and why it has become so significant. One historical and the other ethical. We keep mourning today because we Jews are constantly made aware of how much we are still hated by so many people all over the world, and under the constant threat of Palestinian terror attacks on civilians. And the more we remember, the better armed we are and able to cope. And the other ethical reason is that like Rabbi Akiva's pupils we are still divided into rival camps and political parties treating each other with disrespect. Both are reasons to remember the past and recognize the faults of the present.

In Israel, the political mess is a disaster that threatens our country. Here in the USA, the Memorial Museum which was once happy to hear Alexandra Occasion Cortez speak on their premises has now banned Florida Governor DeSantis because they do not like his politics. Neither do I (they are trying to weasel out of it of course). But if this egoism, vested interest, and capitulation to political correctness is how we are going to get on with each other, then we have a lot to mourn for.

Logically, observing mourning during the Omer does not make sense! Neither does a lot more in religion. Indeed, the world itself does not seem to make much sense nowadays, institutionally, politically, or morally! But religion and tradition do satisfy the human need for spirit, tradition, and structure. It is a constant reminder of how far we have to go to achieve the human ideals we value. History often betrays us. Our values sustain our humanity.