



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Emor 5771

By Rachel Travis

May 7, 2011

We are currently in the third week of the *omer*—the 49-day period of nightly counting between Pesach and Shavuot. According to rabbinic tradition, the *omer* serves as a bridge between two spiritual milestones: the redemption from Egypt (Pesach) and the giving of the Torah (Shavuot).

But biblically, the link between the two festivals was agricultural, and the word *omer* had another meaning entirely. On the second day of Pesach, a sacrifice called the *omer*—literally a sheaf or measurement of barley—was offered in the Temple, marking the beginning of the harvest season. Fifty days later, on Shavuot, a new wheat offering was made, concluding the celebration of the grain harvest. As we read in *Parshat Emor*: "...You shall bring an *omer* from your first harvest to the *kohen*...and from the day on which you bring the *omer* offering... you shall count off seven weeks."¹

It is clear that counting the *omer* in the Temple period was a radically different ritual than the one we practice today. Given that few of us spend our spring months harvesting, and none of us stocks our kitchens with *omer*-sized measuring cups, what does the agricultural history of this ritual have to do with our contemporary *omer* practice?

An answer lies in a broader understanding of the word *omer* in its biblical context. In addition to the command to count the *omer* in *Parshat Emor*, the term appears two more times in the Torah. In Shmot, when the Israelites panic about survival in the desert, wondering if God has redeemed them only to let them starve in a foreign wasteland, God rains manna from heaven, and Moshe instructs the people to "Gather from it, for every man according to what he eats, an *omer per person*."² Rashi teaches that even those who collected too much or too little would find that, miraculously, when they returned home, they had exactly one *omer per person*.³ In other words, God not only provided sustenance, but ensured that it was distributed equitably.

Later, the book of Dvarim enumerates civil laws to help the people create a fair and caring society—without the need for miracles. Among these is the command that, "When you reap your harvest in your field, and you forget a bundle [*omer*] in the field, you shall not turn back to take it; it shall be for the stranger, the orphan and the widow."⁴ Just as God allocated an *omer* for each person in the desert, so, too, Jewish farmers are instructed to leave behind any fallen sheaves for the poor.

All three biblical mentions of the word *omer*—whether an offering in the Temple, a gift from God or an allocation for the needy—are linked by a common theme of gratitude, justice and generosity. The *omer* in *Parshat Emor* is an expression of gratitude for God's role in our ability to provide for ourselves; the *omer* in Shmot demonstrates the just

¹ Vayikra 23:10, 15.

² Shmot 16:16.

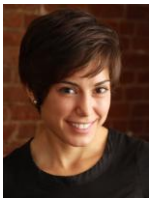
³ Rashi on Shmot 16:17.

⁴ Dvarim 24:19.

way in which God provides for us; and the *omer* in Dvarim instructs us how to care for one another generously. As God gave us manna in the desert, and gives us grain at our harvests, we must provide for each other with a spirit of equality and kindness.

The Torah further connects these values by incorporating all of them into its instructions for the observance of Shavuot, the culmination of the *omer*-counting period. Shavuot served as a reminder to Israelite farmers that the fruits of their labors were a blessing that was to be appreciated and shared. When they brought an offering of first fruits on Shavuot, they were commanded to “rejoice with all the good that the Lord, your God, has granted you and your household; you, the Levite, and the stranger who is among you”⁵—expressing gratitude while simultaneously reaching out to those less fortunate. Not coincidentally, we find that directly after the commandment to observe Shavuot, the Torah instructs farmers to leave the corners of their fields unharvested, so that the needy can come and find sustenance.⁶

Our challenge during the weeks between Pesach and Shavuot is to infuse our modern observance of the *omer* period with lessons from its biblical predecessor, by fulfilling the command to rejoice in all the good we have been granted with those who have less. We can begin to do this by recognizing that the food we have is a gift, and that we have an obligation to share our bounty with others. What form this takes is up to us as individuals: locally, we could volunteer in a soup kitchen or with an organization that supports food justice. Globally, we could learn about food aid and policy or evaluate how our personal consumption can have a global impact. However we act on it, our contemporary counting of the *omer* represents an opportunity to reflect on where our gifts come from and how we can provide for others. This is our *omer*—let’s make it count.



Rachel Travis is currently the Curatorial Assistant for the Roman Vishniac Archive at the International Center of Photography. After earning a Masters in Jewish Art and Visual Culture at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rachel has worked at a number of museums and Jewish institutions, exercising her belief that art can serve as a vehicle for social change. Born in Manhattan and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, she currently lives with her husband in the Upper West Side where they enjoy biking, baking and urban farming. Rachel can be reached at rachel.dvartzedek@gmail.com.

⁵ Dvarim 26:11.

⁶ Vayikra 23:22.

©2011 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/dvartzedek.

The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to the Jewish community and to social justice. She was a creative and vigorous supporter of leadership development, public interest law, women and public policy and Jewish culture. Lisa died tragically at the age of 54. She was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.