



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday, May 13 2022 ~ Parsha: Emor

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Remember the Lessons of the Omer

On the second night of Passover, we began an observance called *Sefirat HaOmer* the counting of the Omer.

You shall count for yourselves -- from the day after the Shabbat, from the day when you bring the Omer of the waving -- seven Shabbats, they shall be complete. Until the day after the seventh sabbath you shall count, fifty days. (Leviticus 23:15-16)

An *Omer* is a unit of measure – think of a quart or a bushel or a pound – you get the idea. In Biblical times, an *Omer* of barley was brought as a special offering during this season. This *mitzvah* reinforced several values. First of all, the spring is the time of the first harvest. Regular offerings of produce like barley, symbolized gratitude for the good harvest that the people enjoyed.

By counting each of the days, the *Omer* linked Passover, the celebration of the liberation from Egypt with Shavuot, the holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people. The *Omer* reminds us that the liberation from Egypt, as important as it was, was not complete until the moment at Mt. Sinai when God revealed his purpose for the liberation.

Originally, this season was a happy, celebratory season of the year. There is much evidence to support this. So how did this season of the year become associated with a sad period of Jewish history, symbolized by taking on certain aspects of mourning. The answer is in the tragic events that followed the destruction of the Temple.

After the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in the year 70 CE, there were several revolts against Rome. We don't know a great deal about some of them, but we know a great deal about the last of them, the Bar Kochba revolt (132 – 135 CE). We know that initially, this revolt was quite successful. We also know that it was not supported by the entire Jewish community. Whereas the Rabbis who lived in Judea and Samaria tended to support this revolt, those living in the north of Israel did not. This led to great discord within the Jewish community over how to deal with their Roman oppressors. Yet the revolt did have the support of the greatest of the sages of the time, the famed Rabbi Akiba. He supported the effort, and his many students flocked to the cause. As I said earlier, initially there were great successes. Yet the Romans soon prevailed. By 135, at a place called Betar, the revolt

was crushed, ushering in an even more terrible period for the survivors, and the forced displacement Jews from Judea and Samaria for generations.

There is very little recorded in Jewish sources about the Bar Kochba revolt. But what we do know is that staggering losses, as well as the end of the revolt took place mainly during this season of the year. Yet there is one cryptic reference to this period, the one explanation for the sad nature of this time period. The Talmud makes reference to the death of 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiba during this season of the year. They attribute this to a plague that affected them. But interestingly enough, the Rabbis attributed a different reason for this plague: that the students did not treat each other with honor and respect and therefore were punished. Now of course, this is not a literal truth – nor did the Rabbis believe it as such. But rather it was a warning to future generations. In the face of great threats and persecution, the Jewish people failed to cooperate and work together to confront the needs of the hour.

It is a warning we should heed. The Jewish people still face all types of challenges and threats. The daily counting of the *Omer* is more than the fulfillment of a *mitzvah*. It's a reminder of our responsibility to cooperate with all of our fellow Jews, of varied religious approaches and diverse life styles to create a better and safer future for all.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner