

On One Foot – Observing the Omer

One of the more befuddling seasonal challenges is the plethora of traditions regarding the Omer. The requirement to count 49 days comes straight from the Torah (Vayikra 23:15). During the Temple period an Omer of grain (about 3 ½ litres) was harvested by each household and taken to the Temple as an offering. No grain from the new harvest (Chadash) could be eaten until the Omer offering had been brought.

The Gemarra (Yevamot 62b) identifies the period as one of tragedy and recounts how Rabbi Akiva lost 24,000 disciples from Pesach until Atzeret (Shavuot). Within the 49-days, we observe a period of mourning with a measure of celebration on Lag BaOmer (the 33rd day of the Omer) where we are told none of the students perished. According to tradition there were 33 days of plague

But what is the period of mourning? And what are the observances?

The Tur (Yaakov Ben Asher 1270-1340) says that there should be no marriages nor haircuts throughout the 49 days, though records an opinion that from Lag BaOmer onwards they are permitted. This opinion is cited as the correct minhag by the Shulchan Aruch (1563 by Yosef Karo 1488-1575). The Shulchan Aruch rules that mourning carries on until the 34th day in the morning.

A third opinion assumes that deaths did not occur on the more joyous days where we do not recite Tachanun. It takes the 33 days from the day after Rosh Chodesh Iyar till Erev Shavuot. A fourth in the Mishna Berura (R' Yisrael Meir Kagan 1838-1933) from the first day of Rosh Chodesh Iyar (30th Nissan) until 3 days before Shavuot (when the Israelites were assembled in readiness at Sinai).

Minhag Anglia is not to have weddings from 2 Iyar up until but not including Rosh Chodesh Sivan (with the exception of Lag BaOmer, when they are permitted).

The Rema (R' Moshe Isserles 1520-1572) states that one should follow the minhag of the city and not have some following one custom and others another as it would look as if we were observing two Torahs.

The restrictions of the Omer are less arduous than the 3 weeks between 17th Tammuz and Tisha B'Av. Greater latitude is given to shaving, for those who need to look groomed at work. The Mishna Berura is explicit that one can say shehechyanu (for example) on new fruits. According to many poskim if there is a need one can buy new clothes as the essential prohibitions are only on weddings and music/dance.

The reason given in the Talmud for the plague which blighted R' Akiva's students was that they did not accord each other due respect. The observance of the mourning is supposed to inspire us to distance ourselves from hatred, jealousy and desire for glory; to pursue love, modesty and peace.

In the spirit of respecting diversity of minhagim, R' Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986) in his Responsa Iggerot Moshe (Orach Chayim 1, 159) allows people who observe mourning in one period to attend the wedding of someone who holds by a different minhag.

The Omer should be counted while standing. May we stand and be counted amongst those who share and show respect. May we be counted amongst those who are blessed to see the light of Redemption and the glory of our morning turned to joy.