

In this final week of the Omer counting, we take up the narrative of our ancestors' long journey through the wilderness. The week before Pesach we began reading the Book of Leviticus, with its detailed rules and regulations for interacting with each other and with HaShem, not only for the journey, but for the future when the wilderness is behind us. However, because we humans have a propensity for creating chaos out of the beautiful order HaShem continually provides for us, we realize that we never completely escape the wilderness. No straight paths for us! We question every command, we complain and rebel, and we take shortcuts that end up lengthening and embittering our journey. Within days of having received our Torah fear and impatience take over, and we make that infamous golden calf. As a consequence, with the *mishkan* built and the priestly offices inaugurated, we still have to pause and learn many more rules before we are ready to move on. Now, with laws and procedures in place, we are able to resume our journey, but only after more than 10 chapters of preparation. First, order must be established for the entire camp, so that everyone understands how they fit in personally, within their family units, within their tribes, and within the entire structure of the nation. It begins with another census, moves through the details of positioning each tribe and assigning each its own flag, to further outlining the duties of the Levites. Underlying all of this is the practice of precise enumeration, a technique that developed as civilization developed and cities began to form, most likely about 4000 BCE in Sumeria. Counting and sorting are among the first basic skills a child learns. But how we count and sort depends on our value system, especially in regard to how we treat individuals. Statistics are important on a multitude of levels, but they are only a tool, and for good or evil, one that lies squarely in the hands of those who employ it. Totalitarian systems see people as mere numbers, as groups consisting of interchangeable, faceless entities to be arbitrarily used as needed. While most of us vehemently reject this way of thinking, we all must engage in some form of compartmentalizing in order to understand our world. If we do so in a healthy fashion, we understand that every group is comprised of unique individuals as well as groups of individuals within larger groups. For example, "the Jews" is a hugely diverse group of people comprised of the subgroups Ashkenazi and Sephardi, each of which contains many regional, national, linguistic, social, and religious subgroups. It starts with the individual and spreads in widening concentric rings that finally encompass all of humankind. The census counts each individual equally (albeit only the men from the age of 20, but that is a topic for another day), from the lowest servant to Moses. Although they differ in numerous ways, all are counted because regardless of the trajectory of their individual lives, all are valuable in the eyes of HaShem.

Since the second Seder we have been counting the Omer each evening, enumerating the days between release from slavery to receiving our Torah. Many of us do so using the kabbalistic system of assigning one of the 7 lower *sephiroth* on the kabbalistic tree of life to each of the 7 weeks of Omer counting, and then assigning one *sephirah* to each of the 7 days of the week. The word *sephirah* comes from the Hebrew root סָפַר, meaning to count, to enumerate, as well as a book or Torah scroll. In the language of Kabbalah, each of the 10 *sephiroth* represents a particular aspect of HaShem. The upper three are beyond our comprehension, but we can relate to the lower 7 through the spiritual, philosophical, and psychological concepts with which we are familiar. As we count the days each week and learn how the *sephirah* of the day interacts with the *sephirah* of the week, we discover ways to apply this understanding to our own lives. The uniqueness of each *sephirah* interacting with the uniqueness of each of the other *sephiroth* can help us appreciate the uniqueness of the people we encounter each day. The final week of counting is influenced by the *sephirah* of *Malchut / Shechinah*, the aspect of Divine Manifestation and Indwelling Presence. It is located at the bottom of the kabbalistic tree, deeply rooted in each of us while remaining connected through the trunk of the tree to the entirety of HaShem. Infused in turn with *Chessed* (lovingkindness), *Gevurah* (discernment/strength), *Tiferet* (beauty through balance, *Netzach* (endurance), *Hod*, (splendor), *Yesod* (foundation), and its own attribute of Indwelling Presence, each day of this week offers us a final chance to reflect on our journey since Pesach. Could we have imagined as we counted last year, that we would still be in the wilderness of COVID? We have learned to adapt, and to value each other's uniqueness in entirely new ways. Although we have been physically isolated, technology makes it possible for us to be more connected than ever before. In the midst of the chaos caused by the pandemic, people with differing skills join forces to help each other, dissolving barriers and making new friends. Amazingly, COVID's *mitzrayim* (narrow places) have opened broad new vistas for human interaction. Geographical, linguistic, cultural, and religious distinctions notwithstanding, we are interconnected in myriad ways, every unique one of us, and we all count, each in our own special way.

Shabbat shalom and chag Shavuot sameach!