Parshat Emor 5771
By Rachel Travis
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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.”

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.” 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. 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.” 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
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” —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.

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.

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