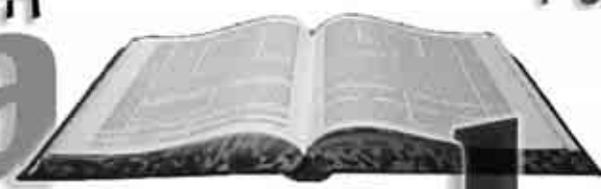


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The Mitzvah of Sefiras Ha'omer

Reviewed by Horav Shlomo Miller

After mentioning the Yom Tov of Pesach and the mitzvos and korbonos that apply to the Yom Tov, the Torah mentions the mitzvah that is commonly referred to as *sefiras ha'omer*. The Torah in Parshas Emor states וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת מיום הביאכם את עמר התנופה שבע שבתות תמימת תהינה — You shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the Shabbos, from the day you bring the Omer of the waving - seven weeks, they shall be complete. The Torah then instructs as follows: עד ממחרת השבת השביעת תספרו חמשים והקרבתם מנחה חדשה לך — Until the morrow of the seventh week you shall count, fifty days; and you shall offer a new meal-offering to Hashem.¹

The *korbon ha'omer* was a measure of ground barley that was brought from grain of the new crop. An *omer* is a dry measurement that is equivalent to a tenth of an *efaif* (i.e. the volume of 43.2 average eggs). *Omer* is also the name by which the *korbon* is known. Up until the time that the *korbon ha'omer* was offered, any grain of the five grains (i.e. wheat, oats, spelt, rye, and barley) from the new crop was forbidden to be consumed. (For a detailed discussion on this topic, see *Halacha Berurah's* issue on *The Observance of Chodosh in Contemporary Times*). The Torah requires the offering of the *omer* to symbolize that despite the back-breaking work that must be done in the field to produce a new crop, we must recognize that it is all a gift from Hashem, and we thank Him for it. Offering a *korbon* from the new produce even before partaking in it, is a sign of thanks to Hashem for awarding us with prosperity in the field. In addition, because physical work in the field may lead one to forget his spiritual nature, the Torah surrounds a farmer's chores with commandments, so that he would remain conscious of his true purpose. Included in these commandments, are the offerings of the *omer* and the *shtei halechem* at the beginning of the harvest.²

The *shtei halechem* were two loaves of bread that were brought from the new wheat crop. Once the *omer* was offered, grain from the new crop was permitted for general use, but could not be used for any offerings in the *Beis Hamikdash* (i.e. with the exception of the *korbon ha'omer*) until the time that the *shtei halechem* was offered fifty days later.³

There is a Torah requirement to count the days and weeks between these two offerings. The counting must commence from the day the *korbon ha'omer* was brought (i.e. the second day of Pesach) until the day that the *shtei halechem* was offered (i.e. Shevuous). When describing on which days one should begin and conclude counting, the Torah refers to those days as *the morrow of the 'Shabbos'*. During the times of the second *Beis Hamikdash*, there were a group of heretical Jews called the *ביתוסין* — Boethusians who interpreted the Torah at face value without accepting any form of Torah *she'bal peh*. They interpreted the word *Shabbos* literally, as referring to *Shabbos*. Thus, in their view, *on the morrow of the Shabbos* referred to Sunday, and they claimed that the *omer* had to be brought on the Sunday following the first day of Pesach. In addition, *Shevuous* would also therefore fall out on a Sunday. Ironically, they rationalized their claim by saying that since *Moshe Rabbeinu* loved the *Yiddin* to such a great extent, he wanted to bestow on them two consecutive days of rest (the first day being *Shabbos* and the second being *Shevuous*). To counter this erroneous interpretation, *Chazal* cite many proofs that the word *Shabbos* in the *posuk* refers to *Yom Tov*. In addition, *Chazal* required much commotion to take place when reaping the new crop for the *omer*. A large group of people would gather on the night of the second day of Pesach when the grain was reaped, and many announcements were made

between the reapers and those people who assembled.⁴

The Mitzvah Nowadays

In the absence of the *Beis Hamikdash*, unfortunately there is no opportunity to offer these *korbonos*. It would seem that the counting was directly linked and associated with the *korbon ha'omer* and *shtei halechem*.

Thus, many *Rishonim* maintain that nowadays there is no longer any requirement *Mideoraisah* to count the days during this period of time, but that as a remembrance of the obligation, *Chazal* instructed that the counting should still be done nowadays.⁵

Other *Rishonim* maintain that the counting was not at all linked to the *korbonos*. The Torah requires the count during this period of time as a preparation for the Yom Tov of *Shevuous*, the day of *kabolas hatorah*. It is merely coincidental that these *korbonos* were offered at the beginning and end of this counting period, and the Torah simply noted that the day on which to begin counting is the day on which the *korbon ha'omer* is brought, and that the counting ends on the day that the *shtei halechem* are brought. Consequently, even in the absence of the *Beis Hamikdash*, the counting would still be an obligation *Mideoraisah*.⁶

There are many practical applications that are dependent on whether the obligation nowadays is *Mideoraisah* or *Miderabonon*. These applications will be discussed in further detail below.

The Obligation of Sefiras Ha'omer

Males above the age of thirteen are obligated to count *sefirah*. Boys under the age of thirteen should be trained to count as well with a *brocha*.⁷

Many *poskim* maintain that women are not obligated in this mitzvah as they are exempt from all mitzvos *asei she'hazman grama* - mitzvos that are bound by a specific time. Additionally, the *Mishnah Berurah* maintains that even if women wish to perform the mitzvah, they should not recite a *brocha*. This is because women may not be aware of all the intricate halachos of *sefiras ha'omer*, and if they error while counting, they may not know the proper halacha. Additionally,

Please Note: Due to the intricacy of the material discussed in each issue, and the brevity of its treatment, a *Rov* should be consulted for a final *psak halacha*. In addition, this publication does not intend to be מכריע on issues that are a *machlokes haposkim*. Although we have usually brought the dissenting views in the footnotes, we have selected for simplicity sake to incorporate into the main text the views of the *Mishnah Berurah*, R' Moshe Feinstein, R' Shlomo Zalmen Auerbach and several other preeminent *poskim*. Please send all questions and comments to 1341 E. 23rd Street, Brooklyn, NY 11210 or email to hinfo@thekosher.net

in order to fulfill the obligation of *sefirah*, a person must understand the language that they are counting in. In earlier times, it was very common for women not to understand *lashon hakodesh*. Consequently, the *poskim* advised that women not count with a *brocha* in order to avoid saying a *brocha levatala*.

Some *poskim* maintain that nowadays, women who are more familiar with *lashon hakodesh* and are taught the proper *halachos* of *sefirah*, may count with a *brocha*. Other *poskim* maintain that even nowadays women should refrain from counting with a *brocha*. Each person should follow their own *minhag*.⁸

תמימות — Complete Days

There is a major *machlokes* amongst the *Rishonim* whether the entire counting of the 49 days of the *omer* is one *mitzvah* that has 49 components to it, or if the counting of each individual day is its own independent *mitzvah*. This *machlokes* is very relevant in terms of practical *halacha*. The *Torah* stresses that the *mitzvah* of *sefirah* must be *temimos* - a complete counting. Thus, if the entire 49 days are considered one *mitzvah*, and a person omitted one day during the course of counting, he has not fulfilled his obligation. On the other hand, if counting each day is a separate *mitzvah*, an omission of one day would not affect the fulfillment of the *mitzvah* on the other days. Since this issue is a dispute amongst the *Rishonim*, the *poskim* are stringent on both accounts. If a day is missed during the course of counting, one should still continue counting the rest of the days, since according to the second opinion he can still fulfill the *mitzvah*. However, in such a scenario, no *brocha* should be recited prior to counting, for according to the first opinion, the proper fulfillment of *mitzvah* required one to count every one of the 49 days.⁹ One who is in doubt whether he counted on the previous night may continue counting with a *brocha*. A *brocha* may be recited since in essence there is a double doubt, for even if the *halacha* is in accordance with the first opinion, there is a possibility that he did count the night before and may continue fulfilling the *mitzvah*.¹⁰

Chazal deduce from the wording of the *Torah* that the *mitzvah* of *sefirah* begins on the second night of *pesach* (i.e. the time when the *korbon ha'omer* was harvested). The *mitzvah* to count *sefirah* continues every night until *Shevuos*. There is a *machlokes Rishonim* whether the *mitzvah* of *sefiras ha'omer* can be fulfilled during the day. Therefore, if one did not count *sefirah* at night but remembered during the following day, he should count without a *brocha*. During the following nights, a *brocha* may be recited.¹¹ If one forgot to count during the day as well, no *brocha* may be recited when counting the remaining days of *sefirah*.¹² However, if one remembered to count during *bein hashmashos* - twilight, there are a number of *poskim* who maintain that one has fulfilled his obligation and may recite a *brocha* on the remaining nights of *sefirah*.¹³

There are some people who in addition to counting *sefirah* every night, also have a worthwhile practice to count the *omer* every day after *Shacharis*. This serves as a safeguard just in case one forgot to count at night.¹⁴

Many *poskim* maintain that even if one knows ahead of time that he will miss one day of

counting the *omer* (e.g. a person who has a scheduled surgery and will be out of commission for 24 hours), he may still count with a *brocha* until that time.¹⁵

A boy who becomes *bar mitzvah* during the period of *sefiras ha'omer*, and had counted every night until then (i.e. as a *koton*), may continue counting with a *brocha* even though he did not have a full fledged obligation when he began counting.¹⁶

The Counting of Days and Weeks

The *Torah* requires a counting that consists of days and weeks. The *Gemara* records a dispute as to whether the same requirement applies nowadays. Some *Amoraim* maintained that the requirement is to count both days and weeks. Others held that since the entire *mitzvah* nowadays is only a commemoration of the count that took place during the times of the *Beis Hamikdash*, only the days have to be counted.¹⁷

We mentioned earlier that the *Rishonim* dispute whether nowadays the obligation to count *sefirah* is *Mideoraisa* or *Miderabonon*. This *machlokes* revolves around the interpretation of this *Amoraic* dispute in the *Gemara*. The *halacha* is in accordance with those who require the counting of both days and weeks. At one time, there were some customs that only required the counting of weeks at the end of each complete week (e.g. counting 'one week' on day seven, 'two weeks' on day fourteen, etc.). Others required the counting of weeks during the week as well (e.g. counting 'one week and five days' on day twelve, or 'two weeks and two days' on day sixteen, etc.), but did not require the 'day' count (e.g. 'twelve days' or 'sixteen days' etc.) since the days are already alluded to in the count of the weeks. Nowadays, the universal custom as codified by the *Shulchan Aruch* is to count both days and weeks even during the week.¹⁸

Errors While Counting

We mentioned above that there used to be different customs regarding counting the number of weeks during the week. Although our custom is to count the number of weeks as well, one who erroneously omitted the number of the weeks or counted the wrong week has fulfilled his obligation as long as he counted the total number of days correctly. However, if one omitted or erred in the counting of the weeks at the conclusion of a week (e.g. at the end of two weeks he counted 'fourteen days' and did not mention 'which is two weeks'), there is a *machlokes Rishonim* whether he has fulfilled his obligation, and he should therefore count again in the proper manner. The *brocha* need not be repeated. If one did not count again in the proper manner, he may continue counting the rest of the days of *sefirah* with a *brocha*.¹⁹

If one erred in the number of the days, but counted the number of weeks correctly (e.g. on the sixteenth day he counted 'fifteen days which is two weeks and two days') he has fulfilled his obligation.²⁰

If, however, this transpired at the conclusion of the week when the weekly segment of the count has no mention of days at all, most *poskim* maintain that he has not fulfilled his obligation. This is because he neglected counting the 'days' of *sefirah*, which is an integral part of the *mitz-*

vah. In such a case, if one did not immediately correct himself, he must repeat the *brocha* and count again correctly.²¹ Even if he did not count again in the correct fashion, there are some *poskim* who still permit him to continue counting the rest of *sefirah* with a *brocha*.²²

In summary, where one errs in only one portion of the *sefirah* (i.e. either the days or the weeks) the only possible problem would be at the conclusion of a week. In all instances, one may continue counting the rest of *sefirah* with a *brocha*.²³

The Proper Time

We mentioned above that in the opinion of many *Rishonim*, *sefiras ha'omer* is an obligation *Mideoraisah*. Consequently, the *poskim* maintain that one should refrain from counting until it is definitely night (i.e. after *tzeis hakochavim*, which according to some opinions is approximately 40-50 minutes after sunset). However, if one counted prior to that time he has fulfilled his obligation as long as it was after sunset. Nonetheless, he should preferably count again after *tzeis* without a *brocha*.²⁴ If one finds himself in a *shul* that scheduled a *minyan* for *maariv* before *tzeis hakochavim* but after sunset and is counting *sefiras ha'omer* he should make the following stipulation prior to counting *sefirah* with the *minyan*: He should stipulate that he only intends to be *yotze* with this counting in the event that he forgets to count again after *tzeis hakochavim*. No *brocha* should be recited when he counts before *tzeis hakochavim*. If he remembers to count again after *tzeis hakochavim*, a *brocha* should then be recited prior to counting *sefirah*.²⁵

Many *poskim* stress that once the time of *tzeis hakochavim* arrives, one should not delay counting *sefirah*. We mentioned above that there is a concept of *temimus* - completeness. In order to have a complete day, it is preferable to count as early as possible after *tzeis hakochavim*.²⁶ The *poskim* even forbid one to eat or engage in other activities once the time of *sefiras ha'omer* approaches.²⁷ Nevertheless, if one is about to *daven maariv*, he should *daven* first. Since *maariv* is a constant *mitzvah* which applies every day all year round, it has precedence over *sefiras ha'omer* which only applies during one period of time during the year. This is based on the concept of **דביר ושאינו דביר תדיר קורם**.²⁸

Many *poskim* point out that this concept of performing the constant *mitzvah* first only applies if one wished to perform both of them at the same time. However, if one plans on *davening maariv* at a later time, he is permitted to count *sefirah* first.²⁹ Still, many *poskim* mention the tremendous advantage of counting *sefirah* with a *minyan*, and therefore suggest that *sefirah* should not be counted until one goes to *shul* to *daven maariv*.³⁰ Some *poskim* maintain that if one appoints someone to remind him to *daven* and count *sefirah* it is permitted for him to eat or engage in other activities first. Likewise, if one has a set time to *daven maariv* and count *sefirah*, he may eat or engage in other activities first. It seems that the *minhag ha'olom* is to rely on this view.³¹

The same applies, according to some *poskim*, when reciting *krias shema*, *birchas hamazon*, etc. For example, if one *da'ened* early Friday night and did not count *sefirah* in *shul*, and

started his meal more than a half an hour prior to *tzeis hakochavim* he may finish his meal although it becomes *tzeis hakochavim* in middle of the meal. However, according to these *poskim* before *benching* one should say *krias shema* first, then say *birchas hamazon*, and then count *sefirah*.³² Some other *poskim* maintain that *benching* is considered a part of the *seudah* and since one need not interrupt the *seudah* to recite *krias shema* one may delay it until after *benching*.³³ According to all *poskim* if *tzeis hakochavim* arrives before one recites *kiddush* one should count *sefirah* first although *kiddush* is considered the one that is *תדיר*. This is because one may not partake in a meal prior to counting *sefirah*.³⁴

Some *poskim* permit one to count *sefirah* after sunset on *Erev Shabbos* when making an early *Shabbos*. Other *poskim* maintain that even in such an instance, one should preferably wait until after *tzeis hakochavim* to count. If one wishes to start his meal during *bein hashmoshos* he should count *sefirah* without a *brocha* and stipulate prior to doing so that he only intends to fulfill his mitzvah now in the event he forgets to count again later. When he counts again later he should recite a *brocha* as explained above.³⁵

On the first night of *sefirah* (i.e. the second night of Pesach) some wait until after the *sefer* to count *sefirah*. This practice has some sources in *kabbalah*. The general custom, however, is to count *sefirah* in *shul* after *maariv*.³⁶

Intention

We mentioned above that many *poskim* consider *sefiras ha'omer* to be an obligation *Mideoraisah* even nowadays. There is a concept in *halacha* that states: *מצות צריכות כוונה* — *mitzvos require intention*. For *mitzvos* commanded by the *Torah* all agree that the *mitzvah* can only be fulfilled if one has proper intention to fulfill the *mitzvah*. However, there are grounds to say that intention is not necessary as far as *mitzvos derabonon* are concerned.³⁷ Therefore, the *poskim* stress that in addition to having proper intention prior to counting *sefirah*, one should be careful to avoid inadvertently saying that night's *sefirah* prior to the proper time, even in another language. The *mitzvah* of *sefiras ha'omer* can be fulfilled in any language, and therefore if during the course of a conversation one mentions to someone what that night's *sefirah* count is, he may have fulfilled the *mitzvah* by doing so and may not recite a *brocha*.³⁸ If one did inadvertently mention what that night's *sefirah* is, he should repeat the *sefirah* while having in mind to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *sefiras ha'omer*, and in certain situation without reciting a *brocha*.³⁹ In the following paragraphs we will discuss some common scenarios.

If prior to counting *sefirah* one is asked what that day's *sefirah* is, the answer should be given by stating the *previous* day's *sefirah*. Doing so avoids any problem that could arise by stating what that night's *sefirah* is.⁴⁰ If one has specific intention not to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *sefiras ha'omer* with what he is saying, he may even respond with that night's *sefirah*.⁴¹ Alternatively, one may respond by simply stating the number of the *sefirah* without prefacing it with the words "today is".⁴² Also, if one responds by indicating the day of the *sefirah* without explicitly answering the question, he may still count that night with a

brocha. For example, one may respond by saying, "Today is the fortieth day minus one", or "Today is the sum of ten and three".⁴³

If it is explicitly clear that one does not intend to fulfill the *mitzvah* when he mentions that day's *sefirah*, he still may recite a *brocha* and count again. For example, most *poskim* maintain that if while learning *hilchos sefiras ha'omer* one reads a *halacha* that mentions the counting of that particular day, he has not fulfilled the *mitzvah*, and may recite a *brocha* and count the appropriate *sefirah*. Aside for not having intentions to fulfill the *mitzvah* in this situation one did not even have intention to count. It therefore does not qualify as a counting.⁴⁴

Occasionally, on the night of *Lag Ba'omer* a person may mention to his friend that "Tonight is *Lag Ba'omer*". If a person does so prior to having counted *sefirah*, he may still recite a *brocha* and count in the proper fashion.⁴⁵ There are a number of reasons why one has not fulfilled his obligation and may still count with a *brocha*. Firstly, *Lag Ba'omer* is the name of the *Yom Tov* of the day, and if it is clear that he is referring to the name of the *Yom Tov*, no question exists. For example, if a person asks "Aren't you happy that tonight is *Lag Ba'omer*?", he may definitely count *sefirah* that night with a *brocha*.⁴⁶ Moreover, there are several differences between the way this person responded and the way that one normally counts *sefiras ha'omer*. In this scenario, he said "tonight is" instead of "today is", and he referred to the day by its numerical abbreviation (i.e. *lag*) instead of spelling it out (e.g. thirty-three).⁴⁷ Additionally, the *Mishnah Berurah* maintains that since after the eighth day of *sefirah* one normally also counts the weeks, and in this instance he did not count the weeks, he should count properly and may recite a *brocha*.⁴⁸

Preferably, prior to reciting the *brocha* one should know what that day's *sefirah* is. If one recited the *brocha* and had in mind to listen to his friend recite the *sefirah* and then repeat it after him, he has fulfilled his obligation.⁴⁹

If one made the *brocha* and mistakenly counted the wrong day, he may correct himself immediately and does not need to recite a new *brocha*. If, however, he did not immediately correct himself and recite the proper *sefirah*, a new *brocha* should be recited and he should count the correct *sefirah*.⁵⁰

Forms of Counting

Ideally, every person should verbally count *sefiras ha'omer*. There is a dispute amongst the *poskim* whether one can fulfill the *mitzvah* of *sefiras ha'omer* by hearing it being said by someone else. The prevailing *minhag* is for everyone to recite their own *brocha* as well prior to counting *sefirah*. In cases where one may no longer recite a *brocha* (e.g. he missed a day), he should listen to the *brocha* being recited by someone else. The person reciting the *brocha* should have him in mind when reciting the *brocha*.⁵¹

There is a discussion amongst the *poskim* whether one can fulfill the *mitzvah* of *sefirah* by writing it. One should therefore avoid writing that day's *sefirah* (e.g. dating a letter with that day's *sefirah*) prior to reciting the *sefirah* with a *brocha*. In many instances, even if one did write the *sefirah*, he may still recite a *brocha* and count the *sefirah* verbally.⁵²

A Rov or Shliach Tzibbur who Missed a Day of Counting

The *poskim* discuss the predicament of a *Rov* or *shliach tzibbur* who missed a day of counting. Technically, he may not recite a *brocha* on the subsequent days of *sefirah*, but refraining from saying the *brocha* aloud prior to counting would cause him great embarrassment. Some *poskim* suggest that the *Rov* or *shliach tzibbur* tell someone in the *shul* not to recite a *brocha* prior to counting *sefirah*, and that the *Rov* or *shliach tzibbur* will recite the *brocha* on behalf of that person. Other *poskim* disagree and maintain that although normally one may technically recite a *brocha* on behalf of someone else, however, in this instance where the one reciting the *brocha* is not obligated in the *mitzvah* (according to some opinions), he may not be *motzie* someone else. Instead, some *poskim* maintain that since this situation could cause great embarrassment, the *Rov* or *shliach tzibbur* may rely on the opinion of those *Rishonim* who permit one to recite a *brocha* even after having missed a day of *sefirah*. Obviously, we are discussing a situation where one cannot avoid reciting *sefirah* out loud for the *tzibbur* (e.g. a *Rov* or an *ovel* who *must daven* for the *amud*).⁵³

The Proper Position for Sefirah

Preferably, one should stand while reciting the *brocha* and counting *sefirah*. Those who make an early *Shabbos* and therefore count *sefirah* in their homes on Friday night should remember to do so while standing.⁵⁴

Associated Tefilos

Many *poskim* maintain that one should count *sefirah* during *maariv* prior to saying *aleinu*. Some have the *minhag* to count *sefirah* after *aleinu*. Each person should follow their own *minhag*.⁵⁵

There were *poskim*, most notably the *Noda B'Yehudah*, who vehemently discouraged people from saying the *tefilah* of *לשם יחוד* prior to counting *sefirah* or performing any other *mitzvah*. Other *poskim* maintain that the *minhag* to recite it is a correct one. Again, each person should follow their own *minhag* in this regard.⁵⁶

All agree that the sentence beginning with *בן הריני מוכן* should be said. These words articulate the proper *kavanas* required to fulfill this *mitzvah*. Some *poskim* questioned the appropriateness of mentioning the words *מצות עשה* as is printed as part of the sentence of *בן הריני מוכן* in many *siddurim*. They claim that since according to many *Rishonim* the *mitzvah* of *sefirah* nowadays is only *Miderabonon*, it is incorrect to say otherwise, and may even violate the prohibition of *בל תוסיף* — adding *mitzvos* to the *Torah*. Other *poskim* justify the practice and maintain that there is nothing wrong with saying it.⁵⁷

After counting *sefirah*, many have the custom to recite a *tefilah* for the speedy rebuilding of the *Beis Hamikdash*. Some also recite the *tefillah* of *רבונו של עולם*, which mentions many *kabbalistic* concepts associated with the *mitzvah* of *sefirah*.⁵⁸

