

WALKING TOWARD WHAT COULD BE

OUR JEWISH YEAR SESSION 7: THE OMER, SHAVUOT, AND CONCLUSION

BIG QUESTIONS FOR THIS SESSION:

Counting the Omer begins at Passover and ends at Shavuot. How do these seven weeks represent the potential of freed slaves to become a free people? How does the season of the Omer remind us to cultivate respect?

Shavuot marks the moment that God gave Torah to Israel at Mount Sinai, a holiday that encourages us to ask what meaning Torah and tradition have for us. How do we make the tradition our own?

In this final session, we also consider: Have these months of study impacted our Jewish practice or identity?

BEFORE THE SESSION:

Read Abby Pogrebin's chapters on the Omer and Shavuot in *My Jewish Year*, pp. 229-237 and 249-260.

MATERIALS:

A computer or tablet (for watching video)

YOM HASHOASH: REFLECTING ON YOUR PRACTICE (10:00)

1. Did you mark Yom HaShoah? On the day, or in the days leading up to or following?
2. Did it feel important to you, to mark the occasion?
3. Did our conversation affect the way you experienced Yom HaShoah?

DIVING INTO OUR TRADITION: THE OMER (עומר) AND LAG B'OMER (ל"ג בעומר) (5:00)

The Omer is a period of 49 days--the seven weeks after the start of the barley harvest, when, in ancient times, the new sheaves of grain were brought to the Temple. Seeking deeper meaning in this harvest festival, our ancient ancestors linked this interval to the days between leaving Egypt and receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. Instead of just focusing on harvest, this interpretation suggests that the Jews leaving Egypt underwent a gradual transformation. It allows us to understand each of these 49 days as a step taking the Jews from understanding themselves as slaves to imagining they could be a free people. These were days of community and togetherness, but they were also liminal--taking place in a time without the strictures of slavery or the structures of Jewish law. Ultimately, these were 49 days of potential--of not knowing what would be, but walking toward what could be.

The Talmud teaches that during the Omer, around the time of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans (first century CE), the students of the great teacher Rabbi Akiva were wiped out in a plague. This plague came to punish their refusal to treat one another with respect. Because the plague came during the Omer, these 49 days became a time of mourning in memory of those students, their choice to act disrespectfully of one another, and also of their resulting, tragic deaths. Because the plague affected the Jewish people, traditionally observant Jews act as if they are in mourning, and do not celebrate weddings or other *simchas* (celebrations) during the Omer. Later, a tradition arose saying that the plague halted on the 33rd day of the Omer (Hebrew numerology: lamed = 30 and gimel = 3; “Lag” = 33). Hence, we take a break from the mourning of the Omer on the 33rd day, Lag B’Omer.

THE OMER: R-E-S-P-E-C-T (15:00)

Respect for others (especially those we disagree with), and the difficulty in cultivating this respect lie at the heart of the story about Rabbi Akiva’s students.

Although Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed, Beit Shammai did not, nevertheless abstain from marrying women of the families of Beit Hillel, nor did Beit Hillel refrain from marrying those of Beit Shammai. This is to teach you that they showed love and friendship towards one another. . . For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. [One group] said: “The law is in accordance with our opinion,” and the other said: “The law is in accordance with our opinion.” Ultimately a Divine Voice emerged 1 Shemot Rabbah 5:9. and proclaimed: “Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the law is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.” Since both these and those [opinions] are the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the law established in accordance with their opinion? The reason is that they were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted, and when they taught the law they would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements, in deference to Beit Shammai. (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How do Hillel and Shammai practice respect for one another, despite their differences?
2. During the Omer, a time of year when we are reminded of the consequences of the absence of respect, what is the lesson that Hillel and Shammai teach us about how we should interact with those with whom we disagree? Do you think this ideal is really achievable?
3. How do you cultivate respect?

DIVING INTO OUR TRADITION: SHAVUOT (שבועות) (5:00)

After their journey of seven weeks, the Jews arrived at Mount Sinai. It was there that God gave them the Law--starting with the Ten Commandments. Rabbis believed that the Jews needed the seven weeks to become a people able to make the autonomous choice to accept the responsibilities of the Torah. Shavuot, the holiday marking the giving and receiving of Torah, is one of the biggest celebrations of the Jewish year. But, not every community marks it as such. Abby Pogrebin writes (*My Jewish Year*, pp. 251-252),

I didn't grow up understanding how huge this Torah-giving moment was, how it marks, really, the beginning of Judaism. The Israelites were in a precarious state after decades of slavery in Egypt, and had barely escaped--with Pharaoh's army in hot pursuit. They had survived in the desert with little food and water, trusting Moses without knowing for sure that he could be trusted. ...In a cinematic crescendo, the Ten Commandments were proclaimed by God in a bracing crash of lightning and thunder. Shavuot represents the denouement--referred to as Revelation in our prayer books. Very soon after the thunder moment, we signed on, accepting the law and agreeing to live by it. This is when we became Jews, when we graduated from an enslaved people to an autonomous one. We had been at the mercy of others; finally we governed ourselves.

SHAVUOT: MAKING THE TRADITION YOUR OWN (25:00)

According to tradition, it was not just Moses' generation that stood at Sinai and received the Torah; it was all Jews, past, present, and future. Three texts discuss aspects of feeling that we, too, stood at Sinai:

- It was not with our ancestors that Adonai made this covenant, but with us, those of us here today, all of the living. Adonai spoke face to face with you on the mountain from out of the fire. (Deuteronomy 5:3-4)
- Rabbi Yochanan said the voice of God [at Sinai] went forth and was split into 70 voices, 70 languages, so that all the nations would hear, and each nation would hear the voice in its own tongue...The voice of God spoke to each Israelite, that means to each and every person. God's voice was heard and understood because the voice spoke to each individual according to that person's particular ability to hear and understand...to the elderly in keeping with their ability, to the young in keeping with their ability, to the little ones in keeping with their ability, and so on. (Midrash Shemot Rabbah 5:9)
- Abby Pogrebin writes: "My own former senior rabbi, Peter Rubinstein of Central Synagogue, used to rouse our sense of obligation by reminding us that we were all at Sinai. If the Talmud contends that every Jew was there, that's a metaphor for us today: each of us receives this law, tradition, and history, and each of us must decide what to do with it. Standing at Sinai today means paying attention to what is heard at the foot of the mountain, after the lightning and thunder subside, when it's quiet. 'The question is,

“What do you hear?” [Rabbi Irwin] Kula says. ‘If that’s not a living question, Shavuot can’t work for you.’” (*My Jewish Year*, p. 255)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Each of us hears something different at the foot of the mountain. When you listen to the voice of Torah and tradition, what do you hear? In other words, how do you come to understand what Jewish tradition asks of you? What is the easiest “way in” for you, when it comes to Jewish tradition? How do you make the tradition your own?
2. How do Torah and Jewish tradition help you join a people that is walking toward what could be? How do Torah and tradition help us become one people? Or do they create barriers to our feeling like one people?
3. What roadblocks do we need to remove in order to hear and learn from these traditions in today’s world? How do ancient traditions help us experience the world in a new way, now?

We all struggle with this living question, of what we hear at Sinai. Filmmakers are no different. Their work is part of the ongoing process of midrash (stories that expand upon the text we are given in Torah).

1. The Ten Commandments (2:38): <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=Id6oS3L-D9A>
2. History of the World (0:24): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXeTsWGPT0w>
3. *HaYehudim Baim* (2:46): <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=fCV8j3VSsXs>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Each of these filmmakers has made the Torah their own, and therefore have framed their work in radically different ways. Do any of these videos align with your own feelings about that moment of receiving Torah? How do you imagine that moment?
2. How do the parodies add important questions that complicate our relationship to the law and to tradition?

CONCLUDING THE YEAR (30:00)

As Abby Pogrebin writes, “When it comes to my tradition, I want to know the steps” (*My Jewish Year*, p. 259).

1. As our months of study conclude, do you feel like you “know the steps?”
2. Do you feel more familiar with the rhythms and rituals of the Jewish year now than when we started?

Looking back, we have discussed together Chanukah, Tu B'Shvat, Shabbat, Purim, Passover, Yom HaShoah, the Omer, and Shavuot.

1. How have you made these holidays your own?
2. Was there a holiday whose meaning changed for you?
3. Did you bring any of the learning home with you? Has it affected your practice?

Over the coming months, several more important Jewish holidays and observances will occur:

- Tisha B'Av – a fast day, marking the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem (*My Jewish Year*, 267-275)
- Elul – a month of preparation leading up to Rosh Hashanah (*My Jewish Year*, 21-30)
- Rosh Hashanah – the New Year (*My Jewish Year*, 31-39)
- Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement (*My Jewish Year*, 47-71)
- Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Hoshanah Rabbah – the Feast of Booths, the fall harvest holiday, and the days that conclude the holiday (*My Jewish Year*, 73-93)
- Simchat Torah – the conclusion and restarting of the Torah (*My Jewish Year*, 95-102)

1. After this discussion series concludes, how will you mark these holidays?
2. Will *My Jewish Year* be a part of your experience? Will celebrations and observances at Central Synagogue?

Concluding questions:

1. How have these chapters and discussions impacted how you think about Jewish holidays? About Jewish identity?
2. In a year, what impact will this learning still have on you?