

The Omer Roller Coaster Passover

By Rabbi Jason Miller

There are not many jokes about the Jewish calendar. And you would be surprised to know that the only one I can ever remember was actually told by a non-Jewish late-night talk show host. I remember watching David Letterman's opening monologue a number of years ago. It was the day after Rosh Hashanah and he wished his Jewish bandleader, Paul Shaffer, a "Happy New Year." He then asked Paul what the Jewish year was, to which he explained that it was now 5759. Letterman then deadpanned "Well, I'm sure I'll still be writing 5758 on all my checks for a few weeks."

Of course, we Jews don't even use the Jewish year or the Jewish calendar very much in our everyday lives. Even Israelis write the secular year on their checks and on contracts. But how the Jewish calendar plays a part in our lives is a very important question. How does the rhythm of the Jewish calendar affect us emotionally? The Jewish calendar takes us on a journey. The old joke that each Jewish holiday can be summarized by stating: "They tried to kill us, we prevailed, let's eat!" is actually quite inaccurate. The calendar is made up of days in which we celebrate and days in which we grieve. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, in his book *The Jewish Way*, explains "Living the Jewish way means dreaming of total perfection so vivid that you can almost touch it, while affirming and working with what is in order to make the dream come true."

Our experience over the next few days is a perfect example of the Jewish calendar affecting our emotions. We will commemorate those Israelis who lost their lives defending the Jewish state, and then turn our feelings of sadness into feelings of celebration as we rejoice in Israel's fifty-sixth year of independence. These two days alone force our feelings to be stretched from one end of the spectrum to the other. The Jewish calendar in general, with all its holidays and life cycle events, causes our hearts to swing like a pendulum.

The journey from Pesach to Shavuot is the communal journey of a people on the path from redemption to revelation. On the second night of Pesach, we begin counting forty-nine days until Shavuot. On the second night of Pesach, at the Seder, just as we are finishing our final cup of wine and relishing in our freedom from Egyptian slavery, we arrive at the part of the Haggadah in which we find the formula for counting the first of the forty-nine days of the Omer. The actual mitzvah for counting the Omer comes to us from Leviticus, in which the Torah relates, "And from the day on which you bring the sheaf elevation offering – the day after the sabbath – you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: you must count until the day after the seventh week – fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Lord." By bringing the offering of new grain to God, our ancestors expressed their appreciation to the Creator for the new harvest. We would think then that this period of time in which Jews brought their offerings to God was a period of happiness and celebration; and yet, the Omer period was a time of great anxiety.

From an agricultural perspective, it was a critical time of uncertainty and insecurity for our ancestors who lived on what they grew. Their emotional state went from the celebration of our people's liberation to the harsh reality of apprehension during the harvest season, and the question of their own salvation. This anxiety translated itself into a number of actions undertaken during the period of the Omer that are connected to our Jewish traditions of mourning. Thus, some Jews avoid getting haircuts, attending concerts, or buying new clothes during this period. Additionally, weddings do not take place in certain communities with varying opinions as to when this prohibition is in effect during the Omer. Just as a mourner's feelings during aveilut, the mourning period, are not only those of grief and remorse, so too are our emotions varied during the Omer, as the Jewish calendar takes us on the journey from celebration and joy to commemoration and sorrow. It is a period of emotional fusion.

Immediately before we set our minds to the preparation that Pesach requires of us, we find ourselves overjoyed on the holiday of Purim, rejoicing in the salvation of the Jewish people from the hands of a

tyrant. Before we know it, the Pesach festival is upon us and we reflect back upon the bitter slavery that our ancestors endured in Pharaoh's Egypt before being redeemed by God. Our journey through the calendar then brings us to the first of our modern commemoration holidays taking place within the Omer.

Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, which we observed this past week, calls on all of humanity to state in no uncertain terms that the atrocities of the Shoah will never again take place. On our journey from Pesach to Shavuot, we traverse the bridge from the mayhem of the Holocaust to the promise of redemption in the modern state of Israel. As the Chancellor of the Seminary, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch describes it, "We move quickly on an emotional roller coaster from Yom Hashoah five days after the end of Pesach to Yom Hazikaron and Yom Ha'atzmaut the following week to Lag Ba'omer thirteen days later. The linkage between the Holocaust and Israel, embodied in the first three commemoratives, is surely warranted. As Israel's Declaration of Independence of May 14, 1948 states unequivocally, the annihilation of six million European Jews made the creation of a Jewish state in the ancient homeland an overriding necessity. Some 6,000 Israeli soldiers died defending it in the War of Independence and nearly another 3,000 twenty-five years later in the Yom Kippur War."

The forty-eight hour period that incorporates the commemoration on Yom Hazikaron and the celebration of Yom Ha'atzmaut is a day of stark contrasts. Israelis stand at attention during the sound of the sirens that reverberate throughout the country. They stand in silence pausing to dwell on the sacred memories of those lost in battle. But, as the sun sets, those same Israelis put their sorrow aside and light bonfires to sing and dance in the Yom Ha'atzmaut festivity that night. From visiting the graves of relatives and close friends who sacrificed their lives to setting off fireworks and attending barbecues in a matter of hours. This annual emotional roller coaster is nothing new for Israelis – they experience it throughout the year as well. We can pick up an Israeli newspaper and read of some young Israelis partying at a wedding of close friends in the same week they were at the funeral of other close friends. Or the Israelis enjoying a soccer match who leave the stadium to head downtown for dinner only to witness a terrorist bombing. The life of the Jew echoes the life of the Jewish calendar.

The Jewish life cycle is a bumpy journey through the highs and the lows of our milestone experiences. We are obligated to perform mitzvot in happy times – at the simchas, as much as we are in our grief on those sorrowful occasions. When we are enjoying the high romance and merriment of a wedding, we must bring happiness to the bride and groom. And when we are standing at the graveside of a departed friend, we are obligated to console the mourners.

At times, we have to pick ourselves up in order to celebrate life's festive occasions. And at other times, we must put an abrupt end to our celebration, in order to feel the pain of loss. I think of my friend and fellow rabbinical student Moshe whose family has experienced both aspects of this emotional roller coaster within the past six months. Immediately following the 30-day mourning period for Moshe's twenty-one-year-old brother, the family came together once again but this time to rejoice at a simcha – Moshe's wedding. Unfortunately, another tragedy entered the family's life cycle. Just last week Moshe buried his father, a Conservative rabbi well known for his contemporary books on Midrash and Talmud.

The life cycle is an emotional cycle. The family who loses its head of the family, the elder paternal or maternal figure, grieves over the loss. They cherish the memories, they agonize about the future. Then, in a relatively short time, there is an addition to the family, the name of the departed is honored. It is carried on and memorialized by this new child. Not just celebration, but renewal.

We travel an emotional journey from each of life's milestones to another. We never can be certain of how the journey through our Jewish life cycle will turn out. It is like our journey through the Jewish calendar. And, it is like the journey of the Jewish people from Pesach to Shavuot – from the emergence of an enslaved group of individuals to the formation of a holy people with leadership and divine inspiration and Law. It is the journey of our lives.

We may be at the low place of the Psalmist who wrote *mi-ma'amakim keraticha Adonai* – Out of the depths I call you Adonai. And then, at the blink of an eye, we are transformed to the highest heights of joy. The Omer is truly a time of emotional contrasts. It is a period that reminds us about the journey of life. Ups and downs. Happy times and sad times. Times to celebrate and times to mourn. But what all these times have in common is that we experience them together, with community and with God. And while the Omer is no time for playing Pete Seeger music, it is appropriate to quote from his song inspired and adapted from the Torah, from the Book of Kohelet – Ecclesiastes:

There is a season

*To Everything (Turn, Turn, Turn)
There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn)
And a time for every purpose, under Heaven*

*A time to be born, a time to die
A time to plant, a time to reap
A time to kill, a time to heal
A time to laugh, a time to weep*

*To Everything (Turn, Turn, Turn)
There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn)
And a time for every purpose, under Heaven*

Shabbat Shalom.