

HUE AND CRY: The Beginning and End of the Omer Count

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excerpted from the book Counting the Omer: A Daily Devotional Toward Shavuot

Before you read my daily devotionals for the fifty-day Count of the Omer, a brief overview of the subject is in order. The command to Count the Omer is derived primarily from the following verses in Leviticus 23:

“You shall also count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering; there shall be seven complete sabbaths. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh sabbath; then you shall present a new grain offering to the LORD” (Leviticus 23:15-16).

In these two brief verses, the command to Count the Omer (or new grain offering) is declared. But if you are familiar with the expression, “two Jews, three opinions,” you will then understand that for millennia, the command to Count the Omer has not been universally agreed upon. First Century Jewish history reveals that there were several ways that the fifty-day count from the season of Passover to *Shavuot* was determined.

What we know for certain is that the Counting of the Omer lasts fifty days. It lasts for the fifty days between the “day after the sabbath” to the “day after the seventh sabbath.” To me, following this command should be fairly simple. During the Festival of Unleavened Bread, which lasts for seven days, there is always a regular weekly Sabbath that is observed. The command is simply to “count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering” (Leviticus 23:15).

From this simple reading, you might ask, “Why is there so much confusion? What is so difficult about starting the count after the Sabbath?” But then you realize that historical differences in interpretation of when to begin significantly divided sectors of the First Century Jewish community. Each had its own way at looking at the command to Count the Omer, and was readily prepared to declare anyone who did not follow their method as being in severe error. A review of the command and what it signifies for us as Messianic Believers today is certainly in order.

How to Count the Omer

On the day after the Sabbath of the Passover season or Festival of Unleavened Bread, Israel was instructed to bring a wave offering of grain from the ripened early seasonal barley that would, in essence, be an early “Feast of Firsts Fruits” to the Lord, celebrated in the Spring of the agricultural year. The following verses from Leviticus 23 precede the command to Count the Omer. Once again, note that there is not universal agreement about the interpretation of these commandments:

“In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight is the LORD’s Passover. Then on the fifteenth day of the same month there is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the LORD; for seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not do any laborious work. But for seven days you shall present an offering by fire to the LORD. On the seventh day is a holy convocation; you shall not do any laborious work.’ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, “When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD for you to be accepted; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. Now on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb one year old without defect for a burnt offering to the LORD. Its grain offering shall then be two-tenths of an *ephah* of fine flour mixed with oil, an offering by fire to the LORD for a soothing aroma, with its drink offering, a fourth of a hin of wine. Until this same day, until you have brought in the offering of your God, you shall eat neither bread nor roasted grain nor new growth. It is to be a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwelling places.” Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, “When you

enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD for you to be accepted; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it” (Leviticus 23:5-14).

As you can read in these verses, there are several commands subject to various interpretations, especially in regard to the different “Sabbaths.” Since the emphasis of this devotional is *not to argue* the various viewpoints, I will simply explain my own personal interpretation and conviction, especially as it concerns Yeshua the Messiah as the “first fruit offering.”

In the Hebrew Scriptures, it is understood that the word *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת) is the same term translated that is used for the weekly Sabbath that was originally commanded in Exodus 20:8, Leviticus 23:3, and other significant places in the Hebrew Scriptures. This word is distinct from the related word *shabbaton* (שַׁבְּתוֹן), which is indicative of “sabbath observance, sabbatism,” in many cases representing a “sabbatical year,” or used in reference to a high Sabbath day (*BDB*).¹ *Shabbaton* is used later in Leviticus 23 regarding the “rest” relating to the Day of Blowing or *Yom Teruah* (v. 24), the Day of Atonement or *Yom Kippur* (v. 32), and the Feast of Tabernacles or *Sukkot* (v. 39). (But since the Hebrew is not absolutely specific on the day to start the Counting of the Omer, I would mention that the same word for “complete rest” or *shabbaton* is also used in Leviticus 23:3, when describing the weekly Sabbath.)

The oblique use of the word *Shabbat* in Leviticus 23:15 allowed the Pharisees, and consequently their Rabbinical descendants, to conclude that the Counting of the Omer was to begin on the day after *the high Sabbath* of the Passover meal. But is it possible that the real motivation for making this determination was to invalidate the historical event that occurred when Yeshua Himself, after His resurrection, prophetically fulfilled the Feasts of First Fruits when He presented Himself to the Father as a wave offering, on the day after the weekly Sabbath during the week of Unleavened Bread?

Based on the historical record, the year that Yeshua was crucified, I believe the evening of the Passover meal was on a Tuesday night that began on 14 *Aviv/Nisan*. Yeshua had actually entered the city of Jerusalem, as prophesied by Zechariah, on the daylight hours of 10 *Aviv/Nisan* so that He could be inspected as the unblemished, sacrificial lamb for the days prior to the Passover on 14 *Aviv/Nisan*:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout *in triumph*, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, humble, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9).

“When they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Yeshua sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied *there* and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, “The Lord has need of them,” and immediately he will send them.’ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ‘SAY TO THE DAUGHTER OF ZION, “BEHOLD YOUR KING IS COMING TO YOU, GENTLE, AND MOUNTED ON A DONKEY, EVEN ON A COLT, THE FOAL OF A BEAST OF BURDEN.’” The disciples went and did just as Yeshua had instructed them, and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid their coats on them; and He sat on the coats. Most of the crowd spread their coats in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in the road. The crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed, were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!’” (Matthew 21:1-9).

When Yeshua came into Jerusalem, I believe it was in the daylight hours of 10 *Aviv/Nisan* that just happens to correspond with the daylight of the first day of the week or Sunday. Then, in order to fulfill some of the other prophecies that He Himself declared regarding His three days and three nights in the heart of the Earth, prior to the resurrection (Matthew

¹ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 992.

12:40), I believe that the crucifixion and burial took place on the daylight hours of Wednesday on 14 *Aviv/Nisan* or the required day of the Passover:

“But He answered and said to them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:39-40).

Yeshua was in the grave on Wednesday night, Thursday night, and Friday night (three nights), and all day Thursday, all day Friday, and all day Saturday (three days), before He rose again on Saturday evening, which would be considered the first day of the new week after the Sabbath has been completed. Then in the morning light of what would be considered Sunday morning, the empty grave was discovered. It would be on this day that the priests at the Temple would have been waving the First Fruits offering of the barley harvests in accordance with waving the barley sheaves on the first day after the weekly Sabbath (Leviticus 23:14). Yeshua could then fulfill the Festival of First Fruits as this offering before the Father, just as the Apostle Paul would later write the Corinthians:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep...But now Messiah has been raised from the dead, **the first fruits** of those who are asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:3-6, 20).

As you are no doubt aware, this fulfillment caused quite a stir among the Pharisaical sect of the First Century. In order to discourage belief in Yeshua and His atoning work at Calvary, I believe that the Pharisees began *in earnest* to conclude that the Counting of the Omer should commence on the day after the feast celebrating Passover or *Pesach*. To this very day, the Rabbinical authorities that are responsible for establishing the Jewish calendars Count the Omer on the basis of what was concluded centuries ago by starting the count after the High Sabbath of Unleavened Bread.

This, of course, creates some confusion because the Counting of the Omer and the fifty days that lead up to the celebration of the Feast of Weeks or *Shavuot* are frequently on different days according to the traditional rendering. Ironically, it was the sect of the Sadducees who actually interpreted the commandment of Leviticus 23:15-16 in such a way that the Omer Count begins on the day after the normal weekly Sabbath of the week of Unleavened Bread. According to this method, the Feast of Weeks or *Shavuot* always occurs on a Sunday after seven sets of weeks have been counted. Their logic was such that it would make perfect sense that the Holy One would want exactly seven weeks of Sabbaths to be complete before a celebration that actually means “Feast of Weeks.” I believe that their method should be followed to celebrate *Shavuot* today.

However, let me be sure to add that the Holy One of Israel is **intently observing the hearts of His devotees**. Any categorical declaration of when to begin the Omer Count and how to observe it properly today, that excludes or demeans other Believers who hold to different interpretations, is both unnecessary and ungodly. When Yeshua returns, and when He rules and reigns from Mount Zion, He will personally tell us what the correct interpretation is and when we should celebrate *Shavuot*.

Focusing on the Lord

Shavuot is a major festival that is referred to by a variety of names. These include “Pentecost,” because of the fifty day count; “latter First Fruits,” because the ripened wheat was now another agricultural offering; the “Day of Assembly” (Deuteronomy 18:16); and *atzeret* (עֲצֵרֶת), or “stop or cease from counting” as is typified with conclusion of Counting the Omer for the fifty days. Each one of these descriptions focuses on a unique aspect of *Shavuot*.

In some Messianic circles, the Counting of the Omer has been related to a betrothal period between the engagement and the consummation of a marriage. As you might recall, when Israel was delivered from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, there were a number of judgments and miracles that took place during their deliverance. When Israel had finally crossed the Red Sea and began its wilderness trek on the way to Mount Sinai, it actually took seven weeks from their deliverance before they received the revelation of the Ten Commandments on what is considered the Feast of Weeks or *Shavuot*. This has been made analogous to waiting for the time when a couple is preparing to be wed. When the voice of the Lord was spoken from Mount Sinai, the response from Israel was one of complete reliance upon Him:

“Then he took the book of the covenant and read *it* in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!’ So Moses took the blood and sprinkled *it* on the people, and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words’” (Exodus 24:7-8).

In some respects, the declaration that Israel made to the Holy One could state that they will obey, even before they necessarily know what they are going to be told. They were willing to make a total commitment to the Word of the Lord, prior to even hearing what He was going to say. This can be likened to the unconditional vows that are made in a marriage covenant.

Many have recommended that during the traditional period of fifty days, while we are Counting the Omer, we should be preparing our hearts to make a total commitment to our God and Savior. This betrothal period of seven full weeks is indeed a great time to be preparing our hearts for the proclamations that are typically associated with the Feast of Weeks or *Shavuot*.

As we enter into the commanded season known as the Counting of the Omer, we can once again use this opportunity to draw closer to our Creator. He is always faithful to give us a variety of admonitions that continually require us to reflect upon Him, who He is, and our relationship to Him.

Over the years, there have been a variety of systematic ways that have been formulized to make it easier for God’s people to remember to Count the Omer. For the purposes of this devotional, I am beginning each day of the Omer Count with Psalm 67. Since it was used historically as a psalm of praise for the morning and evening oblation, I found it fitting to read, contemplate, and meditate upon in order to prepare my own heart for some additional psalm reflections. The following is the list of the selected psalm readings that correspond to the various days of the Omer Count:

| Day | Meditation/Declaration | Psalm Reading |
|-----|----------------------------------|---------------|
| 1 | The Law of God | 119:1-8 |
| 2 | Obedience to Law of God | 119:9-16 |
| 3 | Happiness in Law of God | 119:17-24 |
| 4 | Determination to obey Law of God | 119:25-32 |
| 5 | A prayer for understanding | 119:33-40 |
| 6 | Trusting the Law of God | 119:41-48 |
| 7 | Confidence in Law of God | 119:49-56 |
| 8 | Devotion to Law of God | 119:57-64 |
| 9 | The value of the Law of God | 119:65-72 |
| 10 | The justice of the Law of God | 119:73-80 |
| 11 | Prayer for Deliverance | 119:81-88 |
| 12 | Faith in the Law of God | 119:89-96 |
| 13 | Love for the Law of God | 119:97-104 |
| 14 | Light from the Law of God | 119:105-112 |
| 15 | Safety in the Law of God | 119:113-120 |
| 16 | Obedience to the Law of God | 119:121-128 |
| 17 | Desire to obey Law of God | 119:129-136 |
| 18 | The justice of Law of God | 119:137-144 |
| 19 | Prayer for deliverance | 119:145-152 |

| | | |
|----|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| 20 | Plea for salvation | 119:153-160 |
| 21 | Dedication to Law of God | 119:161-168 |
| 22 | A prayer for help | 119:169-176 |
| 23 | True happiness | 1:1-6 |
| 24 | Confidence in God | 11:1-7 |
| 25 | What God requires | 15:1-5 |
| 26 | The Law of God | 19:1-7 |
| 27 | A prayer for guidance | 25:4-10 |
| 28 | Longing for God | 63:1-8 |
| 29 | A song of thanksgiving | 67:1-7(8) |
| 30 | God and His people | 78:1-16 |
| 31 | God and His people | 78:17-31 |
| 32 | God and His people | 78:32-39 |
| 33 | God and His people | 78:40-55 |
| 34 | God and His people | 78:56-72 |
| 35 | God, the King | 93:1-5 |
| 36 | God, the Judge | 94:12-23 |
| 37 | A song of praise | 95:1-7 |
| 38 | God, the Supreme King | 9:1-13(14) |
| 39 | God, the Ruler of the world | 98:1-9 |
| 40 | God, the Supreme King | 99:1-9 |
| 41 | The love of God | 103:1-22 |
| 42 | God and His people | 105:1-11 |
| 43 | God's graciousness | 106:1-5 |
| 44 | In praise of God | 111:1-10 |
| 45 | The happiness of a good person | 112:1-10 |
| 46 | The reward of obedience | 128:1-6 |
| 47 | A prayer for help | 130:1-8 |
| 48 | A call for the universe to praise God | 148:1-14 |
| 49 | A prayer of thanksgiving | 138:1-8 |
| 50 | Praise God | 150:1-6 |

Please remember that in spite of all of the confusion and disagreements about when Counting the Omer should begin and end, I am confident that when Yeshua returns, **we will all be given the correct interpretation.**² Until then, whether you start on the day after Passover following Jewish tradition, and observe *Shavuot* on Sivan 6, or wait until the day after the weekly Sabbath of the Passover week, the most important thing is to simply draw closer to the Holy One through a consistent reflection upon Him through His Word. Ultimately, learned opinions and/or misguided interpretations are not what really matters. He is always looking at our hearts and our desire to know Him. And of course, the atoning work of the Messiah and our trust in Him are, according to the Scriptures, the things absolutely required for salvation—not when we celebrate *Shavuot*.

“Yeshua said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me’” (John 14:6).

If you are going to count on anything, you must count first and foremost on your relationship with God, made possible by Yeshua.

I trust this introduction will give you the confidence to take the *Counting of the Omer: A Devotional Toward Shavuot* as simply one tool among many to encourage a consistent pursuit of the Holy One through His Word. May you be blessed in your endeavors as you begin your own personal count toward the Feast of Weeks.

² For a further examination of both sides of the debate of Counting the Omer, consult the FAQ entry on the TNN website “Omer Count.”

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

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