

Dear Rabbi,

In our hagadah which we used for our seder this year, it said on the second night of Passover, we begin counting the "omer", saying it is the first night of the omer. Nobody at our seder had previously heard of this practice. Could you please give us some insight?

Sincerely,
Mark L.

Dear Mark,

The Jewish people's journey toward nationhood began on Passover. The Exodus redeemed them from physical slavery and subjugation, but they still lacked a national identity and purpose. This was conferred upon them only later - when the Jewish people heard the words of G-d at Mt. Sinai. (Exodus/Shemos chs. 19 & 20). In those moments, the newly formed nation obtained its spiritual identity and national calling through the Torah, and the redemption was complete. This world-altering event, the Revelation of the Torah to the Jews at Mt. Sinai, took place on the seventh day of the Jewish month of Sivan, in the year 2448 (1313 BCE). Every year, the seventh of Sivan is celebrated as the festival called Shavuot. (Exodus/Shemos 19:1, Leviticus/Vayikra 23:15-22).

The Torah emphasizes the link between Passover and Shavuot, the very beginning of the redemption from Egypt and its culmination, through the commandment of *Sefiras Ha'omer*. We count the days and weeks from the second day of Passover until the festival of Shavuot. (We begin the counting only on the second night of Passover, not on the first, in order not to detract from the celebration and joy of the Exodus, with a reminder that the redemption was not yet complete). (See *Sefer Hachinuch* mitzvah 306).

The words *Sefiras Ha'omer* actually mean, "the counting of the Omer." The Omer was an offering of newly harvested barley that was brought to the Temple in Jerusalem on the 16th of Nissan, the second day of Passover. (Leviticus/Vayikra 23:10-14). In contrast to the Passover barley, the offering on Shavuot was bread made from wheat flour. (ibid 23:17).

Barley is often used as animal fodder, while wheat is predominantly for human consumption - and bread is an exclusively human food. Thus, as we count from Passover to Shavuot, we also mark our progression from slavery to our material animal needs, to the increasingly human realm of free will, intellect and attachment to G-d, as humans in their highest form. Through the counting of 49 days, we count our elevation, day by day, into the realm of Torah life and our growth as a "mentch". (See *Gateways to Judaism*, Becher, Ch.12).

The Kabbalists explain further that 49 days of counting, comprised of 7 weeks of seven days, represents the epitome of the physical world. 7 in Judaism always represents physicality, such as seven days of the week, the seven musical tones, etc. The multiple of seven times seven is the epitome of that concept. The Jews had sunk to 49 levels of impurity during their sojourn in Egypt. Egypt itself was at the level of 50, the point of no return. The Jews needed to leave immediately at that point, because to tarry any further endangered them to sinking to the point of no return, hence there was no time for the bread to rise, and they had Matzo. The rising of the bread, the *chametz*, represents the inclination to haughtiness and evil. By leaving with great speed to fulfill G-d's command, they stopped the "rising of the bread", in its tracks. The next 49 days were devoted to growing and acquiring positive character traits, one by one, day by day. At day 49 the Jews had perfected themselves and freed themselves of the 49 levels of impurity, now ready to receive the Torah. On day 50, they entered the spiritual realm which transcends the physical, the square multiple of 7, into the realm which is diametrically opposed to the "50" of Egypt. This is the world of Sinai, of Torah, of the Al-mighty. This is the real purpose of our redemption of Passover, hence it begins with, and connects to, the Haggadah.