Making Ritual Count: A Study of Ritual Theory and *Sefirat Ha'Omer* within the Context of the American Reform Movement

by

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Digest

Ritual performance is a universal behavior essential to the human condition. It arises from the need to relate to life's varying conditions, its depth and character. Through ritual, humans create structures that provide moments of predictability and safety among times of uncertainty, transition, or loss. Many people also learn by doing and experiencing. *Religious rituals* enable religious culture, tradition, and theology to be enacted and transmitted. *Jewish ritual* specifically provides the opportunity to transform the ordinary into the sacred, marking certain moments and days by linking them to moments in Jewish history and to important values of the Jewish tradition. The days of the Jewish calendar and the cycle of the Jewish year alone hold countless possibilities for ritual enactment. Jewish rituals have been shaped by Jews of every generation. The observance of these rituals and the development of new rituals have, in return, sustained Judaism.

One such Jewish religious ritual that has been observed traditionally for centuries is the counting of the days of the Omer, *sefirat ha'omer.* Forty-nine days are counted from the night of the second Passover Seder until the eve of Shavuot. However, considering the usage of the modern calendar, Reform Judaism has generally rendered "counting" obsolete. The Reform movement has mostly done away with this custom. The various treatments of this ritual make it a provocative case study for exploring the dynamic of ritualization, especially in the American Reform movement.

At this time, there is an undeniable trend towards the reinstitution of traditional practices in the Reform movement. Questions have arisen from both inside and outside

the movement: Why have some rituals been reinstated and not others? Who decides? Are the choices a matter of philosophy and theology, or a matter of logistics and practicality? Or, are some rituals readopted because they may be more aesthetically and emotionally appealing than others? To further complicate the answers to these questions, Reform Jews individually take the liberty to accept or reject certain customs. A study of the traditional development of *sefirat ha'omer* and its place within the Reform movement provides a medium through which to understand the values of Reform ritual practice and the boundaries upon which the movement draws in regards to the observance of 'traditional' customs.

Through the study of ritual theory, the development of *sefirat ha'omer*, and the exploration and analysis of Reform ritual practice, I will strive to imagine what elements may be necessary to develop a *sefirah* ritual that resonates with Reform Jews. This ritual has the potential to offer its observers a deep sense of meaning and spiritual guidance.

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Introduction

Humans have a need to ritualize. In moments of transition or uncertainty, we look for ways to create order. In moments of joy and celebration we seek to connect to others. Throughout our life journeys, we search for meaning. Many of us find meaning through religious practice. Religious rituals enable the meaning and the values of a religious culture, tradition, and theology to be enacted and transmitted. Jewish ritual specifically provides the opportunity to transform the ordinary into the sacred, marking certain moments and days with divine purpose.

One such Jewish religious ritual that has been observed for centuries is the counting of the days of the Omer, *sefirat ha'omer*. However, I sense that the Reform movement has mostly done away with this custom. The treatment of this ritual within the Reform movement has led me to consider the implications for Reform ritual in our time and in the future. I understand why many practices have been abandoned by the Reform movement, but I wonder why the values of these seemingly ancient and outdated practices cannot be re-contextualized to bring meaning to our modern existence as Jews and human beings. Knowing that ritual practice changes in every age, I believe that it is time to seriously consider what is necessary to create sustainable, innovative Reform ritual.

Focusing on *sefirat ha'omer*, one such ritual that, in my opinion, begs for a meaningful contemporary existence, I will strive to imagine what elements may be necessary to develop ritual that relates to Reform Jews. Through my study of ritual theory and the development and traditional observance of *sefirat ha'omer*, along with my

exploration and analysis of Reform ritual practice, I hope to create an innovative Reform *sefirah* ritual. I believe that this ritual has the potential to offer its observers a deep sense of spiritual guidance.

Below is a description of the larger issues explored in this thesis and the method each chapter utilizes to addresses them:

Chapter One seeks to explore ritual as a theoretical field of study. The aspects of ritual theory are applied beyond its anthropological and sociological roots to the arena of religious study. In this context, the following questions are addressed: "What is ritual?" and "What does ritual actually *do*?" Finally, the specificities of Jewish ritual are discussed.

Chapter Two presents a ritual case study providing an historical analysis of *sefirat ha'omer*. The research traces the origin and progression of this ritual as it relates to each generation. The ritual's biblical, rabbinic, mystical, and modern developments are explored. This chapter aims to track the social and historical construction of this ritual as it relates to the study of ritual theory discussed in Chapter One.

Chapter Three traces the American Reform movement's approach to ritual as expressed in the movement's various platforms, publications, and by its leadership. Connections are made to relate the movement's ritual approach to the development of *sefirat ha'omer* as described in Chapter Two. This chapter concludes with a study of the current attitude towards ritual in the Reform movement. Surveys from Reform congregations throughout North America also lend information to determine the implications that might affect the innovation of Reform ritual in the future.

Chapter Four provides a Reform ritual proposal for *sefirat ha'omer.* The ritual is analyzed using the ritual theory in Chapter One, the changing *sefirat ha'omer* narrative traced in Chapter Two, and the conclusions that are drawn regarding Reform ritual theory in Chapter Three.

Chapter One -
An Introduction to Ritual Theory

Ritual performance is a universal behavior essential to the human condition. It arises from the need to relate to life's varying conditions, its depth and character. Through ritual, humans create structures that can provide moments of predictability and safety among times of uncertainty, transition, or loss. Many people also learn by doing and experiencing. *Religious rituals* enable the culture, tradition, and theology of religion to be enacted and transmitted. In this context, ritual provides the opportunity to transform the ordinary into the sacred, marking certain moments and days by linking them to moments in the religious historical narrative and to important values of the tradition. The days of the Jewish calendar and the cycle of the Jewish year alone hold countless possibilities for ritual enactment. Jewish rituals have been shaped by Jews of every generation. The observance of these rituals and the development of new rituals have, in return, sustained Judaism. Where Jewish text and law provide a script for Jewish practice, ritual provides an experience of Jewish living.[1]

This chapter seeks to explore ritual as a theoretical field of study. There exists a sizable body of literature on ritual theory and ritual studies, and it is not the purpose of this thesis to duplicate the extent of this work. Rather I wish to provide a foundation for our study of ritual theory as it relates to the Reform movement and the practice of *sefirat ha'omer* today. The implications of ritual theory will be applied beyond its scientific and sociological roots to the sphere of religious study. With an understanding of the

[1] See, for example, Mark Washofsky, *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice* (New York: UAHC Press, 2001).

development and the application of religious ritual we will turn to exploring the specificities of Jewish ritual and its implications for Jewish living.

Foundation of Ritual Theory

Ritual is one of the oldest activities of humankind.[2] Its roots come from the evolution of the human species. The human inclination is not whether to ritualize but when, how, where, and why.[3] Rituals are performed all over the world, and archeological evidence suggests that they always have been. It is important to remember that in all cultures rituals go far beyond the apparent religious services, ceremonies, and festivals to include simple and habitual acts of greeting, leaving, eating, house-making, and so on. Our entire lives are greatly affected by ritual activity.[4] Ronald Grimes, a distinguished scholar of ritual study, argues that there is no reason why we should not view ourselves as ritualizing animals.[5]

The notion of ritual has been central to research in religion and society since the late nineteenth century, and few other single terms have been more fundamental in defining the issues basic to culture, society, and religion. Now, however, ritual has become a topic of interest in its own right, not merely a tool for understanding broader social phenomena. Theories about ritual have developed among, and have come fully embedded in, larger discourses.[6] Since the mid-1970's, a number of diverse fields have

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[2] Ronald L. Grimes, ed., *Readings in Ritual Studies* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1996), xiii.
[3] Thomas Driver, *The Magic of Ritual* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 6.
[4] Ibid., 12-13.
[5] Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 36.
[6] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13.

found ritual to be an important focus for new forms of cultural analysis.[7] Anthropologists, sociologists, historians, sociobiologists, and philosophers all use ritual as a "window" through which to view the cultural dynamics of people's lives. The result has been a relatively broad and interdisciplinary conversation known as "ritual studies." Indeed, ritual has simultaneously become an object, a method, and even a style of scholarship in academic discourse.[8] The development of ritual studies as an independent and interdisciplinary area of scholarly research confirms the result of the complex coexistence of ritual as an analytical tool and as a universal human experience.[9]

Ritual Theory – What is ritual?

The theories that make up the field of ritual study define "ritual" in different ways. "Ritual" first emerged as a formal term in the nineteenth century to identify what was believed to be a universal category of human experience. Since then, many other definitions of ritual have been developed and linked to a wide variety of scholarly endeavors. What follows is an exploration of the answers to the highly debated question, "What is ritual?"

The formal study of ritual began with a debate on the origins of religion. The debate at hand was whether religion and culture were originally rooted in myth or in ritual.

William Robertson Smith (1846-1894), a linguist and a scholar of Hebrew Scriptures, argued for the primacy of ritual in the origins of religion and society. He believed that religion arose in the ritual activities that cemented the bonds of the

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[7] Grimes, ed., *Readings in Ritual Studies*, xiv.
[8] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 3.
[9] Ibid., 16.

community. Religion was rooted not in myth, but in ritual that essentially allowed its participants to worship divine representations. He argued that religion was made up of a series of acts and observances. It did not exist for the sake of saving souls, but for the preservation and welfare of society.[10]

Smith's study of ritual laid the foundation for the basic tenets of three prominent schools of interpretation of religion. The first was the "myth and ritual" school associated with Sir James George Frazer's (1854-1941) work. It argued that in order to understand a myth, one must first determine the ritual it accompanied. For Frazer, ritual was the origin of most of the expressive forms of cultural life.[11]

The phenomenologists of religion (*Religionswissenschaft* - science of religion – in German), a non-theological and non-philosophical systematic study of religion, took a second approach. They emphasized myth as the source of religion. [12] A major effect of this approach, led by Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), was to minimize the importance of ritual, but not necessarily to dismiss it. Rites were the deeds enacted in mythological accounts. By performing these deeds in ritual, the participants identified with the sacred primitive period of the gods before time began. Ritual, therefore, in Eliade's opinion, was dependent on myth.[13]

A third approach was the psychoanalytical school founded by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), which borrowed heavily from the previous approaches. Freud adopted Smith's notion of the social origins of religious authority. This was also advocated by French sociologists such as Emile Durkheim (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*).

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[10] Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.
[11] Ibid., 5.
[12] Ibid., 10.
[13] Ibid., 11.

Ritual pointed to modes of interpretation that looked beyond what people themselves think about what they do or believe. The 'real' purpose and significance of ritual were different from what the actors themselves believed. [14] Catherine Bell summarizes the Freudian interpretation of ritual: "It is an obsessive mechanism that attempts to appease repressed and tabooed desires by trying to solve the internal psychic conflicts that these desires cause."[15]

Scholars who followed these early approaches were concerned less with the historical or psychological origins of ritual than with its role and purpose in society. They explored ritual's social function. These theories are representative of the "functionalist" approach, concerning what ritual accomplishes as a social phenomenon.[16]

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) established religion as a social phenomenon, defining religion in a way that gives priority to its social rather than psychological dimensions. "Religion contains in itself from the very beginning, even in an indistinct state, all the elements which...have given rise to the various manifestations of collective life."[17] Religion is first and foremost a way of socially organizing a group of individuals. (Psychologists, on the other hand, approach religion in terms of individual experience.) Durkheim argued that religious beliefs are representations that express the nature of sacred things, while rituals are the 'rules of conduct' that govern how people should act in the presence of sacred objects. For Durkheim, this is what separates thought from action. Theoretical discourse about ritual had been organized as a whole, logically, by

[14] Ibid., 5.
[15] Ibid., 14.
[16] Ibid., 23.
[17] Ibid.

the opposition of these two poles: thought and action.[18] Ritual is, therefore, introduced as the means by which collective beliefs and ideals are simultaneously generated, experienced, and affirmed as real by the community.[19]

Durkheim also reasoned that rituals play an important role in the way that religion functions to ensure the (unconscious) priority of communal identification. Rituals are designed to arouse a passionate intensity, feelings of "effervescence," in which individuals experience something greater than themselves.[20] Durkheim clearly saw ritual as the means by which individuals come together as a collective group. Ritual functions to "strengthen the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member."[21] This is not by means of a conscious act of affiliation but by the experience of the collective representation that transcends the mundane.[22]

Durkheim's social approach developed into a general school among British anthropologists, specifically under the influence of Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955). He broadened the sociological aspects of Durkheim's theory of ritual and religion in several ways. Specifically, he argued that belief is the *effect* of rite, that action *determines* belief.[23] This is the same argument with which the myth-and-ritualists struggled.

A variety of later ritual studies can be loosely grouped as "neofunctional" forms of analysis. They explore various ways that ritual activities serve to regulate the

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[18] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice,* 6.
[19] Ibid., 20.
[20] Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 24.
[21] Ibid., 25.
[22] Ibid., 26.
[23] Ibid., 27.

community or enhance the well-being of the individual. The "neofunctionalists" typically try to describe the interaction of multiple cultural systems.[24]

Working on the basis of a modern Freudian theory of development, Erik Erikson (1902-1990) and Jean Piaget (1896-1980) were concerned with physical and social maturation. Erikson addressed the development of ritualization in stages of maturation within the human life cycle.[25] He suggested that the psychosocial roots of ritual arise early, specifically in the interactions between parents and children.[26] Various dimensions of ritual are elaborated and learned in eight successive stages of the life cycle, the stages necessary for a fully socialized human being.[27]

Within the functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown was an appreciation of social structure as a system of relationships connecting people or their social roles. This related to ritual in two ways: one could analyze how ritual activities function (how they order communal life) and one could analyze what ritual activities mean (what cultural ideas and values are expressed in the symbols and patterns of activities.) For Radcliffe-Brown, the ritual's meaning to be interpreted from the structured relationships among symbols had to be linked to its function, the structured social relationships in the society.

E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) emerged as an important figure in the modification of functionalism. He also promoted other forms of ritual explanation, both structural (concerned with functions) and symbolic (concerned with meanings). Evans-Pritchard explored how economic, historical, and environmental factors influence social organization and thereby ritual. He agreed with Robertson Smith, Durkheim, and others,

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[24] Ibid., 29.
[25] Ibid., 32.
[26] Grimes, ed., *Readings in Ritual Studies,* xiv.
[27] Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 32.

that religions are "products of social life," but he strongly disagreed with the statement that rituals are "nothing more than a symbolic representation of the social order."[28] He did not want to reduce religion to a social structure.

These apprehensions led Evans-Pritchard to a new way of viewing ritual. Ritual allows for religious concepts to be externalized. "Evans-Pritchard's analysis...depicts the system of ordered relationships of mutual dependency that links humans, animals, ancestors, and gods."[29] Therefore, the activities of the ritual demonstrate and communicate the structural order.

Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957), a strong critic of Durkheim, challenged many traditional ways of categorizing ritual. He argued that rites could only be understood in terms of how they were used in their original social setting. His "sequential method" of study looked at ritual in terms of what precedes and follows it. Van Gennep specifically focused on rituals of life passage, when individuals move from one status to another.[30] He believed that rites of passage order these chaotic social changes that have the potential to disturb society. (His functionalist strategy is implicit within his studies.) Rites distinguish status groups and can change and reconstitute a group while maintaining the integrity of the system.[31]

Van Gennep's ideas were developed more systematically and thoroughly by British anthropologist Max Gluckman (1911-1975) and American anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983). Gluckman suggested that rituals are really the expression of complex social tensions rather than the affirmation of social unity. They highlight real

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[28] Ibid., 34.
[29] Ibid., 34.
[30] Ibid., 36.
[31] Ibid., 37.

conflicts that exist in the organization of social relations and affirm unity despite these structural conflicts. Gluckman termed these rites "ritual rebellions." Where Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown emphasized ritual as an operation of social cohesion, Gluckman expressed ritual's potential to exaggerate the tensions that exist in society. This makes the goal of ritual to express conflict in a therapeutic way so as to restore a functioning social equilibrium.[32] Ritual symbolically enacts the social relationship itself, even in all its ambiguity, tension, and strife. Gluckman's work re-shifted the definition of ritual away from Durkheim's notion that ritual was primarily concerned with religion. He redefined ritual as a more enveloping category of society and social relationships.[33]

Victor Turner combined Gluckman's and Van Gennep's approaches, adhering to the functionalist interest in maintaining social equilibrium and the structuralist perspective on the organization of symbols. He argued that many forms of ritual serve as "social dramas" through which social tensions can be expressed and worked out.[34] While doing so, people experience the authority and flexibility of the social order and the passage from an old place in the social order to a new status in a reconstituted order. Turner went beyond Gluckman by asserting that rituals do not simply release emotional tension in an attempt to relieve the social tension; rather, rituals give form to conflict and the values that hold the group together. Ritual dramatizes the situation and the dramatization serves a higher function.[35] Ritual expresses the affirmation of communal unity in contrast to the competitiveness of social life and organization.[36]

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[32] Ibid., 38.
[33] Ibid., 39.
[34] Ibid., 39.
[35] Ibid., 40.
[36] Ibid., 20-21.

Turner also attempted to analyze what ritual does through the meaning of ritual symbols. He came to the following conclusions: symbols are not timeless entities and they do not have a fixed meaning. They can refer to both the sensory experiences and the ideological values of a community. For Turner, "ritual is a mechanism that periodically converts the obligatory into the desirable. The symbol is the heart of this ritual mechanism; it is the irreducible unit of ritual activity."[37] Turner's work is a development of a variety of interdependent studies. He utilized ethnographic accounts, social strategies and game theory. His emphasis on what ritual does by means of a process of dramatization led him and other scholars to explore ritual as performance.[38] Both theories put emphasis on the human body and call attention to its capacity to enact social roles and embody cultural meaning.[39]

The application of functionalist theory generated a number of concerns in the late 1950's and early 1960's about aspects of the structural organization of societies and ritual activities. Functionalism could not answer the questions that arose. This led to a greater reception of a different form of analysis known as "structuralism," which was promulgated by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-). Lévi-Strauss regarded all forms of social phenomena, ritual, for example, as symbolic systems of communication shaped by structures of thought in the human brain. Unlike Durkheim, the relationships of symbols are not reflections of social structure. Rather, human beings impose these symbolic systems on social relations in order to structure and organize

[37] Ibid., 41.
[38] Ibid., 42.
[39] Ronald L. Grimes, "Ritual Studies" in *Encyclopedia of Religion.* 12: 423.

them.[40] The practitioner in the moment of practice may even have little consciousness of the constructed character of the ritual.[41]

Structuralism stemmed from, and was critical of, a functional concern with the organization of social groups that tended to see ideas, values and symbols as direct projections of the social organization. Rather, symbols should be seen to have no fixed meaning by themselves or in relation to a fixed social reality. Their meaning depends on how they are grouped with other symbols and how the individual perceives them.

Like Turner, the British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1921-2007) also developed a unique functional-structuralist approach that had a major impact on ritual theory. She argued that ritual is predominantly a form of communication, generated from social relations. It exercises a constraining effect on social behavior. For Douglas, the symbolic communication of ritual always enacts the real social relations among humans.

In conclusion, the early study of ritual helped to construct a portrait of primitive culture and the primitive psyche. For the myth-and-ritualists, a single ritual became the key to unlocking the meaning of a wide variety of ancient and modern cultural activities. For phenomenologists, ritual patterns of thinking and acting were the only way to experience meaning in the face of the contradictions of human experience. The psychoanalysts found in the psychology of the individual a certain pattern of life and ritual. The functionalists and structuralists explored ways that ritual ordered and regulated the social community as a system of relationships. They also examined what these rituals expressed in terms of their meaning. The appreciation of ritual formulated in

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[40] Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 42.
[41] Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 33.

all of these debates forced all theorists to consider the social dimensions of religion in an innovative way.[42]

It is challenging to classify ritual because the above-mentioned theories clearly overlap. This is due to the multi-leveled nature of ritual.[43] In general, ritual studies can be thought of in at least three ways: as an interdisciplinary task, as a subfield of religious studies, or as a fundamental re-conceptualization, in terms of action, of religion itself.[44]

With a greater understanding of the meaning of ritual as presented by the field of ritual studies, we turn now to understand the question of ritual's function: What does ritual actually *do*?

What do rituals do?

It would be nearly impossible to catalog all of the functions of ritual. Thomas Driver suggests that it is easier to speak of the three major gifts that rituals bestow upon society: order, transformation, and community.[45]

Order

Rituals constitute order in several ways beyond the obvious one of sequence. They order in the sense of organization, form, or regularity.[46] The performance of ritual not only reminds individuals of an underlying cosmic and social order; it establishes that order.[47]

Many parts of our day are structured by ritual (going to class, taking a lunch break, attending a meeting). A loose script defines, for example, who sits where, who

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[42] Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 23.
[43] Evan M. Zuesse, "Ritual" in *Encyclopedia of Religion* 12: 414.
[44] Grimes, "Ritual Studies" in *Encyclopedia of Religion.* 12: 424.
[45] Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 44.
[46] Roy A. Rappaport, "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual," in *Ecology, Meaning, and* Religion, 1979, 192.
[47] Ibid., 197.

does what, who pays, and so on. During ritual, we follow a script that builds to a climax and has signposts of symbolic behavior that are connected along the way. It is necessary that the script be commonly accepted, that all decide to see the symbolic significance of the behavior that would otherwise seem mundane. The players invest themselves psychologically in the whole drama, expecting the time spent to be worthwhile.[48] In this way, time is forced into an orderly framework by ritualizing it, defining what is done and said for each moment, then repeating the script (perhaps with minor variations) the next time. A previously "empty" time or space is now marked.[49] Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman explains,

> Ritual is how we play out prearranged scripts of behavior to shape specific durations of time. Since each script is repeated regularly, it prepares us to anticipate the details of our lives, the high and low points. Without ritual, there would be no meaningful use of time, except for accidental events that force us to laugh or cry on occasion. Ritual seeks to transform the inconsequential triviality of ordinary life. It helps us minimize our dependence on chance. It arranges our life into relatively small packages of moments that matter.[50]

Rituals convert structureless time and necessary tasks into meaningful and satisfying experiences.[51] Our routine ways of perceiving our environment through seeing, hearing, and touching are given added emphasis and purpose during ritual activity. Extra attention given to our sensory experiences centers our focus on primary human realities (life, joy, sexuality, death, strife, and failure). Through ritual we face our personal limits and our

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[48] Lawrence Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer:* 2nd ed. (SkyLight Paths Publishing, 1999), 21.
[49] Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, 2.
[50] Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer:* 2nd ed., 17.
[51] Ibid., 20.

merely relative existence. The major transitions of life are given resonance with the sacred.[52] Ritual ideally serves the purpose of "context-marking."[53]

The performance of certain rituals is often regarded as a sacred duty or a sacred opportunity. Ritual transforms the ordinary into the holy, surpassing comprehension to the realm of the spiritual. The ritual provides the occasion for a numinous encounter, a term coined by Rudolf Otto to describe an experience with the sacred dimension of reality, something that is "wholly other."[54] Doing things in the way ritual order prescribes is to take part in holiness, to "do it God's way."

Ritual acts often utilize a symbol that carries meaning with it. The symbol represents a specific value or experience that is inherently within us. Hoffman further expounds,

> A group's ritual symbol is an item that directs its participants immediately and with absolutely no commentary or explanation to an awareness of an experience or value that they hold in common, and to which they are attracted or from which they are repelled, even though they cannot explain or agree on the reason why.[55]

For example, for Jews, the lighting of the Chanukah menorah symbolizes the rededication of the holy lights that were relit in the Temple after it was cleansed and reclaimed. From a young age, Jews are taught this historical narrative and are conditioned to see this symbolic association when the Chanukah menorah is brought out and lit each year. Emotionally, Jews who partake in the ritual of the menorah might feel a sense of religious freedom. This ritual experience brings a sense of purpose and order to their lives,

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[52] Zuesse, "Ritual," 409.
[53] Rappaport, "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual," 186.
[54] Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 9 on Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917).
[55] Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer:* 2nd ed., 41.

evoking personal memories of meaning. Ritual emphasizes its symbolic intention through its stylized, ordered manner, through the use of special clothing, objects, an altered manner of speech, and use of distinct places and times.[56]

Ritual also orders the agricultural cycle of the year. Roy Rappaport argues that "annual festivals surely distinguish the seasons from each other more clearly than the weather, ordering the lives of people more effectively than the growth of plants or changes in temperature."[57] Rituals not only separate the seasons, but they link them in the cycle of the year.[58] In terms of diachronic time, the ritual transmits its broad messages that are enduring aspects of nature, society, or the cosmos. These are preserved in a variety of liturgical orders.[59] Ritual also makes one take one's place in the cycle of the generations.

The desire for ritual seems to grow most urgent when people feel an absence of moral guidance.[60] People seek ritual in their lives in order to create and affirm a moral order. In times of uncertainty, loss, danger, or trial we feel the need to respond, to bear witness, to be in the company of others who experience the same challenges. This kind of pragmatically inadequate, half-certain, ethically driven, expressive behavior is an act of ritualizing.[61] Tom Driver further explains, "It is like trying to beat a pathway through the wilderness, through a terrain of human, moral bewilderment."[62] In this case, too,

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[56] Zuesse, "Ritual," 406.
[57] Rappaport, "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual," 186.
[58] Rappaport, "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual," 187.
[59] Ibid., 182.
[60] Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 44.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.

rituals confirm a sacred presence in the world, and move us to live in ways that are more moral and righteous.[63]

Rituals are concerned with their own ordering along with the ordering of the world.

Community

Another gift of ritual is its ability to bring people together physically and to unite them emotionally. Frequently, there is a "loss of self" – that is, a loss of the sense of separation – and a feeling of union with the other members of the community.[64] They become as united as is possible for human beings to be.[65] "Anthropology," Rappaport reminds us, "has known since Durkheim's time that rituals establish or enhance solidarity among those joining in their performance."[66] Ritual has a unique role in forming and preserving social life, as it is *the* basic social act.[67]

The communal qualities of ritual have been further expressed by the anthropologist Victor Turner. *Communitas* is one of society's reasons for existing. Whereas, *community* denotes an area of common living, *communitas,* a more substantive idea, exemplifies an "essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society."[68] Turner sees *communitas* as the soul or essence of a ritual. Referring to the same idea, Martin Buber uses the term *community*. He says,

> *Community* is the being no longer side by side (and, one might add, above and below) but *with* one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude...[represents]...a

[63] Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, 31.
[64] Rappaport, "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual," 138.
[65] Driver, *The Magic of Ritual,* 153.
[66] Rappaport, "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual," 149.
[67] Ibid., 174.
[68] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), 83.

> turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from *I* to *Thou*.[69]

Communitas is not only an ideal or the principal act of bonding, but it is the experience of it. Ritual allows individuals to transcend the self and be united with a community.

Within this uniting comes the sharing of feelings and emotions. Ritual provides a social structure for this expression to occur. Ritual controls emotion while releasing it, guiding it while letting it come out. Even in times of grief, ritual gives permission to cry, for tears to become laughter, or for tears to be intense. A ritual is a gathering at which emotions are welcome.[70]

Rituals are inherently communal. They are carriers of *communitas*, a spirit of unity and mutual belonging. Ideally, rituals can be seen as the occasion for personal and social transformation.[71] This is the subject of our next discussion.

Transformation

Having examined two of the three gifts that rituals lend to social life – the establishment of order and the enriching of communal life – we are now ready to discuss the third and most important gift (according to Tom Driver): the ability of ritual process to affect transformation.

The dominant function of ritual has to do with efficacy, with bringing about some change in an existing state. Richard Schechner coined the term "transformances," meaning performances that are means of transformation from one status, identity, or

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[69] Martin Buber, *Between Man* and *Man* (1961): 51; quoted in Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (1979), 114.
[70] Driver, *The Magic of Ritual,* 156.
[71] Ibid., 165.

situation to another.[72] The transformative action of ritual is eminent in transitional "rites of passage." Rites of passage, according to Arnold Van Gennep, offer the clearest example of rituals effecting change; given that, without ritual, certain transitions in life do not take place or are not socially recognized. All rites of passage are marked by three phases: separation, margin, and aggregation. Van Gennep, in his classic study emphasized that the crucial phase of these rites is the middle, *liminal,* or threshold phase. Separation signifies the detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed point in the social structure.

During the 'liminal period,' the status of the ritual subject is ambiguous or unstable. Because it characterizes a neither here or there, a certain position that is not assigned by law, custom or convention, liminality is likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, or to the wilderness.[73] In this stage, one is exposed more directly to the sacred. In the third phase, the passage is completed. The ritual subject is in a relatively stable state once more and now has rights and obligations clearly defined by this new type. He is expected to behave according to this new social position.[74]

In terms of these aspects, ritual theory meets its critics who deny, from a rationalist perspective, that ritual can actually change reality. In response to this phenomenon, Driver argues that in order to consider the idea that ritual can serve as a technique of transformation, we must face the question of magic. Most Westerners regard magic as superstition. Ronald Grimes asserts, "'magic,' here, does not refer only

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[72] Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 95.
[73] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94.
[74] See Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage. The Rites of Passage [1908]* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

to other people's rituals but to ours as well. It is not a pejorative term."[75] Driver asserts the unique distinction between transformation and ritual, magical transformation. Techniques of transformation that are not magical are culture-invariant. They are based on scientific analysis or empirical observation – like boiling water or growing a plant. These changes are proven to employ forces and laws that are the same in any culture. The techniques of ritual, however, employ forces, agents, and laws that are culture-dependent.[76] We are best to think of magic as "ritual work." If a ritual not only has meaning but also "works" it is magical.[77] A typical use of magic is for the declarative to reach the imperative. (For example, "This is how things work; therefore, let this be so...") To accomplish this, a technique is required. For magic, the technique is ritual.[78] Religion utilizes the principal ritual technique of ceremonies, rites, and services. These are essential to the purpose that religion serves in our world.

Social and political life, in general, requires the magic of ritual. These transformations express and define people's relationships and roles in society. When the President is inaugurated, the scholar hooded, or the couple wedded in a civil ceremony, we have examples of magical transformation. These events change things, and do so by the technique of ritual.[79]

As stated, above, it is impossible to list and describe all of the functions of ritual. However, a few more are valuable to mention here.

Ritual enables us to learn and understand our social roles. Even the socialization of the humanity of an infant involves learned, ritual repetitions. Most of this learning

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[75] Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 45.
[76] Driver, *The Magic of Ritual,* 168.
[77] Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 45.
[78] Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 169.
[79] Ibid.

takes place through doing and conditioning as the learner imitates the activity of others. We enact, rehearse, work and play our way into our society and culture, whether we do something for the first time, or repeat it as an act of learning. "To ritualize is to make or utilize a pathway through what would otherwise be unchartered territory."[80] In the cycle of learning and transmission, the principal technique is ritualization.

We also need rituals to lend stability to our behaviors and to serve as vehicles of communication. Ritual behaviors, since they are patterned and repetitive, can carry meaning as signaling devices, but they can also be used to store and transmit information. Ritual processes carry within themselves a whole complex of meanings. These meanings do not necessarily have to be put into words.[81] They can involve a combination of articulate speech and purposeful action.[82] Ritual language is not just an instrument for conveying ideas, but is directly used in accomplishing the ends of the ritual transformation.[83]

Finally, ritual is what the ancient Greeks would have called *techne*, the root of our words technical, and technique. Ritual is a sort of technology because it is a method for accomplishing something real in the world. Yet, its field of action is not the physical world, but the metaphysical world –having to do with divine and human cosmos, moralities, and mutual relationships.[84] Ritual is a reality to be repeatedly experienced and actualized.[85] Performance in the ritual mode is theatrical, something is "acted out," but in a way that sets it apart from what we call a "performance" in the context of a stage

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[80] Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 16.
[81] Ibid, 26.
[82] Wade T. Wheelock, "The Problem of Ritual Language: From Information to Situation," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion.* (1982), 50.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 47.
[85] Wheelock, "The Problem of Ritual Language: From Information to Situation," 66.

play or on a sports field, for example. In the ritual mode, human performance requires some amount of display.[86] Performance means both doing and showing. This is why we call ritual 'performative action.'

Religious Ritual

In the rest of this study, we will be examining ritual in its religious context. With a background in ritual theory at hand, and an understanding of how it might be applied to religious practice, we turn to this specific ritual function. All of the features we have identified in human ritual generally are also found in religion. The distinguishing characteristic arises from religion's unique view of reality. Secular rites mark special moments, but religion because of its transcendent view of things, takes this much further. Religion's rites direct us towards God.

Any group that provides ultimate answers is by definition religious. Every such group provides religious rituals that satisfy the individual member's need to confront the ultimate. By words, acts, tunes, attitudes, silences, perhaps with the use of special or ordinary artifacts, we pause and reach out to God. Without ritual, this divine-human relationship is broken. In a positive sense, as Martin Buber might argue, divinity itself is an active partnership. Aside from this relationship, it makes no sense to speak of God. If ritual, the pathway to expressing a relationship with God, is abandoned, then everything that can be identified as divine perishes. Subsequently, anything practiced in the respective religious tradition loses its meaning if the ritual relationship is severed.[87] For example, using the words of traditional Jewish blessing, "Blessed are You, Adonai, Ruler

[86] Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 87-88.
[87] Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 98.

of the universe..." works only within the context of ritual, acting out such blessing, or performing a commandment that demonstrates this relationship.

Religious ritual does more than evoke the presence of God. It provides religious identification, declares what is right and wrong, and explains why being a Jew (for example) is ultimately valuable. Religious ritual (inclusive of worship) defines a context for the values that group members share; it both mirrors and directs the social order in which the group lives.[88] Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman explains further, "Ritual's power lies in its artistic capacity to present an alternative world where time and space unfold in structured ways that indicate pattern, plan, and purpose. Faith derives from a trusting that the universe in which we live is meaningful and ordered, as opposed to being random, chaotic, and accidental."[89] Therefore, it is reasonable to say that ritual is not the result of faith, but one of its causes. Or, the two can be considered mutually interdependent, so as not to fall into the chicken-and-egg dilemma of the myth-and-ritualists.

Religious ritual is designed to meet a variety of needs related to life's passage: the need for an individual to find a place among the community, the need for the community to be important to each member, the need for bonding and relating, the need to re-enact the great stories and messages of the tradition, the need to mark lifecycle events, and the need to find order and purpose in our lives. Through ritual we create structures that provide an element of predictability and safety, especially during times of insecurity, transition and loss.[90] Religious ritual also provides an ancient and communal stamp to behavior that once was individual. Now, we sometimes want even the most personal of

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[88] Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer:* 2nd ed., 79.
[89] Ibid., 117.
[90] Debra Orenstein, *Lifecycles*: *Volume I* (New York: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1985), xviii.

moments to be recognized and witnessed by our community.[91] For almost every function of ritual that was mentioned above, there is a religious application. All of the features we have found in the theories of human ritual (as mentioned above) generally are also found in religion. This is mostly because the study of ritual develops out of the study of religion.

Ritual in this religious context faces many challenges, in the areas of worship and beyond. These will be discussed in greater detail, in terms of the Reform movement, in Chapter Three. Many universal challenges also exist. A common roadblock to getting the ritual message through is the worshipper's inability to decode and understand the message (communication, signal, or symbol) properly. It is not that they do not know what is being expressed, as much as that they do not interpret what they hear, see, or experience as having anything to do with worship or divine relationship. Hoffman uses the following metaphor: "If worship were music, we would call them tone-deaf."[92] They hear the music but do not recognize it as a melody. They experience ritual and worship, going through the motions, but they do not recognize it as holy, sacred, or divine. One might not even be able to articulate what something holy, sacred, or divine is because one is not sensitive to this idea.

Jewish Ritual

Judaism is a religion of practices and rituals. Thomas Driver, paraphrasing Jacob Neusner, writes, "Judaism has a world defined by the sense of God as creator, bound in

[91] Ibid., xx.
[92] Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer:* 2nd *ed.*, 117.

covenant to the Jewish people...This world is not grounded primarily in theology, nor even in Scripture...but in ritual. It is a world held together not only by ideas but of people following God's way."[93] The observance of the Sabbath in Jewish tradition is a prime example of such a ritual that binds the Jewish people in covenant with God. Rituals performed throughout the Sabbath day reinforce this value.

For Jews, worship is informed by *halakhah*. *Halakhah* comes from the Hebrew root *halakh*, which means "go." So, a good translation of *halakhah* would be "way." Therefore, *Halakhah* is "The Way," "God's Way." Jewish law, *halakhah*, contains many rituals within it. It is full of normative, prescriptive rules about what one must do and from what one must refrain from doing. Instructions and procedures for many of Judaism's rituals stem from or are inspired by Torah, the Five Books of Moses. In many cases, they are given with the voice of Ultimate command.[94] Rabbinic and oral law addresses almost every situation of life and most moments in the day. The rabbis intended Jewish lifecycle passages and ritual to reflect and sanctify Jewish life as it is lived.[95] Jewish rituals even encompass all those preparatory acts that come before the main event: inviting guests, shopping, cooking and setting the table. The rituals also include the events that come after: cleaning up, story-telling, writing down memories, and so on. Individuals and communities are continually shaping these patterned ways of doing, living their lives according to a sacred calendar.[96]

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[93] Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 141 with reference to Jacob Neusner, *The Enchantment of Judaism*, 169-170.
[94] Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 139.
[95] Debra Orenstein, *Lifecycles: Volume I*, xviii.
[96] Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, 32.

According to the Sages, *minhag avoteinu torah hi*[97], "the custom of our ancestors is the way." This is a primary principle of Judaism: how Jews act and what they practice as they try to negotiate, comprehend, and live by God's laws attains independent and authentic religious status. Because Israel is a people, then what Israel does acquires a theological dimension. These customs draw the Jewish people closer to what God wants them to do. This is the reason that Jews regard their customs and ceremonies as subjects to be expounded upon and taught. Not only do they teach about Jewish identity, they are a window into the sacred.[98] Jews are reminded that rituals are the mechanism through which the divine can be comprehended and the sacred can be practiced in their lives.

Ritual practices vary widely among Jews around the world and from different historical periods. Ritual is greatly dependent upon the cultural and social condition within which it is lived and practiced. Different vessels (symbols, artifacts, texts) also become conduits of Jewish identity for different people.[99] Put simply, rituals do not develop within a cultural vacuum. Jewish rituals are no exception. There has never been a totally separate and endogamous community that knows only Jewish culture, beliefs, texts, and traditional observance.[100]

Jewish ritual often includes the use of sacred text. This might be because many of these rituals are written about in scripture and the oral Torah. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes in the forward to *The Book of Customs,* "In addition to scripture, Jews over the centuries have come to 'read' the customs surrounding the fasts and festivals of their

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[97] Rosh R.H. 4:14, Tos. Menahot 20b.
[98] Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, "Forward," in Scott-Martin Kosofsky, *The Book of Customs: A Complete Handbook for the Jewish Year* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004), xii.
[99] Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, 117.
[100] Ibid., 31.

religious calendar as a kind of second sacred text."[101] The customs are effectively transformed into what Kushner calls "another mode of revelation," as "these inseparable twin strands of scripture and custom create a double-helix of Jewish life-learning."[102] But, the "second sacred text," ritual, differs in one way from its scriptural twin: it is not fixed.

Jews have both maintained rituals from one generation to the next, and created new ones. The practice of Judaism has definitely not been static. From the time of the early Reformers (beginning of 19th century), dynamic processes of adjustment and innovation have been at work, ranging the gamut of all Jewish practices - services, name-giving, Bar Mitzvah, the wearing of *yarmulkes* or *kipot*. Modern American Judaism has developed some of the most unique interpretations of standard practices. Change in Jewish practice has been the means of its survival.[103]

In the next chapter, we will examine a specific ritual in Jewish life, *sefirat ha'omer,* in order to illustrate the above-mentioned theoretical ideas of the field of ritual studies.

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[101] Kushner, Forward in Scott-Martin Kosofsky, *The Book of Customs*, ix.
[102] Ibid., x.
[103] Eugene Borowitz, *Liberal Judaism* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1984), 7.

Chapter Two –
Sefirat Ha'omer as a Ritual Case Study

Rituals and their meanings change over time. The narrative of a ritual's origin develops to fit the perceived meaning of the ritual as it is practiced and therefore established in each generation. The only inherent truth in a myth is that we can never fully know its origin.

> Some of the keen interest in narratives of new rituals is rooted in our inability to know fully the circumstances and experiences surrounding the conception of ancient rituals. However rich the resources of Bible and *midrash*, we can never adequately reconstruct the stories of the first Passover Seder, the first.... Only through "magical thinking" can we be content to take the biblical accounts of these once-new practices at face value, or imagine a narrative as is found in the Bible.[1]

Different communities focus on that meaning which rings true for them, in addition to, or rather than, focusing on the ritual's original performance, either mythical or historical. This is especially true for the ritual of *sefirat ha'omer.* This chapter aims to track the social and historical construction of this ritual, examining its practice along a historical continuum. I trace how the ritual of *sefirat ha'omer* shifts in terms of its practice, vocabulary, meaning, and theoretical application. *Sefirat ha'omer* finds its roots in the Torah, where the reason for its practice is not explicitly given. It appears as a divine commandment. Naturally, this leaves the meaning of its practice open to the interpretation of Jewish communities along the centuries.

The regularity of the seasons and the symmetries of the natural wonders in the world are part of a larger order. Our ancestors reasoned that they must be the work of a divine Intelligence, a Creator who regulates and controls the conditions that allow us to

[1] Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, 63-64.

thrive in the world.[2] As Psalm 104:19 expresses, "God made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows when to set."[3] In biblical times, calendrical rites that took note of this cosmic order quite often embraced the entire society. They were performed at well-delineated points in the annual agricultural cycle, attesting to the passage from scarcity to plenty.[4] This was most true of the festivals that marked the seasons of the harvest and the offerings of the first fruits.

The *omer,* literally "sheaf," refers to an offering from the new barley crop. Barley is one of the seven species that symbolizes and embodies the fertility of the Land of Israel.[5] In biblical times, barley bread was the basis of the Israelite diet. Barley's stamina, especially in drought, made it the principal crop. Because barley is the first fruit to ripen, it also symbolizes spring.[6] When it was reaped, the beginning of the spring harvest season was marked. The grain harvest began in the spring with the cutting of the barley and ended with the reaping of the wheat, a season that lasted about seven weeks.[7]

An *omer,* an offering of the first barley crop was brought as a mitzvah to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem on the sixteenth of Nisan, the second day of the festival of Pesach. The *omer* was offered to the priest on the first day of the harvest as a sacrifice, a gift to God. People, in those days, had the belief that everything that humankind used belonged to the gods and they must, therefore, offer the best of everything, meaning the very first.[8] Leviticus Chapter 23:9-11 describes this commandment.[9]

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[2] Richard Sarason, "Time and the Sacred," *Hebrew Union College Chronicle.* 2001. Issue 59: 7.
[3] *Tanakh* : *A New Translation of The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).
[4] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 169.
[5] Deuteronomy 8:8.
[6] Ruth 1:22.
[7] Hayyim Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals: From their Beginnings to our Own Day* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1965), 41.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Leviticus 23: 9-11.

> The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first sheaf of your harvest to the priest. He shall elevate the sheaf before the LORD for acceptance in your behalf; the priest shall elevate it on the day 'after the sabbath.'

It is not hard for us to picture the simple, joyous scene on that occasion when peasants winding up to the Temple Mount in a procession, bearing the *omer,* would offer it to the priest who would take the sheaf, chant prayers and blessings, and wave it over the altar, symbolically giving it to God.

Following the commandment to offer the *omer* as a sacrifice, the people are commanded to count off a period of seven weeks. This practice has come to be known as *sefirat ha'omer.* The word *omer,* itself, has also come to refer to the period between Pesach and Shavuot when the weeks are counted. Shavuot means "weeks," and was therefore used to designate the festival that ended the weeks of the grain harvest. The grain harvest started with the reaping of the barley and after seven weeks ended with the cutting of the wheat, an occasion for a festive holiday. Fifty days later, two loaves of bread, baked from the wheat of the new crop, were offered as a sacrifice.[10] The practice of counting is also a biblical commandment, described in Leviticus 23:15-16,

> And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of 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.[11]

Shavuot is the only Jewish festival for which there is no given fixed date because it is tied to the physical process of harvesting which lasts fifty days. The Torah does not state on

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[10] Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals*, 85-86.

which day of the month Shavuot is to be observed. It only says that it is to be celebrated fifty days after the offering of the *omer*.[12] Thus, the counting was very important!

The Rabbis of the tannaitic period, who lived after the destruction of the Second Temple, were forced to consider their relationship to the biblical commandments as they transmitted the oral tradition. Their views regarding the ritual of offering the *omer* are first recorded in the *Mishnah* (*Menachot*, Chapter 10). However, a discussion regarding the counting of the *omer* does not appear to be taken up until a later period, the writings of which are codified as Midrash and Talmud. A discussion of these rabbinic texts follows.

Chapter Six of *Masechet Menachot* (Babylonian Talmud folios 63b-64a) sets forth the laws of the *omer* offering, a communal *minchah* brought on the second day of the Pesach festival, as is established in *Mishnah Menachot* (10:1-9). The first *mishnah* and following lengthy *gemara* deal with the procedure for bringing the *omer* when the day falls on Shabbat. Rabbi Ishmael argues that on Shabbat, it was brought from three *seahs* and on a weekday it was brought from five *seahs*. (Even the work of reaping and grinding could be done on Shabbat!) But the Sages say that whether on Shabbat or on a weekday, it was brought from three *seahs*. The *gemara* concludes that three *seahs* of barley suffice to produce an *issaron* of choice flour and save the reaper from doing extra work on Shabbat.[13] Regarding this concept, Rashi later explains that they would cut three *seahs* of barley, for example, and grind them, sifting them repeatedly until just one *issaron* of the finest flour remained.[14]

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[12] Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals,* 87.
[13] Menachot 64a.
[14] Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105) on Menachot 63b.

Mishnah 10:2 teaches from where the barley for the *omer* should be reaped. The mitzvah of the *omer* requires one to bring the barley from the place closest to Jerusalem. Two reasons for this are mentioned in the g*emara*. The kernels are supposed to be soft and crushable. Rashi elaborates that the grains should come from nearby so that they do not become hardened by the wind on the way. Also, one should perform a *mitzvah* as soon as one is given the opportunity. Therefore, according to Rashi, when the emissaries leave Jerusalem to search for barley, they should use the first available crop they encounter. [15] If the barley closest to Jerusalem has not fully ripened,[16] one may bring it from any place. Much attention is paid to the exact way this *mitzvah* is to be performed. The arguments offered by the rabbis do not necessarily respond to the agricultural needs for the reaping of the crop (the detail that is given in the Torah), but rather extend the emphasis on the conditions necessary for performing the *mitzvah* of the offering for God's purpose. Extra attention is to be paid to the details, the rabbis argue.

Regarding the ceremony of reaping the barley for the *omer* (a constructed ritual!!), emissaries of the *Beit Din* would go out on the eve of Pesach and tie the barley into bundles while it was still attached to the ground. This made it easier to reap. On the day of the festival, all of the inhabitants of the town would gather so that it would be reaped with great ceremony. Once it became dark, the reaper would ask them,

> "Has the sun set?"
> They would say, "Yes." This question and the subsequent ones, together with the answers would be repeated three times.
> "Is this the sickle?" "Yes."
> "Is this the basket?" "Yes."
> If it was Shabbat, the reaper would also inquire, "Is it Shabbat today?" And they would answer, "Yes."

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[15] Menachot 64b.
[16] From the term *aviv,* Leviticus 2:14, *Rashi* says this means that the barley has to be fully ripe.

"Shall I reap?" "Reap!"

This script was repeated in order to positively assert the commandment, as it was to be performed correctly, as opposed to the Boethusians[17] who said that the reaping of barley should be done not upon the night immediately following Pesach, but on the first Saturday night after that *Yom Tov* (literally the day after the "Sabbath"). However, rabbinic tradition understands the use of the word "Sabbath," in Leviticus 23:15 (ממחרת השבת), "from 'the day after the Sabbath,'" to denote the day after the festival of Pesach, regardless of the day of the week on which it falls. The word "Sabbath," literally 'cessation,' is used because of the obligation to cease from labor on that festival day.[18] Therefore, the reaping is done on 'the day after the festival,' the second day of Pesach.[19] An entire ceremony for reaping the barley is described in detail in the pages that follow in the Talmud, including the acts of reaping, bringing, and offering processes.

The *omer* period was a time of great vulnerability, since the people's sustenance and livelihood depended on grain. The fruits of the field ripen during the time when the *Omer* is counted, and it is, therefore, a period of uncertainty. Each of the seven species emblematic of Israel's fertility enters a critical growth phase during the *omer* period: olives, grapes, pomegranates, and dates come into flower; figs begin to develop; and wheat and barley kernels fill with starch.[20] This narrative represents the agricultural myth of the *omer* period.

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[17] According to *Encylopedia Judaica* 4:1169, s.v. "Boethusians" a Jewish sect closely related to, if not a development of, the Sadducees.

[18] This usage is also found in Leviticus 23:39 regarding the festival of Succot.

[19] It should also be noted that today, in Israel, the day after the festival of Pesach is the First Intermediate Night of Passover, while in the *golah,* the Diaspora, it is the night of the Second Seder.

[20] Ellen Frankel and Betsy Platkin Teutsch, *The Encylopedia of Jewish Symbols* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1992), 123.

Responding to this somber period in nature, the critical period of the reaping, the Talmud further mythologizes this narrative as it discusses *Mishnah Rosh Hashanah* 1:2, saying that on Pesach the grain of our harvest is judged. Each item is judged on its appropriate festival – the fruit of the trees on Shavuot, the rains on Sukkot, for example. Barley is sown in the months of Shevat or Adar, which means that by Pesach (when the judgment for grain takes place) there is grain standing in the fields ready to be harvested. A *baraita* explains further that if there was a bad judgment, a natural or man-made disaster, then the judgment was made during the previous Pesach (before the grain was sown), if something befell it after Pesach, it was decided on the Pesach that was just observed. Because God ordained ceremonies on these occasions, we know that God made various judgments on these respective days. Ramban[21] on this text explains that even though the fate of the crops is decided, God commanded that we should appease Him on the festivals, so that when the crop or the rain arrive, He will judge us favorable regarding them. Therefore, during these times, we must hope and pray that God will make our physical sustenance grow in abundance.[22]

We notice all the details paid and instructions enumerated regarding the act of reaping the crop during this period of time. Uncertainty during these moments in the agricultural season may have been due to the fact that, in Israel, hot winds *(hamsin)* that are harmful to the crops occur during this time.[23] Israel's land is also not the best-suited for farming. Weather and rainfall concerns constantly affected the viability of Israelite agriculture and the livelihood of those who depended on it. This uncertainty may have

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[21] (Nahmanides) Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (1194-1270).
[22] Talmud Bavli. Rosh Hashanah 16a.
[23] Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice.* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1979), 142.

had a direct impact upon the counting down of the days, marking the time that would pass without undue harm to the crops. "The sacred times at which human ritual activity is prescribed are precisely those times of transition that mark the passage from one experienced cosmic status to another."[24] It is during these anxiety-provoking and anticipatory moments that we are most aware of our dependence on the Ultimate Power that is greater than us. It was typical of the Rabbis to utilize creative reasoning, weaving tales and parables (ritual myth, perhaps!) to explain the conditions of life.

In an agricultural economy, the meaning of the ritual for bringing the *omer* is evident. It was one of the rituals that served to offer gratitude to God for his graciousness and bounty, along with asserting human partnership in the covenant of the land and the marking of the seasons. Only after the people had shown their gratitude by bringing the *omer* to the Temple in Jerusalem were they allowed to enjoy eating of the produce of the new harvest.[25] Leviticus Rabbah 28 regards the act of offering the *omer* itself as a prayer for the success of the barley crop, for the conditions needed to assure its growth. The metaphor used is of a cook or baker who tastes the dish he is preparing in order to know what else is needed. The *omer* offering is thus a prayer for God to do what is still needed for the crop.[26]

Another meaning of the counting, a further mythical elaboration, is suggested in Midrash. In agricultural terms, the *omer* is the period of the ripening of the wheat harvest. In mythic terms, it is the time of the journey between the Exodus from *Mitzrayim* – the liberation from slavery – and Sinai, the revelation of Torah. The weeks

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[24] Sarason, *Time and the Sacred,* 7.
[25] Leviticus 23:14.
[26] Max Kadushin, *A Conceptual Commentary on Midrash Leviticus Rabbah.* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 193.

are anticipatory, both of the harvest of the field and the harvest of the soul, or the spiritual ripening of the Jewish people as they prepare to receive Torah at Shavuot.[27] It was asked why the festival of Shavuot, unlike any other festival, depends on the counting of the days preceding it. It was suggested that when the children of Israel received the news of their liberation from Egypt, they were also told that fifty days after they would receive the Torah. This news was so thrilling that they started counting the days. This counting then became a prescribed practice for all the following generations.[28] Today we say that the counting of the *omer* is the bridge connecting Pesach and Shavuot, "indicating that we want not only freedom from bondage but also freedom for a purpose, i.e. to receive the moral law at Mount Sinai and to practice it."[29] It is important to note that Shavuot was realigned mythically with the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, not with the agricultural harvest season. This is yet another example of how the meaning of the *omer* period changed over time.

Many midrashic reasons have developed beyond the practical, agricultural reason for counting the days until the end of the harvest season. Through this sense of history, humans enlarge their awareness far beyond the typical range of the three generations that one is able to experience first-hand.[30] Rabbi Yochanan said, "Let not the *mitzvah* of the *omer* appear insignificant to you. It as because of this *mitzvah* that Abraham was privileged to inherit the Land of Canaan." The *mitzvah* of the *omer* was the first new *mitzvah* for Israel to perform after coming into the Land and it was in reward for this

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[27] Frankel and Teutsch, *The Encylopedia of Jewish Symbols*, 123.
[28] *Shibolei Haleqet*, ed. Buber, p.236.
[29] Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, 135.
[30] Ibid., 105.

future act that Abraham inherited the Land.[31] Leviticus Rabbah 28:1, expounding in the name of Rabbi Yanai on the verse, "You shall bring the *omer*," states: "When a man buys some meat in the market place, he takes great care and exerts much effort to cook it properly. The Holy One, Blessed be He, however, makes the wind blow, brings the clouds, makes plants flourish and ripens the fruit – all this while people sleep in their beds – and the only reward we give Him is a mere *omer* of barley!"[32] The counting of the *omer* is therefore what we offer in appreciation for the miraculous acts of God's daily creation.

Rabbenu Nisim (the *Ran* of Gerona, Spain, 1290-1380) offered, "When Moshe told Israel in Egypt, 'You shall serve God,' the people asked him, 'When will that service take place?' 'At the end of fifty days,' he told them. Then each person counted the days leading up to this greater event."[33]

If a person counts the days leading to a fixed goal, it is an indication of his longing to reach that goal. It is important to note that we count the days that have passed rather than the days that still lie ahead (we count up instead of counting down), because the pain at the thought of the days of waiting is greater than the joy of the thought of the days that have already passed. (Sefer Hachinuch, 13th century, Spain)

The Chasidic teacher, Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger, Poland (1847-1905), the Sefat Emet, teaches, "The days of counting the *Omer* are mentioned in the Torah along with the other festivals to teach us that these days are akin to the festivals –like an extended

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[31] Kadushin, *A Conceptual Commentary*, 195.
[32] Leviticus Rabbah 28.
[33] Eliyahu Kitov, *The Book of our Heritage: The Jewish Year and its Days of Significance* (New York: 'A' Publishers, 1968), 362.

chol hamoed, preceded by *Pesach* and followed by *Shavuot.*"[34] The Sefat Emet further reasons that a Jew who keeps all of the *mitzvot* connected to this period, bringing the *omer* on *Pesach* and the loaves of bread on *Shavuot*, has already been judged favorably and it is as if he is exempt from being judged on Rosh Hashanah. [35]

Later Sages and Kabbalists who delved into the deeper hidden meanings of the Torah gave new associations to the counting of the *omer.* According to Kabbalah, the universe was created through ten *sefirot*, emanations from God, or sacred attributes that connect the physical and divine spheres of existence. The three upper *sefirot* are somewhat beyond full human comprehension. The lower seven *sefirot*, however, provide humans with an important lesson and opportunity for the development of human character and the actualization of the human soul. The Kabbalists found these to be particularly manifested during the seven weeks of the *omer*, so Kabbalists make it a spiritual practice to meditate on these godly attributes during the *Omer.*[36]

The seven lower *sefirot*/attributes that correspond to the seven weeks are as follows: *chesed*/lovingkindness; *gevurah*/courage or judgement; *tiferet*/harmony; *netzach*/triumph or achievement; *hod*/glory; *yesod*/foundation; *malchut*/sovereignty. Each of the seven days of each week is also associated with a specific *sefirah.* So each day of the forty-nine days of the Omer is associated with both its weekly *sefirah*/attribute and its daily *sefirah*/attribute. That is, day one of the *Omer* was a day on which the Kabbalists contemplated the nature and implications of pure lovingkindness, since *chesed*/lovingkindness was both the weekly and daily attribute. On the thirty-seventh day of the *Omer*, for example, the weekly sacred *sefirah* is *yesod*/foundation and the daily

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[34] Ibid., 367.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Kitov, *The Book of our Heritage*, 366.

attribute is *gevurah*/courage. A Kabbalistic interpretation might associate *yesod* with either the deep sense of self or with basic interpersonal attachment or bonding. Thus, the Kabbalists would reflect on the aspects of self and bonding that require courage, judgment and self-discipline. The seven weeks of counting, therefore, have become an opportunity to perfect the aspects of the human character by meditating on God's attributes as they relate to seven of God's special qualities.

The Kabbalists have also associated the period of seven weeks with seven attributes personified by our great ancestors. The characteristics of these people are seen as essential to the continuation of humankind. Abraham personifies the virtue of loving-kindness (*chesed).* Because of his love for God, the entire world was brought nearer to God. Isaac personifies strength of character *(gevurah).* From him, the world learned to fear God. He was devoted to the service of God. Jacob personifies the characteristic of glory *(tiferet).* God considers him the epitome of glory and righteousness. Moses symbolizes the eternity *(nezach)* of the Torah. Moses bestowed eternal merit on all generations by bringing them the words of God's Torah. Aaron is known for his splendor *(hod)* and sanctity. He pursued peace, loved humankind, and carried out God's commands. Joseph typifies the virtue of morality (*yesod)* . Because of this quality, he rose to great heights of responsibility. King David personifies sovereignty *(malchut).* His wisdom was granted by the King of Kings, God. God chose him for this task because He knew he would be a humble servant. He was of lowly origin, yet all the kings came to pay him homage. Each of these seven qualities are closely intertwined, and all are interdependent.

The weeks between Pesach and Shavuot are customarily a period of some solemnity. Mourning customs probably originally reflected the general anxiety experienced by the Israelite community during the vulnerable weeks before the harvest.[37] Since, then the myth has, again, evolved. The Talmud takes the solemnity of the agricultural biblical narrative and rabbinizes it when it recalls the legend of twelve thousand pairs of Rabbi Akiva's students who died between the weeks of Pesach and Shavuot. The disciples began dying on the first day of the forty-nine days of the *Omer* counting period.[38] They all died an unpleasant death, by *Askerah,* commonly known today as diphtheria. The rabbis explain that this plague took place because the disciples did not treat each other with respect, that is, with the requisite rabbinic etiquette. The world was then left barren of Torah. (Here lies another shift in focus.) Rashi says the Torah was forgotten among the masses. [39]

The 'Omer could no longer be brought to the Temple in Jerusalem after its destruction. The counting was continued, however, as a זכר למקדש –another reason for the sadness during these days. It could serve as a vehicle to express the traditional yearning for the restoration of Zion and the rebuilding of the holy land.

The Crusades added another reason for sadness, especially for the Jews of Germany, since the massacres took place at this time of year. Another reason to mourn was added in modern days. While the crematoria and gas chambers of the Nazis operated all year round, some tragic events of the Holocaust took place during the *Sefirah* period, such as the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. The last great deportation to the gas chambers

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[37] Frankel and Teutsch, *The Encylopedia of Jewish Symbols*, 124.
[38] Talmud Bavli. Yebamot 62b.
[39] Ibid.

including the Jews of Hungary also took place during *Sefirah.*[40] The Parliament of Israel fixed the twenty-seventh day of Nisan as a memorial day for those killed by the Nazis during World War II. In addition, the day before *Yom Ha'atzmaut,* Israeli Independence Day, is called *Yom Hazikaron,* Remembrance Day, for those who have died fighting for the State of Israel. However, this day is not directly connected to the *Sefirah.*

The loss of these Jewish lives was, of course, a tragedy in the history of the Jewish people. These tragedies are mourned through the practice of certain rituals. Many Jewish communities refrain from participating in any joyous events during this period. Weddings are not scheduled, haircuts not taken, and celebrations of music and dance are not held during the *Omer.* [41]

In Ashkenazi communities, the most widespread custom has been to observe mourning from *Pesach* until the three days before *Shavuot.* The three days before Shavuot are called *Sheloshet Yemei Hagbalah,* The Three Days of Boundary, in reference to Exodus 19:12: "And thou shalt set bounds unto the people about." This speaks of the three days of preparation the Israelites had to endure before they received the Torah at Mount Sinai. In anticipation of this sacred occasion, mourning customs are not observed as they are for the other days of the *Omer.* Exceptions are made on *Rosh Hodesh Iyar, Rosh Hodesh Sivan,* and *Lag Ba'Omer.* Some also add the fifth of *Iyar,* Israeli Independence Day, which is recognized by many observant Jews as a joyful interruption to the *Omer's* mourning period. David Feldman provides a modern response to this custom of mourning during the Omer:

> For us, then, the *Sefirah* period has great meaning and validity. A time-space set aside for cumulative

[40] Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice,* 143.
[41] *Otsar Hageonim,* 493:1-2.

> commemoration of national tragedy – at the hands of the Romans, the Crusaders, the Cossacks – it has high national *and* spiritual significance...for a gesture of commemoration, an act of respect offered to others, is spiritual. Commemorative mourning observances are spiritual because they give significance to all of life by respecting life, by a gesture of reverence for the memory of martyrs.[42]

The great exception to the mourning period between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*, as mentioned above, is the 18th of *Iyar,* or *Lag Ba'Omer.* This is the thirty-third day of the counting period, a day on which the plague upon Rabbi Akiva's students is said to have stopped. Again, this is a mythic explanation. According to tradition, the calamities of the Hadrianic persecution were also interrupted on this day, and as a result, it was declared a semi-holiday. *Tahunun* is not recited, weddings and joyous occasions are permitted, and one may cut his hair.

In Israel, the day is also observed as the *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, the alleged author of the *Zohar.* (It was a custom to celebrate the yahrzeit of great people as a holiday.) Large numbers of people visit his grave in Meron and celebrate the day as a full festival. The origin of this custom is attributed to the great kabbalist Isaac Luria. He not only recognized *Lag Ba'Omer* as the cessation of the plague that afflicted Rabbi Akiva's disciples, but as a reminder of how Rabbi Akiva's disciples saved the *Torah.*[43] The observance is called a scholars' festival because of its association with the students of Rabbi Akiva. It is perhaps for this reason that it is highly observed by school-age children. It is customary for children to take up toy bows and arrows as a reference to the warlike activities of Rabbi Akiva's followers. Later kabbalists saw an association with

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[42] Reuven Hammer, *Or Hadash: A Commentary on Siddur Sim Shalom* (New York City: The Rabbinical Assembly, The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2003), 55.
[43] *Talmud Bavli.* Yebamot 62b.

the rainbow, a symbol of redemption, since there is a tradition that the rainbow will appear in the sky as an indication of the final redemption.[44]

Ritual/Liturgical development

Since the counting of the *Omer* is a biblical mitzvah, it is a concrete observance in its own right, a re-enactment of the days when the harvest ritual was observed in the Temple. *Sefirah* was later ritualized and liturgically constructed. Many customs surround the entire period of the *Omer* and some are reserved specifically for the counting. It was a time-honored custom in many communities for pious men to read the chapter from the Torah concerning the *Omer* after the second *seder*. Among the Sephardim, it is the custom to read this chapter before commencing the counting of the *Omer* on the night of the sixteenth of Nisan.[45] Beginning on the Sabbath after Pesach, it is customary to study one chapter of *Pirkei Avot* every Sabbath afternoon. According to *Abudraham Hashalem*, this custom was originally observed only on the six *shabbatot* between Pesach and Shavuot since it was considered to be an appropriate preparation for the receiving of Torah.[46]

The commandment to count the forty-nine days of the *Omer* is observed in the post-Temple period with a brief service that may be said at home or in the synagogue, near the end of the evening service.[47] The *Omer* is counted in the evening, at *ma'ariv* beginning the second night of *Pesach* after the *Amidah* is recited. One prays *ma'ariv* first because praying *ma'ariv* is a mitzvah which is carried out every day of the year, and it

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[44] Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, 146.
[45] Kitov, *The Book of our Heritage*, 360.
[46] *Abudraham Hashalem*, 245.
[47] Rabbi Lawrence Kushner forward in Scott-Martin Kosofsky, *The Book of Customs: A Complete Handbook for the Jewish Year.* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004), 140.

therefore takes precedence over a mitzvah which is performed less often. One stands as the *Omer* is counted because of Deuteronomy, Chapter 16, verse 9. It reads, "You shall count off seven weeks; start to count the seven weeks when the sickle is first put to the *standing* grain."[48] This is a secondary explanation. The choreography probably was developed because standing is a posture of attentiveness and respect.

According to Maimonides, the counting of the *Omer* should always take place after sundown because the new day begins at sundown.[49] If *ma'ariv* was recited before sundown, one should count the *Omer* without a *berachah* and repeat the counting with a *berachah* after sundown. If one has forgotten to count the *Omer* during *ma'ariv* he may do so all night with the prescribed *berachah* and even the entire succeeding day, but without a *berachah.* The *Omer* is counted immediately before *Aleinu* except on Saturday nights or at the end of a festival, when it is recited before *Havdalah.* Although the *Omer* should logically follow *Havdalah*, since it is a weekday activity, the order is reversed to express the desire to lengthen the Sabbath.[50] Maimonides also writes that the mitzvah of *sefirat ha'omer* applies in all times, implying that even today there is a biblical obligation to count the days of the *omer.*[51]

The festival prayer book includes the traditional ritual and liturgy for *sefirat ha'omer*[52]. The introductory prayer, הנני, is thematically Lurianic and declares the worshippers' intention to perform the Torah's commandment of counting the *omer.* The biblical passage that describes the commandment, Leviticus 23:15-16, is quoted. Then

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[48] Kitov, *The Book of our Heritage*, 358.
[49] Maimonides, *Hilchot Temidin Umusafin* 7:22.
[50] Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, 144.
[51] Maimonides, *Hilchot Temidin UMusafin* 7:24.
[52] *Machzor LeShalosh Regalim: Prayer Book for the Three Festivals.* Ed. Philip Birnbaum. (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1971).

the *brachah* is recited. The *omer* is then counted, declaring what day it is, according to a formula for each day: by days and weeks. For example, on the nineteenth day, we say, "This is the nineteenth day, which is two weeks and five days of the *omer*."

הִנְנִי מוּכָן וּמְזֻמָּן לְקַיֵּם מִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה שֶׁל סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב בַּתּוֹרָה: וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הֲבִיאֲכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה, שֶׁבַע שַׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה. עַד מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִת תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם.

I am ready and prepared to perform the positive command concerning the counting of the *omer*, as it is written in the Torah: "You shall count from the day following the day of rest, from the day you brought the sheaf of the wave-offering, seven full weeks shall be counted; you shall count fifty days; to the day following the seventh week you shall count fifty days."[53]

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ עַל סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who has sanctified us with Your commandments, and commanded us concerning the counting of the *omer*.

הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת וַחֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.

Today is the nineteenth day, which is two weeks and five days of the *omer*. [54]

Much halachic debate ensues regarding the practicality of counting the specific days of the *omer*. There is an opinion of the *Baal Halachot Gedolot*, the '*Bakeg*' that if

[53] Leviticus 23:15-16.
[54] *Machzor LeShalosh Regalim*, 634.

one skips a day of counting, he may no longer continue counting.[55] This is based on the word *temimot,* "complete," used by the Torah to describe the counting process. Apparently the author of *Halachot Gedolot* is of the opinion that if one day is missed, the counting is incomplete. *Tosafot* disagree, as does Rabbeinu Yitzchak.[56] [57] The *Shulchan Aruch* rules that if one skips an entire day of counting, one should continue counting without reciting a *berachah.* The reason one continues counting is because according to most *Rishonim*, there still exists an obligation to count, even if one day is skipped. However, one does not count with a *berachah* to show deference to the opinion of *Halachot Gedolot* that one who skips a day is no longer obligated in the *mitzvah* of *sefirat ha'omer.*[58]

Rabbeinu Yitzchak (mentioned above), implies that the reason behind the ruling of *Halachot Gedolot Bahag* is that the counting of all forty-nine days is considered one elongated mitzvah. Therefore, if one skips one day of counting, the *mitzvah* is no longer complete and one can no longer fulfill it. Soloveitchik suggests a different explanation of *Bahag'* opinion. He offers that the reason why one who skips a day of counting may not continue counting with a *berachah* is because *sefirat ha'omer* requires consistency. One who has skipped a day of counting can no longer fulfill the *mitzvah* of *sefirat ha'omer.* [59]

If one intended to say one number to count one day and, after the blessing, said a different one, he does not need to repeat the blessing to correct the number. If one completely forgot to count one day, one generally counts the days for the remainder of

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[55] *Menachot* 66a.
[56] Cited in ROSH *Pesachim* 10:41, www.yutorah.org Yeshiva University. *The Mitzvah of Sefirat Ha'Omer.* Weekly Halachic Overview by Rabbi Joshua Flug. http://www.yutorah.org/_shiurim/The%20Mitzvah%20of%20Sefirat%20HaOmer.pdf
[57] Ibid.
[58] *Orach Chaim* 489:8.
[59] www.yutorah.org.

the *omer* without saying the blessing (because of the ruling mentioned above). If, however, he cannot remember whether or not he has counted on a particular day, he may continue to count the rest of the *omer* with the blessing. In order to prevent anyone in the congregation from making a mistake, if counting is done in the synagogue, it became customary for the *chazzan* to count first.[60] Then each individual counted for his/herself.

After the counting, it is traditional to say, "May it be Your will that the *Beit Hamikdash* be rebuilt speedily in our days." Having mentioned the *omer* offering, one would pray that the opportunity to bring this offering to the *Beit Hamikdash* would be renewed. The counting of the *omer* came to serve as a vehicle for remembering and yearning for the restoration of Zion and the rebuilding of the Holy Land, hence the addition of the prayer הרחמן הוא יחזיר לנו עבודת בית המקדש. Today, for those who include it, the prayer is interpreted as a means of connection to the Holy Land, working for the rebuilding of Zion as a homeland for the exiled and a spiritual center for the life of the Jewish people.[61]

Psalm 67 is recited along with the counting of the *omer* because it includes a petition that the earth yield its produce and asks God for blessing. The psalm also requests God to accept the people's prayers, strengthen them, and cleanse them. It also consists of seven verses which total forty-nine words, suggesting the number of seven weeks or forty-nine days of the *sefirah*!

Psalm 67:1 לַמְנַצֵּחַ בִּנְגִינֹת מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר: [2] אֱלֹהִים יְחָנֵּנוּ
וִיבָרְכֵנוּ יָאֵר פָּנָיו אִתָּנוּ סֶלָה:
[3] לָדַעַת בָּאָרֶץ דַּרְכֶּךָ בְּכָל־גּוֹיִם יְשׁוּעָתֶךָ:
[4] יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים אֱלֹהִים יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים כֻּלָּם:

[60] Kitov, *The Book of our Heritage*, 359.
[61] Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, 135.

יִשְׂמְחוּ וִירַנְּנוּ לְאֻמִּים כִּי־תִשְׁפֹּט עַמִּים מִישֹׁר וּלְאֻמִּים
בָּאָרֶץ תַּנְחֵם סֶלָה׃
יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים אֱלֹהִים יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים כֻּלָּם׃
אֶרֶץ נָתְנָה יְבוּלָהּ יְבָרְכֵנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵינוּ׃
יְבָרְכֵנוּ אֱלֹהִים וְיִירְאוּ אֹתוֹ כָּל־אַפְסֵי־אָרֶץ׃

[1] For the leader; with instrumental music. A psalm. A song.
[2] May God be gracious to us and bless us; may He show us favor, Selah.
[3] that Your way be known on earth, Your deliverance among all nations.
[4] Peoples will praise You, O God; all peoples will praise You.
[5] Nations will exult and shout for joy, for You rule the peoples with equity, You guide the nations of the earth. Selah.
[6] The peoples will praise You, O God; all peoples will praise You.
[7] May the earth yield its produce; may God, our God, bless us.
[8] May God bless us, and be revered to the ends of the earth.[62]

The final *brachah* of the liturgy is again reminiscent of the Lurianic school of Kabbalah, referring to the *klipot.* It reads,

> May I set right all the errors I have committed. God commanded us since Moses concerning the counting of the *omer , in order to cleanse us of our evil ways and impurities.* As it says in the Torah, "You shall count... (Lev.23:15-16)" May all the people of the earth be purged from their impurities. May it be thy will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, that my counting the 'Omer today help set right again the errors I have committed; may I rise high in purity and holiness.[63]

There are many reasons for omitting the *shehechiyanu* blessing when we count the *omer*. We say the *shehechiyanu* only for something over which we rejoice or from

[62] Psalm 67.
[63] *Machzor LeShalosh Regalim,* 634.

which we derive benefit. The purpose of the *mitzvah* of counting the days is to prepare ourselves for the festival with which the counting ends – Shavuot – and when we reach it we say the blessing to thank God for having kept us alive to that day. When the blessing is said at that time, it refers both to what preceded the festival and to Shavuot, itself.[64]

Discussion of Ritual Objects

Omer charts and calendars, often embellished with folk art motifs, were developed to keep track of the counting. Not only were they used as practical devices for remembering the days of the *omer,* but they became (depending on the art and elaboration) a physical actualization of the counting. According to ritual theory, ritual objects are helpful concretizations of the ritual myth or idea. They serve to enact the narrative and emphasize the meaning of the ritual. In addition, the kinesthetic element introduces another way for the ritual to be learned and experienced. Examples of *omer* ritual objects can be found in the Appendix.

Conclusion:

Festivals are closely bound up with the life of a people and with their spiritual culture. Over time, when the life of a people changes, the festivals of the people, respectively, change and assume a new character. The ceremonies and rites, to a great extent, remain but they take on a new meaning. They are given new symbolic values and sometimes interpreted differently. Jewish life changed significantly after the destruction of the Temple and the resulting exile. Jews were spread over many distant lands, estranged from the agricultural cycle of the year in the land of Israel. They could no longer bring sacrifices to the Temple in Jerusalem. So, the three great, yearly festivals

[64] Kitov, *The Book of our Heritage*, 360.

took on, with time, a new character. Some customs still retained an essence of the agricultural origin of the festival. But, the agricultural season was no longer the reason for the festival. The observance became a different expression of rejoicing and drawing near to God.

When trying to establish a narrative chronology, we have to remember that not all ritual choices are as we expect. Many know the old tale about the family who ritually cut off the edges of a pot roast generation after generation, only to find that the practice originated because a great-grandmother didn't have a large enough pan. We may find it hard to acknowledge that the rituals to which we cling may have come about in equally unintentional and roundabout ways.[65]

The biblical *mitzvah* of *sefirat ha'omer,* which begins as a rite to mark the days of the harvest season, has come to symbolize many aspects of the Jewish experience: the Temple cult in Jerusalem, the festival calendar, our people's journey from redemption to revelation, and the commemoration of tragic events that happened in our history.

Yet, the traditional approach regarding the reason for performing the *mitzvah* of *sefirah* rests with the simple concept of commandedness. The fact that God has commanded the Jewish people is sufficient reason for carrying out a *mitzvah* with enthusiasm. If the Sages have provided reasons for performing the *mitzvah,* it is because of this underlying idea – service to God is following the commandments. If the Sages have not given a reason for a particular *mitzvah,* then traditionally it is recognized that the

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[65] Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual.* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 70.

mitzvah is a manifestation of the wisdom of the Creator and far beyond human understanding.[66]

Each of these meanings has been reenacted or expressed in the liturgies and rituals that have been created, whether by the Sages, Lurianic Kabbalists, or contemporary Jews from all movements. The origin of these rituals is as old as the settling of the Jews in Palestine and a remnant of the period when Jews began to live off of the fruit of the earth and observe the agricultural seasons of the year.

[66] Eliyahu Kitov, *The Book of our Heritage: The Jewish Year and its Days of Significance* (New York: 'A' Publishers, 1968), 361.

Chapter Three –
Ritual Implications for *Sefirat Ha'Omer* in the American Reform Movement

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, the ritual of *sefirat ha'omer* has been observed with varying customs throughout the centuries of Jewish history. Forty-nine days are counted from the second night of Pesach until the eve of Shavu'ot. However, given the usage of the modern, secular calendar, Reform Judaism has generally deemed this counting to be obsolete, reasoning that there is no need for Reform Jews to count the days in a ritual manner. The Reform movement, therefore, has mostly done away with these customs.[1] The various treatments of this ritual make it a provocative case study for exploring the dynamic of ritualization, all the more so throughout the historical evolution of the American Reform movement. This chapter seeks to trace a Reform approach to ritual as expressed in the movement's various platforms, publications, and by its leadership. When conclusions can be drawn to relate this ritual approach to the practice of *sefirat ha'omer,* a connection will be made.

At this time in the movement's history, there is an undeniable trend towards the reinstitution of traditional practice. Questions have arisen from both inside and outside the movement: Why have some rituals been reinstated and not others? Who decides? Are the choices a matter of philosophy and theology, a matter of logistics and practicality, or even nostalgia? Or, are some rituals readopted because they may be more aesthetically and emotionally appealing than others? To further complicate the answers to these questions, Reform Jews individually take the liberty to accept or reject certain

[1] See, for example, Mark Washofsky. *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice* (New York: UAHC Press, 2001), 110.

customs. A study of *sefirat ha'omer* and its place within the Reform movement provides a medium through which to understand the values of Reform ritual practice and the boundaries upon which the movement draws in regards to the observance of 'traditional' customs.

Tracing Ritual Development in the American Reform Movement

At the beginning, the Reform movement, particularly in America, was anti-rabbinical and opposed to rabbinic literature, the Talmud and the Codes, which were the source of rabbinic authority. The early Reform movement became essentially biblical.[2] Instead of basing its religious expressions on tradition, it turned to enlightened human reason, to the authority of the prophets and to the moral and ethical expressions of the religion. In this respect, it sought to be in agreement with the most "progressive" and "enlightened" aspects of modern European (and later, American) culture and religious expressions which were predominantly Protestant.

Over the course of the twentieth century, this attitude in America changed as more and more eastern European Jews entered the Reform movement and sought more forms of Jewish expression to which they were accustomed. Early Reformers had questioned the authority of rabbinic Judaism and rabbinic customs, therefore eliminating much of the particularity of Judaism. When a new spirit arose, it was "a spirit of conservatism which sought to 'return to tradition,' to reappraise the movement's attitudes toward ritual and ceremonial in the realization that a religion which has only the universal cannot survive...Ritual and ceremonial provide the necessary concretization of the universal to

[2] Solomon Freehof, *Reform Responsa* (Cincinnati, 1960), 15.

make survival a true possibility."[3] This view was expressed to the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1953. Herbert A. Friedman stated that a modern Reform movement must endeavor to conduct continuous experiments in ceremony to make our religion grow through more meaningful rituals.[4]

Norbert M. Samuelson's 1961 prize essay on Reform attitudes toward ritual attempted to examine, systematically, the attitudes that were characteristic of the early Reform movement. He sought to discover if the attitude toward ritual and ceremony in the nineteen thirties, forties, and fifties, really differed from its predecessors in the movement. Regarding his own method of study, Samuelson states,

> If one sought to characterize the attitudes or the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church on a given theological statement, one would turn to official papal statements for this evidence. When dealing with the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church this is a valid procedure, since the members of the Church are bound religiously by those statements. When one is dealing with the Reform movement in Judaism, however, no such method is possible. While statements will be made on given subjects by the leaders of the Central Conference of American Rabbis as was done in Pittsburgh in 1885 and in Columbus in 1937, these statements cannot be regarded as authoritative in the same way that a papal statement is authoritative. In the Reform movement, each individual must settle the questions of his belief for himself. While rabbinic statements may serve as a guide, one need not agree with these statements to belong to the Reform movement.[5]

Even though the words of Reform leaders and rabbis cannot be taken as the official statements of the Reform movement, they are at least indicative of the thinking and the

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[3] Norbert M. Samuelson, *The Changing Attitude of Reform toward Ritual and Ceremonial in the 20th Century.* Submitted in competition for the Harry W. Ettelson Award of $200. (Cincinnati, Ohio, May 3, 1961). Referee Dr. Eugene Mihaly, 1.

[4] Norbert M. Samuelson in reference to Herbert A. Friedman, "Goals of the Reform Movement," *CCAR Yearbook,*(1953) 63: 299-304.

[5] Norbert M. Samuelson. *The Changing Attitude of Reform*, 3.

trends going on in the movement. This is true because the rabbi of a congregation tends also to reflect the thinking of his congregants. It is therefore important to consider these records.

Two sources are relevant when considering the view of the Reform rabbi on matters pertaining to ritual observance. The first source is the material written by individual rabbis highly regarded in the movement. A second source, and perhaps more indicative of the movement's viewpoint as a whole, is the records of the annual meetings of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) as recorded in the *CCAR Yearbook*. Papers on relevant issues to the movement were presented at these meetings and the ensuing discussion was recorded.

In addition to reviewing these primary sources and the secondary literature pertaining to them, I will also consider the platforms and principles that have been issued by the movement in 1885 (Pittsburgh), 1937 (Columbus), 1976 (San Francisco-Centenary Perspective), and 1999 (Pittsburgh II). My goal is to trace the development of ritual and attitudes towards it specifically in the American Reform movement. The same limitations of Norbert Samuelson's previously mentioned study apply to the one I take up to explore the movement's ritual culture.

From 1885-1937

(Periodization is necessary in order to simplify this discussion. The periods designated here are shaped by the statements issued throughout the movement's history.)**

The 1885 Pittsburgh Platform pre-dates the establishment of the CCAR by four years. The platform was never officially adopted as the official statement of the Reform movement, but its ideas were incorporated into the philosophy of the movement.

Historically, it has been universally accepted as the primary statement of Classical Reform Judaism.[6]

Kaufman Kohler was the chief architect and writer of the Pittsburgh Platform. In a series of sermons entitled "Backward or Forward," Kohler described what he saw to be the difference between Orthodoxy, which he claimed looked backward and "subsist[ed] on the merits of our forefathers," and Reform, which looked forward and whose "golden era lies not behind but before us."[7] Kohler believed that Judaism must address whether Jews must "observe all of the meaningless practices of the past" or whether they should "replace them by doctrines that are in keeping with the spirit of our age."[8] Kohler opposed "Orientalism," what he called the Orthodox refusal to recognize higher Western ideals. In his opinion, Orthodoxy still adhered to the customs of the Orient.

Paragraphs three and four of the 1885 Platform are of primary importance to us here. The platform begins,

> We as representatives of Reform Judaism in America...unite upon the following principles...
>
> Third: We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only the moral laws and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.
>
> Fourth: We hold that all such Mosaic and Rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their

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[6] Sharyn Henry, *An Analysis of the Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot in the American Reform Movement 1885-1987* (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1988), 71.
[7] Kaufmann Kohler, "Backward or Forward" in Robert J. Marx, *Kaufmann Kohler as Reformer*. (Rabbinic Thesis, Cincinnati, HUC-JIR, 1951), 39-42.
[8] Ibid.

> observance in our day is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.[9]

These paragraphs reflect the theologies and philosophies of the Reform leaders of the time. Instead of adhering to divine authority and revelation, the authors and religious leaders exercised the authority to decide which practices were relevant for their time. There was no longer a "national life in Palestine," which further pushed the biblical legislation out of its appropriate frame of ritual practice. As stated in paragraph three, only the moral law of the Bible was binding.

The Jew's spiritual elevation was important to the framers of the Pittsburgh Platform. Ceremonies that had the potential to "elevate and sanctify" were welcomed; while, those which could not were to be abandoned. Reason was also an important factor. Practices regarded as irrational were discarded. Paragraph four particularly mentions the basic criteria for acceptance of any particular custom. Certain Mosaic and Rabbinical laws were considered "altogether foreign" to current sensibilities. The tone of this paragraph is prohibitive. *Kashrut* and practices of priestly purity were best not observed. The language suggests a strong disfavor of traditional ritual behaviors. "The movement has never considered itself to be a legislative body capable of imposing its will. This does not, however, diminish the importance of the tone of this document. It was influential in policy formation, production of liturgy, social action and the setting of ritual standards for the next fifty years."[10] The platform initiated a period in Reform history characterized by its disinterest in Jewish ritual and ceremony. Ritual surveys conducted in our present time confirm the impact of Reform's anti-ritual attitude. This is

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[9] Michael A. Meyer and W. Gunther Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader* (UAHC Press, 2001): 199. The Pittsburgh Platform (1885): propositions 3-4.
[10] Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot*, 75.

one of the reasons why *sefirat ha'omer* is just now finding its way into Reform congregations.

Addressing the attitude of Reform Judaism to the past, the Pittsburgh Platform states, "We are convinced of the utmost necessity of preserving the historical identity with our great past."[11] From this statement, one is given the impression that a connection and continuation of the very much valued historical past is a source of conscious religious identity for the writers of this platform. However, reports from the conventions of the CCAR at this time give an entirely different impression. For example, Hyman G. Enelow at the 1902 conference argued for the establishment of Sabbath on Sunday. Others argued that the tradition (while beautiful and charming) had grown out of date and needed to be modernized.[12] For them, the past was something to be ignored or at best, condemned. Regarding the meaning and purpose of ritual and ceremony in Reform Judaism, the Pittsburgh Platform declared (for many) that customs and ceremonies must change with the varying needs of different generations. There was also a perceived need for Jews not to be "foreign" or too different from their Christian neighbors.

Kaufman Kohler, at the 1907 CCAR Conference, stated that ceremonial laws are an essential part of Mosaic law. They embody that which is specifically Jewish.[13] He further stated,

> We, who hold in religion, an ever progressive force working through the inner consciousness of man, first collectively and afterwards individually, must ascertain the origin and purpose of each and every ceremony in order to find out whether by appealing to our minds and hearts it fulfills a religious function or whether it has become an empty shell with the kernel gone. In doing so, we must

[11] Meyer and Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader,* 199. The Pittsburgh Platform (1885): proposition 6.
[12] Samuelson in reference to *CCAR Yearbook* (1902), 63: 299-304.
[13] Kaufman Kohler, "The Origin and Function of Ceremonies in Judaism," *CCAR Yearbook* (1907), 17.

> discriminate between the ancient ceremonies of Biblical times which are still influenced by primitive notions, the Rabbinical ceremonies which received their mold and character under the influence of conscious but authoritative forces, and modern ceremonies which still lack more or less the authority of historic powers and specific Jewish characteristics.[14]

This argument implies that Jews of each age required new forms, appropriate for their unique situation. It is clear that Kohler did maintain an important place for ritual *mitzvot*, as long as they were meaningful. In 1924, Kohler expanded his definition of meaningful ceremony, saying that the goal of ritual is to promote group identity, to draw the enlightened youth back into the synagogue.[15]

The ideas of Isaac Mayer Wise also reflected much of the general theology of liberal Jews in America at the time. In regards to the authority of the law, he claimed that "we know of no spiritual proof that Moses originally intended all the Levitical law and all the Levitical priesthood and institutions to be carried into Canaan and stand there forever...We are forced to the conclusion that the Levitical laws of Moses were not intended to be eternally obligatory."[16] Wise further claimed that all forms to which there is no longer meaning attached are an impediment to our religiosity and must be tossed away. Thus Wise believed in the necessity of Judaism to change in regard to forms. One was to determine what was intended for all eternity and all humankind and what was intended originally for a certain time or place.[17] This was the purpose of re-form.

This left the controversial question: how are the limits to be set? What, if anything, has authority? Liberal Jews had denied the literal authority of Jewish tradition

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[14] Ibid., 210.
[15] Kaufman Kohler, "Revaluation of Reform Judaism," *CCAR Yearbook* (1924), 34: 228.
[16] James G. Heller, *Isaac M. Wise, His Life, Work, and Thought* (New York: UAHC Press, 1965): 527; quoted in Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot*, 14.
[17] Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot*, 15.

in their lives. In the early years of American Reform, the argument revolved around the discussion of a synod or a creed that would bind Reform Jews. These became key issues in the CCAR throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. A synod would invest the movement with a religious legislative authority. A creed would base it in doctrine. The CCAR later debated the appropriateness of a guide to religious practice. The synod was specifically Wise's positive response to authority in Jewish life. He thought of it as "a method of regularizing change, of giving reinterpretations of the law a *halachic* sanction."[18] Wise thought this would increase uniformity and unity in belief and ritual for the Jews of America. But no synod was ever established. The publication of the manuals for Reform practice (as mentioned below) portrayed their role as strictly advisory, never compulsory.

It is fair to say that the overwhelming majority of early Reformers viewed ritual and ceremony as a means to an end, that end being the promotion of rational religiosity, ethical conduct and a sense of loyalty to the Jewish people.[19] But a concern arose regarding the need to maintain loyalty to the Jewish people. A particular religious practice could be maintained by American Jews only to the extent that the custom could be adapted to the American atmosphere.[20] For example, in 1930, the Committee on Synagogue Music stated that certain traditional melodies were revised by transposing the music from a minor to a major key so that the music would express the more "joyous and free" atmosphere of the United States.[21]

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[18] Heller, *Isaac M. Wise,* (New York: UAHC Press, 1965): 572; quoted in Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot*, 15.
[19] Samuelson, *The Changing Attitude of Reform*, 14.
[20] Ibid., 21.
[21] *CCAR Yearbook* (1930), 40: 79.

In general, the Reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the essence of Judaism in terms of the unity of the Jewish people and their focus on human rationality and morality. Judaism was considered to be both a group of people called Jews and an actualization of humankind's potential for rational and ethical behavior. Ritual and ceremony were not *the* essence. Rather, they were the means through which the essence of Judaism could find realization in each generation.

1937-1976

Changes in the movement's ritual outlook are substantially evident between the publication of the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform and the gathering of the 1937 annual CCAR convention which met in Columbus, Ohio. Discontent arose in response to the pallid ceremonial ways of the late nineteenth century. Going beyond the 1885 platform, the 1937 platform asserted that Jews are expected to participate fully in the Jewish life of the home, the synagogue, the school, and other community institutions. Here, unlike before, ritual is not only a tool for the enactment of Judaism; it is more of an aspect of Judaism's essence. Thus, by 1937, ritual and ceremony are elevated in status in Reform Judaism as a whole.

In 1934, the Committee on Resolutions at the CCAR convention called for a committee to address and study the changes since the Pittsburgh Platform. The following year, they were to present a "symposium re-evaluating the platform with a view of formulating a pronouncement touching the philosophy and program of present day Reform Judaism."[22] Two years later, in 1936, Rabbi Samuel S. Cohon presented his proposed draft of the Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism. The platform was revised

[22] "Report on Committee on Resolutions." *CCAR Yearbook* (1934), 44: 132.

by a committee of six and later adopted. After some difficulty, the platform was presented to the Conference with this preamble:

> In view of the changes that have taken place in the modern world and the consequent need of stating anew the teachings of Reform Judaism, the CCAR makes the following declaration of principles. It presents them not as a fixed creed but as a guide for the progressive elements of Jewry.[23]

The platform itself was divided into three parts: Judaism and its Foundations, Ethics, and Religious Practice. The fact that religious practice was found worthy of an entire category is noteworthy. The first sub-heading under the Religious Practice category was titled "The Religious Life." It reads:

> Jewish life...calls for faithful participation in the life of the Jewish community as it finds expression in home, synagogue and school and in all other agencies that enrich Jewish life and promote its welfare...
>
> The home has been and must continue to be a stronghold of Jewish life, hallowed by the spirit of love and reverence, by moral discipline and religious observance and worship...
>
> Judaism as a way of life requires in addition to its moral and spiritual demands, the preservation of the Sabbath, festivals, and Holy Days, the retention and development of such customs, symbols, and ceremonies as possess an inspirational value.[24]

Before the platform was written, Marvin Nathan conducted a study in 1926 that documented a movement away from the rational toward the emotional and mystical. He noted that "the weakness of Reform has been its over-emphasis on the rational. The swing is now back to the emotional, from rationalism to feelingism...There is a craving

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[23] Michael A. Meyer, and W. Gunther Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader.* (UAHC Press, 2001). *Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism* (1937), 199-200.
[24] Michael A. Meyer, and W. Gunther Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader.* (UAHC Press, 2001). *Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism* (1937), 202.

for something warm, definite, concrete—that appeals to the heart, that grips the soul. That there is a return to the customs and ceremonies in home and synagogue is evident on every side."[25] Solomon Freehof later stated in 1946,

> When our Columbus Platform declared that the concept of Torah was essential for us [and by 'Torah' included ritual and ceremonial observances as well as ethics], the Platform meant to express our sense of the increased validity of the ritual practices in Judaism...To declare that practice has some religious validity and to seek to establish a suitable foundation and structure for [this practice] is our concept of the present duty of Reform.[26]

Rituals in this case are not quite law, but they carry with them a certain authority. Samuel Cohon commented that without ritual of some kind, no religion can live or survive.[27] Eight years later, Morton Berman added, "surveys made...provide ample proof that nearly all of the Reform congregations have accepted practices, whether we call them *mitzvot*, observances, customs or ceremonies, as an integral, indispensable part of Reform Jewish life both in the synagogue and in the home."[28] In light of the theory of ritual discussed above in Chapter One, this reflects both the human tendency to ritualize as well as the specific need of American Jews at this time for a concrete, specific content to Jewish life that would be more than universal ideas and ideals. That is, once American Jews had successfully Americanized, wherein lies the rationale and content for Jewish difference?

The Columbus document gives authority to "Jewish life" and "Judaism," as opposed to the Pittsburgh document which gives authority to the rabbis, leaders, and

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[25] Nathan study cited in Milton Matz, *American Reform Judaism 1890-1937.* (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1952), 73-74.
[26] *CCAR Yearbook*, 56 (1946), 287.
[27] Ibid., 307.
[28] *CCAR Yearbook,* 64 (1954), 125.

writers of the platform. The rabbis of Pittsburgh stated that it was "we" (meaning "they") who had the authority to accept or reject ritual. In Columbus, the power of the rabbis is transferred to the Jewish people and to Judaism itself. "This change limited the freedom of the individual by delineating a boundary: a collective entity called 'Judaism.'"[29] Judaism emerges at this time, for the American Reformers, as a "way of life," especially as it "finds expression in home, synagogue and school." This attitudinal shift is significant and ultimately is identified as one of the major influences of the Columbus Platform.[30]

Not only does the authority change from 1885 to 1937, but the force of the verb changes, too. The words "calls for," "must," and "require" all connote obligation. The 1937 Columbus platform, in contrast to 1885, obligated Reform Jews to both ritual and moral commandments, stating that each age is obligated to adapt the teachings of the Torah to its needs. This implicit language expresses a responsibility that was not present in 1885. The strength of this language signifies the seriousness by which these ideas were taken.[31] Columbus asserted that a meaningful Jewish life included requirements. Despite the force of the word "requires," the platform does still not use the more powerful term, "*mitzvah.*" The issue of ceremonial relevance is still present in Columbus. Both platforms favor those rituals that "possess inspirational value" (1937) or that "elevate and sanctify our lives" (1885).

The voices among the Reformers who condemned the Jewish past ceased to be heard. There was now an appeal to reclaim the rich Jewish heritage. The Reformers of this age viewed tradition with nostalgia and disapproved the practices of their

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[29] Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot*, 78.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot*, 77.

predecessors in the movement who effectively achieved a break with tradition. Jewish tradition was welcomed, as expressed by Samuel S. Cohon in 1936 when he said, "[Tradition] forms the channel through which revelation comes down to the people."[32] Jewish tradition was seen as the heart of the Jewish people. Cohon's understanding of the essence of Judaism is similar to that of the early Reformers in that it credits Judaism as the preserver of certain ethical and rational ideals, but he differs in that he finds the embodiment of the essence of Judaism in all Jewish tradition, not just the biblical period. In this way, Cohon has been identified as the first significant Reform theologian to lead the movement away from its Classical persona.[33] Solomon Freehof reiterated this approach in 1946 when he said that the Reform leaders of his day no longer hate Orthodoxy as did the earlier Reformers, but are able to examine Orthodoxy and see what is and is not worth preserving.[34]

In general, the Reform movement was influenced by those who wanted to see an increase in ceremony. In 1937, a resolution was passed by the UAHC:

> Whereas, Reform Jewish worship has allowed many symbols, customs, etc., of traditional worship to fall into disuse; and Whereas, It is the sense of this Convention that many of these forms should be re-introduced.
> Now, therefore, Be It Resolved, That this Convention recommend to its constituent congregations, and to all Reform Jewish Congregations that into its Sabbath Services be put, and made a part thereof, traditional symbols, ceremonies and customs...[35]

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[32] Samuelson, *The Changing Attitude of Reform*, 26 citing Samuel S. Cohon, "Authority in Judaism," *HUC Annual* (1936), 11: 643.
[33] Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot*, 30.
[34] Solomon Freehof, "Reform Judaism and Halacha," *CCAR Yearbook* (1946), 66: 276-292.
[35] Robert M. Scott, "The Transition from Classical Reform to Neo-Reform," (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1966), 26.

This resolution recognizes a new tendency in Reform to use traditional ritual as a guide and a source from which to select practices and ceremonies. Yet, the Union's resolution is only a recommendation. It is not compulsory. There is still room for local discernment as to which practices should be readopted.

The Joint Committee on Ceremonies of the UAHC and the CCAR worked diligently in the 1930's and 40's to provide ritual objects and services to be used by congregations and individuals. This is another indication of the development in ritual culture. The committee itself was created in order to "encourage and stimulate experimentation in our congregations for the revival of old and the introduction of new ceremonies in the synagogue and to make concrete suggestions to the congregations for the introduction of such ceremonies."[36] For example, they prepared enhanced Torah services and devised a trumpet mouthpiece for the *shofar* so that a real *shofar* (as opposed to a horn) could be blown during the High Holidays.

In terms of ritual selectivity, prior to 1937, the question at hand was which practices to select among the existing rituals, which to preserve and which to reject. This question remained after 1937, but a new question arose: by what criteria should new rituals be created and introduced? These two concerns were raised by the Committee on Ceremonies in 1939 when they announced the Committee's purpose to the CCAR.

The impact of the Columbus Platform was monumental. The adoption of this document was seen as a turning point in the development of Reform Jewish history in America. It indicated new directions that the movement would take.[37] In 1938, the Committee on the Synagog and the Community reported that "the time has come for the

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[36] Report on Committee on Ceremonies, *CCAR Yearbook* (1940), 50: 22.
[37] Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot*, 79.

responsible leaders of Liberal Judaism to formulate a code of observances and ceremonies and to offer that code authoritatively to Liberal Jews."[38] Even though it took many years to produce such a guide, the attitude among the Reform rabbinate was favorable to the idea. The Columbus Platform formally acknowledged the changes that had been taking place in American Reform Judaism since the time of the Pittsburgh Platform. It articulated what could be characterized as a "Neo-Reform" point of view.

What distinguished this era in Reform Judaism from the previous one was that considerably more rituals and traditions were found to fulfill the demands of the above-mentioned criteria that judged a religious practice to be valid: if it enhanced Jewish loyalty, if it embodied the ethical and intellectual ideals of Judaism, if it was deemed to be aesthetic, and if it did not conflict with American life. How did this increased valorization of ritual come about socially in the American Reform movement?

In 1880 there were approximately three hundred thousand Jews in the United States, most of whom were of German ancestry. In 1881 the Russian government initiated a period of persecution against the Jews of Russia, causing a wave of Eastern European immigration to the United States. Two and a half million came to the US between 1881 and 1924, when the US instituted restrictive immigration laws. "While the Russian immigrant had tasted the Enlightenment to some extent, rationalism was new to the Russian immigrant and he had not yet severed his ties with traditional Jewry."[39] Most of these Jewish immigrants were Orthodox, and from them came new Reform Jews. These Jews brought their love of tradition into the Reform movement. If the movement was going to continue to grow and be a comprehensive expression of Jewish religious

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[38] Report of the Committee on the Synagog and the Community, *CCAR Yearbook* (1938) 48: 64.
[39] Samuelson. *The Changing Attitude of Reform,* 40.

life, then it would have to appeal to these new American Jews. The ceremonialism that had been previously rejected by Reform Jews was now examined and reconsidered. Without ritual practice, perhaps the beauty and sanctity of the Jewish home had become grievously impaired.[40]

A second factor influencing the change in the ritual of the Reform movement at this time was the rise of a new generation of Reform Jewish leaders who had never experienced religious discrimination in Europe at the hands of the Orthodox authorities. These Reformers were far removed from this intolerance and could approach matters of traditional practice with a different sense of connection.

A third factor was also at play. The nineteenth century had been relatively calm – Western civilization had gone almost one hundred years without war in Europe, and Jews throughout Western Europe and the United States were accepted politically and economically. The Jew was safe in his world and had faith in the collective possibility for bringing about an even better world for humankind. At such a time, there was little need for prayer or ritual to express more anxious or existential concerns. The twentieth century, on the other hand, did not maintain this same level of peace and prosperity for the Jew. Two world wars broke out, bringing for the Jew anti-semitism and persecution. One could no longer rely on human reason. The power of prayer and ritual once again took on important meaning and purpose for Jews everywhere, particularly when they felt more and more that they needed to rely on each other.[41]

With the change in ritual culture in the American Reform movement came the need for a ritual manual. Frederic Doppelt and David Polish wrote the first *Guide for*

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[40] Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot*, 58.
[41] Samuelson. *The Changing Attitude of Reform*, 41-42.

Reform Jews in 1957. "[The Guide] was required because complete religious laissez-faire was seen to have failed in the past. The result of the extreme individualism of the Reform movement was that 'Reform Judaism has been equated with minimal Judaism in the eyes of many; and to some, being a Reform Jew came to be synonymous with doing nothing about Judaism—all of which tended to sap the strength of Reform as a way of life.'"[42] In this guide, much of the symbolism in Jewish ceremony is based upon Israel's obligation to remember the spiritual roots of its being.[43]

In 1965, W. Gunther Plaut spoke before the CCAR arguing the need for a guide to Reform Jewish practice produced by the movement. Plaut asserted that most Reform Jews would agree that they must do something to remain Jews. The guides he proposed would tell Reform Jews what to do. Plaut's 1965 speech proposing a guide to Shabbat observance led to the establishment of a CCAR Sabbath Committee, which eventually became the Committee on Reform Jewish Practice after *A Shabbat Manual* was published in 1972. The same committee worked on the next guide, *Gates of Mitzvah,* published in 1979.[44] Both of these guides will be discussed in further detail in the context of the next section.

1976-1999

As the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion neared their one hundredth anniversaries, the movement planned to mark the events with the writing of a new platform. But the movement was fragmented and burdened by tension, mostly revolving around issues of intermarriage

[42] Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot*, 8.
[43] Frederic Doppelt and David Polish, *A Guide for Reform Jews* (New York, 1957), 17-18.
[44] Henry, *An Analysis of the Changing Attitude Toward Ritual*, 42-43.

which almost split the Conference in 1973. The task of creating a new platform was considered to be too great and this particular project was abandoned.[45]

Eugene Borowitz, professor of religious education at Hebrew Union College in New York previously had contributed greatly to the literature of the Reform movement. Particularly influential now was the Centenary Perspective of the CCAR in 1976, of which he was the primary author. He differentiated between the would-be platform that was abandoned and the Centenary statement which was ultimately devised. Of the later adopted Centenary Perspective, he says, "[it] sought to perform a far smaller task, retaining only the historical orientation of the previous effort."[46] This document aimed to emphasize the elements that united the members of the CCAR instead of the controversial ones. Despite all of the obstacles, the product was enthusiastically accepted by the CCAR at its 1976 Conference in San Francisco.

The Centenary Perspective essentially provided Reform Jews with a list of obligations. However, it began with a definite statement favoring autonomy. Under the heading, "Diversity Within Unity—the Hallmark of Reform," it states:

> Reform Jews respond to change in various ways according to the Reform principle of autonomy of the individual. However, Reform Judaism does more than tolerate diversity; it engenders it...We stand open to any position thoughtfully and conscientiously advocated in the spirit of Reform Jewish beliefs.[47]

The mention of this 'principle' is an indication that there still existed a tension between autonomy and authority in the Reform movement. At this time, Borowitz maintained that

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[45] Ibid., 79-80.
[46] Eugene Borowitz, *Reform Judaism Today: Book One: Reform in the Process of Change* (New York, 1978), xiii.
[47] Meyer, and Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader. Reform Judaism – a Centenary Perspective* (1976), 204.

"when conscience conflicts with Jewish law, *halacha,* Reform Jews feel it their duty – literally – to break with tradition."[48]

Borowitz specifically believes that a Jew is in covenant with God and is *obligated* to the observance of ritual mitzvot. For Borowitz, one must be a Jew in everything one does.[49] By 1976, the Reform rabbinate affirmed that Judaism emphasizes "action rather than creed as the primary expression of a religious life." Reform Jews are obligated to some type of daily religious observance. Borowitz called upon Reform Jews to let ritual direct them to God, facilitating a relationship with the holy. The entire section under the subtitle "Our *Obligations*: Ritual Practice" reads:

> Judaism emphasizes action rather than creed as the primary expression of a religious life, the means by which we strive to achieve universal justice and peace. Reform Judaism shares this emphasis on duty and obligation. Our founders stressed that the Jew's ethical responsibilities, personal and social are enjoined by God. The past century has taught us that the claims made upon us may begin with our ethical obligations but they extend to many other aspects of Jewish living, including: creating a Jewish home centered on family devotion; lifelong study; private prayer and public worship; daily religious observance; keeping the Sabbath and the holy days; celebrating the major events of life; involvement with the synagogues and community; and other activities which promote the survival of the Jewish people and enhance its existence. Within each area of Jewish observance Reform Jews are called upon to confront the claims of Jewish tradition, *however differently perceived*, and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge.[50]

The development of the movement's attitude on the subject of authority is summarized briefly within this statement. As mentioned above, the early Reformers of the Classical

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[48] Borowitz, *Reform Judaism Today*, 96.
[49] Ibid., 127-128.
[50] Meyer and Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader. Reform Judaism – a Centenary Perspective* (1976), 205-6.

period emphasized the divine origin of ethical standards. Just like the Columbus Platform, the Centenary Perspective acknowledges that there is authority vested in Jewish tradition. Judaism carries with it certain responsibilities. So, too, does a Reform Jew have certain responsibilities. At the same time, the statement mentions autonomy. Noting the importance of study, Reform Jews are obligated to make educated choices, however the choices are expressed and "however differently [they are] perceived." Here we see a stance towards ritual that leaves room for innovation and personal, meaningful expression, as long as the choice is made 'through knowledge.'

The concept of ritual, as it is addressed throughout the Pittsburgh, Columbus, and San Francisco statements, changes. In Pittsburgh, ritual and ethical matters are called "laws," in Columbus they are called "demands," and in San Francisco they are called "responsibilities." The Pittsburgh Platform dismisses ritual laws on the basis of their irrelevance. Columbus and the beginning of Neo-Reform redirected the movement to a greater focus on ceremony. (There, some ceremonies were actually required.) The Centenary Perspective follows the Columbus Platform's lead by stating that Judaism emphasizes action rather than creed as an expression of religious life. According to ritual theory, the ritual action serves to enact or concretize the creed. Action or deed was also considered the means to attain universal justice and peace.

Eight categories of religious practice are named to be obligatory in the Centenary Perspective: creating a Jewish home, lifelong study, prayer and worship, daily religious observance, keeping the Sabbath and holy days, celebrating life events, synagogue and community involvement, and activities that promote the survival of the Jewish people. This list is prefaced with the word "including," perhaps to avoid creating a minimum

standard of practice. Borowitz further maintains that "no intimation is given that these eight are the only ones or officially regarded as the most important ones...the wording does not exclude those who feel that some other aspect of Jewish living is critical."[51] This leaves the question begging to be asked, "What other ritual practices did Reform Jews take upon themselves?" Does not "activities that promote the survival of the Jewish people" (such as support of Israel and other local Jewish communities, financially and otherwise) include all Jewish rituals? Why are these categories listed if they are not somehow the most important or the most practiced religious rituals?

These categories are left wide-open for interpretation. "Daily religious observance" could mean a number of things. Borowitz explained this value:

> Daily religious observance, aside from ethics, has not always been associated with Reform Jewish practice. Rabbis have tried to get people to say blessings and carry out ritual practices which would sanctify the everyday, but secularization has made this seem old-fashioned and many people have assumed that Reform Judaism was something one did in the synagogue on the weekend
> ...considering how secularized life-style has tended to rob us of our humanity, we desperately need to bring some religious practice into our everyday activities to make unassailable our consciousness of our inalienable dignity founded in our being children of God. Surely the current American concern with all sorts of mysticism testifies to this religious need in a time when rationalism no longer seems adequate to the human situation. The *Centenary Perspective* passes no judgment on what sort of regular effort to maintain contact with the Divine is appropriate to all of us, but it does say that this is an aspect of Jewish piety which rightly lays a claim upon us.[52]

[51] Borowitz, *Reform Judaism Today*, 36.
[52] Ibid., 41.

In Borowitz's opinion, a Reform Jew has an obligation to establish a relationship with God. Everyday ritual practice would inevitably bring this relationship to consciousness. This is the first platform that speaks so clearly and directly about spirituality.

Other platforms mention the uplifting potential of the Sabbath and holy days, but Borowitz asserts a different perspective of this religious obligation in relation to the Centenary Perspective:

> There has never been much question that Reform Jews should observe the traditional Jewish calendar with its special days and weekly Sabbath. Yet if our obligations as Jews were primarily ethical, then one could easily substitute other times and activities for our customary Jewish observance. However, when God is basic to your life and further, you live as part of the Jewish people, then its calendar and customs take on fresh importance. The holy days and festivals mark critical moments in the life of our people and its relation to God. They accent the passage of our years with their reminders of what history is all about. They give us a weekly and seasonal rhythm that commercial and social time does not know. The Jewish calendar does impose special burdens upon us, but as Sunday is no longer the compulsory day of rest, and as we are able to exercise more personal control over our schedules, the religious challenge of the Jewish calendar becomes increasingly real. No Reform Jew can legitimately avoid it.[53]

The traditional Jewish calendar is to be observed by Reform Jews. This concept reiterates the Reform movement's connection to Judaism and the Jewish people. Both the form and content of the ritual are important. One can no longer observe only the values or the ethical mandates of Shabbat because how and when it is observed is also important. The same is true for the counting of the *Omer*. Just because a Gregorian calendar exists, the counting of the days is not obsolete. *Sefirat ha'omer*, in many ways that have already been discussed, specifically marks out "Jewish time."

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[53] Ibid., 41-2.

Finally what is transformative about the Centenary Perspective is that it indicates religious practices as the means to ensure Jewish survival. The last of the categories for religious obligation includes "and all other activities which promote the survival of the Jewish people and enhance its existence."

The Manuals of Reform Jewish Practice

The three platforms discussed up to this point outline a theoretical foundation for the Reform movement at different points in its American history. They did not all specifically deal with religious conduct and practice, despite those within the CCAR who advocated for the establishment of some kind of creed or guide for such ritual and ceremony. In 1938, the CCAR Committee on Synagogue and Community determined, "the time has come for the responsible leaders of Liberal Judaism to formulate a code of observances and ceremonies and to offer that code authoritatively to Liberal Jews."[54] However, the motion was defeated by the CCAR Executive Board in 1940 and several unsuccessful organized attempts followed. A few guides were published independently by individual rabbis, one in 1957 by Frederic A. Doppelt and David Polish and another in 1967 by Morrison D. Bial. The CCAR did not produce a guide for religious practices and observances until *Tadrich L'Shabbat, A Shabbat Manual* was published in 1972. This guide was edited by W. Gunther Plaut under the auspices of the Committee on the Sabbath. The committee evolved into the Committee on Reform Jewish Practice and later produced *Shaarei Mitzvah, Gates of Mitzvah* in 1977 (edited by Simeon J. Maslin), and *Shaarei Mo'eid, Gates of the Seasons* in 1983 (edited by Peter S. Knobel).[55]

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[54] "Report of the Committee on the Synagog and the Community," *CCAR Yearbook* (1938), 48: 65.
[55] Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot*, 89-90.

Doppelt and Polish understood Judaism as a way of life, similar to the Columbus Platform, the platform of the time. They wrote their guide "to help bring a greater degree of observance, self-discipline commitment, and spirituality into our religious life."[56] At the CCAR conference in 1954, Doppelt reported in a workshop on Changes in Reform Jewish Practice. He addressed the challenge of determining what should be practiced by Reform Jews, and therefore the problem of what should be included in a guide for Reform practice. He rejected the criteria of aesthetic appeal, national survival, popularity, and ethics. Instead, he believed the contents of the guide should most importantly be written under the framework of Jewish tradition, including Jewish ideology, methodology, and vocabulary. Doppelt named *mitzvah*, *halachah*, and *minhag* as the three "lifegiving streams" which "form the vast network of practices of Jewish life."[57] The guide resulting from his collaboration with David Polish followed the philosophy introduced by Doppelt in his CCAR address. Polish revised the guide in 1973 after Doppelt's death.[58]

The 1973 revision of *A Guide for Reform Jewish Practice* reflected Reform in the seventies. Polish wrote in the introduction that "the years and the Jewish experience have sharpened the need for ever deeper response to the tradition. Thus, the second day of *Rosh HaShanah* is no longer overlooked; a chapter on Conversion is added [to the Guide]; marriages on *Tisha B'Av* are definitely discouraged..."[59] Practices previously designated as *minhagim* are given a higher status as *halachah* in the second edition. This is because the Reform rabbinate, the authority for determining *halachah* according to

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[56] From *A Guide for Reform Jews* (New York, 1957): 29-30 as mentioned in Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot,* 91.
[57] Report from Workshop on Changes in Reform Jewish Practice, *CCAR Yearbook* (1954), 64: 126-7.
[58] Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot*, 92.
[59] Doppelt and Polish. *A Guide for Reform Jews* (revised edition, New York, 1973), v-vi.

Doppelt and Polish, had come to accept these practices. One such ritual example is the suggestion and encouragement of the wedding *chuppah* which was only briefly acknowledged in the first guide.[60]

Morrison D. Bial wrote his guide, *Liberal Judaism at Home: The Practice of Modern Reform Judaism,* in 1967, to "help Liberal Jews determine what is customary Reform practice, especially as it affects them personally."[61] Bial noted that the attempts to comprehend the specific practices of Reform Jews had been inconclusive. Even if such figures existed they would not have any validity to establish what "correct, thoughtful, and efficacious Reform practice should be."[62] The purpose of the book was therefore to present the practices of Liberal Judaism in relation to the accepted norms of traditional Judaism.[63] Bial's guide provides simple explanations for traditional customs as well as reasons that Reform Jews have accepted or rejected them. An example is his explanation of *Tisha B'Av* in relation to Reform:

> Liberal Judaism has deemphasized Tisha B'Av more than any other holiday. It is not that we do not mourn for the loss of life and the wretchedness of our people after these twin tragedies (the destruction of the two Temples). We do. But most Reform Jews feel that the Temple destroyed by the Romans had become a symbol of archaic usages...there is relatively little or often no observance of this day of mourning in Liberal Judaism.[64]

The CCAR published *Tadrich L'Shabbat, A Shabbat Manual* in 1972, which was preceded by seven years of consideration and discussion. When the idea was accepted by the CCAR in 1969 it marked the first time in its 83-year history that the conference voted

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[60] Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot,* 98.
[61] Morrison D. Bial, *Liberal Judaism at Home: The Practice of Modern Reform Judaism* (New Jersey, 1967), 1.
[62] Ibid., 4.
[63] Henry, *Changing Attitude Toward Ritual Mitzvot*, 98.
[64] Bial, *Liberal Judaism at Home,* 140.

to publish a guide to Reform Jewish practice. This guide, edited by W. Gunther Plaut, related only to Shabbat observance. The Conference, itself, focused its attention on Shabbat as the central Jewish experience of Reform Jews, probably because of Plaut's strong influence as chair of the Sabbath Committee. Shabbat has always been of utmost value in the Reform movement, as is evidenced by its mention in all three platforms.

The definition of *mitzvah* in the *Tadrich* implied a certain level of obedience to God or the custom of the Jewish people. *Mitzvah* was introduced as what one ought to do. The guide stated:

> You must always remember that you are performing *mitzvot*. It is not a question of 'how you feel about it at any given time. You may not be in the mood.' But being a Jew is not always convenient or easy. The performance of *mitzvot* ought to be the pattern of one's life.[65]

The manual recognizes that at some point *mitzvot* depend on choice, not observance simply as a point of obedience. On the other end of the spectrum, the performance of *mitzvot* should not depend on the doer's mood. In this manner, the manual commits to both *mitzvah* and choice.

The CCAR-published Shabbat guide was followed by two other guides, *Gates of Mitzvah: A Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle* in 1979, and *Gates of the Seasons: A Guide to the Jewish Year* in 1983. Plaut's remarks in the forward of *Gates of Mitzvah* resonate with the spirit of the Centenary Perspective in that they indicate a desire for Reform Jews to live by a Jewish frame of reference. The guide makes it clear that it is only to serve as a reference, as the individual must work to incorporate Jewish practice into his/her life.[66]

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[65] W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *Tadrich L'Shabbat: A Shabbat Manual* (New York, 1972), 8.
[66] W. Gunther Plaut, "Forward," in Simeon Maslin, ed., *Gates of Mitzvah* (New York, 1979).

The 1979 Publication of *Gates of Mitzvah* focused primarily on ritual *mitzvot*, again in an attempt to make its readers' lives more Jewish. What the first volume did for guidance in lifecycle events, the second one provided for the holiday cycle. It recognized that two calendars regulate our lives, the secular and the Jewish. "This volume...is designed to help Jews feel more clearly the flow of Jewish time."[67] What is particularly interesting about this volume are the comments relating to the criteria for the selection of rituals. Simeon Maslin, the chair of the committee that produced the guide, commonly referenced the philosophy of Reform that encouraged old and new practices that enrich life and discouraged ones that were no longer meaningful. He explains:

> In this book...certain ancient practices are recommended and others are not...Those customs of long standing which still have meaning and which add beauty and Jewish depth to our lives should be observed. But, as Reform Jews, we have every right to discard practices which have lost meaning for contemporary Jews and which lack an aesthetic dimension.[68]

Maslin's words are positively instructive. He infers that Reform Jews *should* observe practices that they find meaningful, but that they *have the right* to discard others. Perhaps this is how his view differs from the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform. The Classical Reformers may have been more inclined to reject certain practices than accept them. Maslin's statement is also congruent with Borowitz's argument that rejection is acceptable, but only after one has studied and encountered the tradition.

There had been plans for a third guide that would have dealt with ethical *mitzvot* and Jewish ethics in general, but the CCAR Publications Committee ran out of money, and so the project was never completed.

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[67] Peter S. Knobel, ed., *Gates of the Seasons* (New York, 1983), 5-6.
[68] Simeon Maslin in Knobel, ed., *Gates of the Seasons*, viii.

Other significant changes that took place in American Judaism at this time were greatly influenced by the shift in American society and culture. A reconsideration of social and moral values became more prominent during the 1960's and the following decades. Two forces, in particular, influenced ritual innovation in contemporary Jewish circles. The first is feminism and the second is what Vanessa Ochs calls "democracy and open access."[69]

The second wave of American feminism influenced educated women to begin speaking out about the discrimination they experienced within Jewish life. They struggled to find liturgical and ritual ways to add a female voice to Jewish ritual life. The effects became more visible in the 1970's as the first female rabbis were ordained and more women rose to roles of leadership in the congregations. Women achieved roles as educators, professors of Jewish Studies, and leaders of Jewish organizations. With access and position, they were influential innovators of a new body of Jewish rituals. They adapted existing rituals (ones that needed a feminine voice or expression) and created new distinctively female alternatives for female life cycle events and healing/renewal ceremonies.

The *havurah* movement was a way to build upon the feminist, non-heirarchical (anti-bourgeois) model of community that encouraged ritual innovation and creativity. *Havurot* were able to fight alienation more effectively than the large synagogue with its bureaucratic structure of leadership. In the literature of the Reform movement, the idea of creating synagogue *havurot* first arises in 1966 as a way to observe *Shabbat*.[70]

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[69] Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, 39.
[70] Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 382.

> The *havurah* model appealed because it offered its members the opportunity to form small intimate fellowships for study, prayer, and friendship that seemed impossible in the large, decorous, bureaucratized synagogues of their youth. It allowed individual participation and spontaneity, whereas established synagogues were dominated by professionals who "led" formal services...The goal, however, was not only to alter the setting of religious interaction but also to construct a different type of Judaism.[71]

Like *Gates of Mitzvah*, the *havurot* in the 1970's provided a vehicle for those congregants who sought to give Reform Judaism a more central role in their lives.[72]

This movement became even more popular and influential with the publication of *The Jewish Catalog* in 1973, which claimed to satisfy a need that had been present for a long time – a need for a lighthearted, yet authoritative guide to Jewish living in a modern world.[73] This volume was followed by a second one in 1976, and a third in 1980. These catalogs depicted emerging Jewish rituals and promoted a creative spirit that would encourage others in the same act of innovation. They gave permission to a generation of middle-class American Jews in rebellion against empty religious conventions to search for religious meaning and self-expression.[74] These hands-on, do-it-yourself books were empowering. You did not have to be an expert to practice Judaism. Vanessa Ochs writes, "If the catalogs seem quaint or outdated now, they were revolutionary in their time and cultivated a spirit that continues to exist."[75]

In addition to establishing *havurot,* some of those influenced by the counter-culture movements sought to combine their interest in eastern religions with the self-

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[71] Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 24.
[72] Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 382.
[73] Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, and Sharon Strassfeld, *The First Jewish Catalog* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1973), back cover.
[74] Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual,* 40.
[75] Ibid.

actualization movement, doing so in a Jewish context. The result was a "new-age" Judaism, led by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi who sought to integrate a spiritual element with Kabbalistic philosophy, Chassidic prayer, and meditation. The goal was to gain a practical orientation to Jewish spiritual life. This movement's focus on prayer and ritual influenced mainstream Judaism through creative liturgies and innovative ceremonies.[76]

In his book, *Liberal Judaism* (1984), Borowitz dedicated an entire chapter to "A Liberal Jewish Approach to Ritual." He begins the chapter by explaining that his positive appeal for more ritual makes many Jews quite uncomfortable. They do not mind some Hebrew and ceremonialism when at temple or lighting the Shabbat candles at home, but that is about as far as they are willing to go personally. Borowitz assumes that many people think that by opening their lives to a little ritual they may eventually resort to becoming overwhelmed by religious demands. Consider the use of the traditional blessing before performing a *mitzvah*. One blesses God *who has sanctified us by divine commandment and commanded us to...* Borowitz comments, "If we took these words literally – and did not choose to rebel – we would indeed have to undertake the entire repertoire of Jewish ceremonial. Our first step, then, in talking together about ritual must be a quick reminder: liberal Jews emphasize personal freedom in Judaism."[77]

Religion for liberal Jews, then, is partly human endeavor and partly God's inspiration. Ritual discloses human need, not just God's commands. Borowitz's observation here shares a perspective with those of anthropology and ritual studies. So, when liberal Jews use the traditional words of Jewish blessing (as mentioned above), they

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[76] Stephanie Wolfe, *Crisis and Celebration: Creating and Adapting Jewish Rituals to Mark Our Lives* (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1995), 53.
[77] Borowitz, *Liberal Judaism,* 410.

are acknowledging God as a part of human religious creativity. What tradition takes literally is viewed figuratively in this regard. With a human approach towards ritual, one is given the power to decide which traditional acts to do and which not to do. Even more so, this approach empowers the worshipper to create new rites needed to express a present-day sense of Jewish-ness.

For many years, Reform Judaism asserted itself as a rational religion, even though it included a substantial aesthetic component. Practicing universal ethics was the primary way of living religiously. Ritual was a relatively unimportant expression of Jewish obligation. The sense of liberal autonomy and freedom probably worked against the inclusion of religious ritual. This is revolt against the authority of tradition in the context of modern western society. Individual responsibility translated as *not* performing traditional Jewish rites.

Borowitz argues that many Jews in the 1980's were still too rational to need ritual as a component of religious expression.[78] This is especially interesting since some aspect of the irrational (stereotypically coined "magic") already pervaded secular life. Borowitz discusses the function of ritual using a theoretical lens, just as the literature in Chapter One does. Consider the ritual of the birthday cake.[79] The yearly passing of a birth day seems incomplete without a specially designated cake or dessert topped with candles. The cake cannot be presented without the rendition of "Happy Birthday." And, the candles cannot be blown out by the honored birthday guest without the making of a wish and the attempt to extinguish the candles in one breath. A level of magic is evidently functioning here, yet it is overlooked and the emotion that it evokes is instead embraced.

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[78] Ibid., 411.
[79] Example given by Eugene B. Borowitz, *Liberal Judaism,* 412.

This birthday ritual is surprisingly constant throughout our culture and others. So why are magic and emotion not yet fully accepted in the realm of religious ritual? Rationally oriented critics deny that ritual can actually change reality. Thomas Driver does not consider "magic" to be a pejorative term. To him, a ritual that has meaning and also 'works' is "magical." This definition of magic does not overlook the emotional transformation involved with living a human life.

Besides the predominance of the rationalist tendency in Reform Judaism, another response may be the following: People who have grown up with a Judaism relatively void of ritual comfortably fit into a reserved, dignified way of religious practice. The analysis below includes ritual surveys that suggest why Reform Jews have not been exposed to *sefirat ha'omer.* This ritual was not even given a fighting chance because it was not in the conscious sphere of religious expression. Reform Jews may consciously or unconsciously feel embarrassed by not knowing the requirements of a Jewish ceremonial life: the actions, words, or songs involved. They may have never been exposed to these Jewish rites or they may have not let themselves feel the emotions these rituals create.[80]

It is important to note that the liberal Jew need not do everything that the classic Jewish codes prescribe. Borowitz makes it clear that the rationale, 'If you don't do it the Orthodox way you might just as well not do it at all,' *is the antithesis* of a Reform way of practice. In other words, inventive and creative adaptation is the key to a Reform approach to ritual. Ritual choice is subjective, especially if the ritual is chosen because of its affective nature. This would have been an important factor to recognize if *sefirat ha'omer* was going to become an integral Reform Jewish ritual. Because subjective

[80] Ibid., 411-412.

choice is true for an individual and a community, a variety of rituals will always exist within the spectrum of Reform Judaism. "From the liberal perspective, such pluralism is not only healthy but desirable; from it, particularly from the creative energy it releases, arise the new forms which keep Judaism alive."[81]

Borowitz argues that a transition to a more positive approach to ritual, as evidenced by the 1976 Perspective, must have stemmed largely from two causes: the changing perception of the self as human and as Jew. We already noted the emphasis of nineteenth-century western bourgeous civilization and thought on the importance of the intellect. Neglect of our bodies, emotions, and passions accompanied this heavy rational focus. A more holistic view of the self emerged with an appreciation of both physical and emotional needs – hence the increased practice of ritual. This, too, relates to Driver who recognized humans as ritualizing animals. "Once we acknowledge that we are less exclusively cerebral and more happily Jewish than we once may have thought, we can share in the new contemporary openness to ritual."[82]

It helps that many of our rituals are a joy to perform. As humans we enjoy making moments special. It is one thing to set aside each Friday night for Sabbath dinner, but if we light candles, the sense of the meal immediately and completely changes. A blessing over them sets a sacred tone and gives a different context to the meal. To say the blessings over the wine and the *challah* further links the dinner to a cosmic reality as well as to the generations of our people who came before us and to our people everywhere today.

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[81] Ibid., 423.
[82] Ibid., 412.

Rituals teach us lessons we need to know or things of which we need to be reminded. The Passover *seder,* for example, enacts the redemption narrative of the Jewish people. The prayers we recite are powerful not only for what they say to God, but for what they say to us.

In the 1980's, Borowitz found it surprising that a major motive leading to greater ritual observance was the "quiet rise of a new spirituality."[83] The liberal community set out on a new spiritual search in order to discover a different realm of meaning. This new sensitivity engaged the part of the self that connects with God and the cosmic order of the universe. The result was a willingness to tap into another level of cognition, a fresh awareness or consciousness. At the time, Borowitz projected that this inclination would continue, saying "the more we see our humanity as multileveled and the more we wish to express ourselves as loyal and believing – or spiritually searching – Jews, the more ritual will be important to us."[84]

The 1990's – 1999

We have gone from an 1885 and 1937 "Platform" to a 1976 "Perspective," and now we address the era of change that brought about the 1999 "Principles." In 1989 and 1994 the Union of American Hebrew Congregations' and the Central Conference of American Rabbis' (UAHC/CCAR) Joint Commission on Worship and Religious Living initiated two surveys. The surveys addressed the worship and ritual patterns of (North American) Reform congregations. First, we'll consider the implications of the 1989 survey. Rabbi Sanford Seltzer who wrote the report begins by stating that the

[83] Ibid., 422.
[84] Ibid., 425.

congregational ritual practices of the time were linked to significant demographic changes in the Reform movement whose membership consisted of predominately second and third generation Americans. These Jews have few ties to their Eastern European or German Jewish ancestors. The contemporary synagogue is also comprised of individuals from a diverse number of family structures, and a growing presence of Jews-by-choice and intermarried couples. It should be noted that when drafting the survey, the Commission focused on concerns that were of immediate interest of and relevance to the congregations, not necessarily the individual.

The results of the 1989 survey confirm anecdotal evidence that customs and ceremonies began to play a larger role in Reform congregations than ever before. The survey report suspects that this period of change was not easy for Reform congregants whose orientation was that of Classical Reform. The growing use of *kippot* and the addition of rituals surrounding the Torah reading, for example, probably added to their discomfort. The report suggests, "These dedicated men and women will be tempted to label such trends as a return to Orthodoxy – which they are not – rather than expressions of a post-Holocaust generation of Reform Jews in search of new dimensions of spirituality."[85]

The 1994 survey on *Emerging Worship and Music Trends in UAHC Congregations* confirms the above-mentioned shift.[86] As the twentieth century came to a close, the institutions and practices of Reform Judaism underwent great changes. A

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[85] UAHC-CCAR Commission on Religious Living, *Worship and Ritual Patterns of Reform Congregations: An Interim Report.* By Rabbi Sanford Seltzer (1989), 6.

[86] UAHC-CCAR Commission on Religious Living, *Emerging Worship and Music Trends in UAHC Congregations* Report by Daniel Freelander, Robin Hirsch, and Sanford Seltzer (1994), ii. 546 UAHC Congregations (64%) responded to this survey that was sent to all UAHC affiliates. These numbers are telling, indicating a great interest in this topic, reflecting the ideological direction of the Reform movement at the end of the 20th century.

substantial number of congregations conducted B'nei *Mitzvah* on Shabbat morning rather than Shabbat evening. An overwhelming observance of *Selichot* began, as did morning festival services on *Sukkot* and the first and last day of Passover. The building of an outdoor *Sukkah* also became normative.[87] American Jews, whose lives have been shaped by an American culture in which they feel very comfortable, express patterns of religious behavior that are congruent with an American lifestyle. "For what we now have is a set of Reform Jewish synagogue practices which are indigenous to the American Scene."[88] The principle of free choice is certainly an influence. Both surveys conclude that the optional usage of *kippot* and *tallitot* would become normative in the Reform synagogue in the twenty-first century.[89]

Faced with all these factors of change, the CCAR began a two-year process of conversation and consultation with its membership and laypeople in 1997. Following a long discussion in the CCAR, initiated by then-president Rabbi Richard Levy, the Conference adopted a new platform, once again in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The *Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism* (1999) elicited quite a few objections from rabbis and laypeople who expressed their discontent with the traditional tone of the document.[90] The Conference set out to address the direction and vision of Reform Judaism in the twenty-first century; at a time when "so many individuals are striving for religious meaning, moral purpose, and a sense of community..."[91] The Preamble continues to illustrate the Reform way of Jewish practice:

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[87] Ibid., 19.
[88] Ibid., i.
[89] Ibid., 20.
[90] Meyer and Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader,* 208. *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism* (1999).
[91] Ibid., Preamble.

> Throughout our history, we Jews have remained firmly rooted in Jewish tradition, even as we have learned much from our encounters with other cultures. The great contribution of Reform Judaism is that it has enabled the Jewish people to introduce innovation while preserving tradition, to embrace diversity while asserting commonality, to affirm beliefs without rejecting those who doubt, and to bring faith to sacred texts without sacrificing critical scholarship.[92]

The Principles suggest that Reform Jews with the tenets of Judaism (God, Torah, and Israel) hope to transform our lives through *kedushah,* holiness. In the city where fifteen Reform rabbis gathered in 1885 to assert that only the Torah's moral laws were binding, that laws that regulate diet and dress obstruct modern spiritual elevation, some four hundred Reform rabbis gathered one hundred and fourteen years later to approve a document that stated:[93]

> We are committed to the ongoing study of the whole array of *mitzvot* and to the fulfillment of those that address us as individuals and as a community. Some of these *mitzvot,* sacred obligations, have long been observed by Reform Jews; others, both ancient and modern, demand renewed attention as the result of the unique context of our own times.[94]

In May, 1999, the CCAR voted 324 to 68 that Reform Jews can respond, in diverse and individual ways, to all of the *mitzvot.*[95] Pittsburgh was chosen as the setting for the vote with the hope that the name "Pittsburgh" would be permanently linked with the document that illustrated the growth of the movement since 1885.[96]

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[92] Ibid.
[93] Richard N. Levy, *A Vision of Holiness: The Future of Reform Judaism* (New York: URJ Press, 2005), 2.
[94] Meyer and Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader*, 208. *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism* (1999): Torah.
[95] Levy, *A Vision of Holiness*, 2.
[96] Ibid, 5 .

The 1999 Principles stress the importance of *mitzvot* for Reform Jews. In 1991, Dr. Eugene Borowitz had written, "to claim Jewish significance, a contemporary idea of God must first motivate and mandate the life of Torah."[97] Even if these words brought feelings of discomfort to the Reform Jew in 1991, they were further emphasized in the Principles of 1999 which state, "We affirm Torah as the foundation of Jewish life."[98] The Principles further idealize, "Through Torah study we are called to *mitzvot,* the means by which we make our lives holy."[99] If Reform Jews seek to live a life of holiness, the doing of *mitzvot* is the way to achieve this. *Mitzvot,* which allow humans to relate to God, have both ethical and spiritual dimensions.[100]

Some of the other ritually relevant and telling selections of the 1999 Platform are:

> We respond to God daily: through public and private prayer, through study and through the performance of other *mitzvot*, sacred obligations – *bein adam la Makom*, to God, and *bein adam lachaveiro,* to other human beings.[101]
>
> We bring Torah into the world when we seek to sanctify the times and places of our lives through regular home and congregational observance. Shabbat calls us to bring the highest moral values to our daily labor and to culminate the workweek with *kedushah,* holiness, *menuchah,* rest, and *oneg,* joy. The High Holy Days call us to account for our deeds. The Festivals enable us to celebrate with joy our people's religious journey in the context of the changing seasons. The days of remembrance remind us of the tragedies and the triumphs that have shaped our people's historical experience both in ancient and modern times. And we mark the milestones of our personal journeys with

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[97] Eugene Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew* (The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 58.
[98] Meyer and Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader,* 208. *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism* (1999): Torah.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Levy, *A Vision of Holiness*, 10.
[101] Meyer and Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader,* 208. *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism* (1999): God.

traditional and creative rites that reveal the holiness in each stage of life.[102]

Baruch she-amar ve-hayah ha-olam.
Praised be the One through whose word all things came to be.
May our words find expression in holy actions.
May they raise us up to a life of meaning devoted to God's service
And to the redemption of our world.[103]

Compared to the 1976 Centenary Perspective which speaks of "obligations," the 1999 Platform explicitly states that we respond to God with the practice of *mitzvot* on a daily basis. It is important to note that these obligations are now formally called by their traditional, Hebrew name: *mitzvot.* In the 1999 Platform, these *mitzvot* are named as public and private prayer, study, and other sacred obligations – to God and human beings. We assume that these *mitzvot* refer to ethical as well as spiritual *mitzvot,* but we cannot gather that either one takes precedence over another according to this statement. The distinctions between these two categories of *mitzvot* are blurry, as well. Examples of *mitzvot bein adam la-Makom* (between humankind and God) might be prayer, study, dietary laws, and wearing *tallit* and *tefillin.* Examples of *mitzvot bein adam la-chaveiro* (between one human and another) are visiting the sick, rejoicing with bride and groom, and refraining from harmful actions against another. There are divine and human elements in all of these *mitzvot.* As previously stated, ethical *mitzvot* held a higher status for Reform Jews in the past. Here, the *mitzvot* are not as easily distinguished. Although this shift from 1976 to 1999 may seem subtle, it speaks greatly to the increasing practice of ceremonial and spiritual *mitzvot* in later years.

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[102] Meyer and Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader*, 208. *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism* (1999): Torah.
[103] Ibid.

The 1999 Platform seems to suggest that Reform Judaism at this time relates very strongly to one of the main purposes of religious ritual practice as discussed in Chapter One: ordering time by sanctification. According to the platform, we, Reform Jews, do this by taking part in regular home and congregational observance on Shabbat, during the High Holy Days, the festivals, the days of remembrance, and milestones throughout our lifecycle. This suggests that Reform Jews are aware of ritual celebrations that mark Jewish time throughout the year. This may seem ideal, but I think it is far from the practice.

Jewish tradition has an interesting view on managing the time throughout the days of a year. There are roughly 136 days in the traditional Jewish year that have an aspect of *kedushah* attached to them; including the month of *Elul* in preparation for the High Holy Days, the ten days of repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and the 49 days of counting the *Omer* between Passover and Shavuot. Rabbi Richard Levy imagines the potential of finding meaning during these times. "If we make ourselves conscious of the special *kedushah* inherent in all those days, how rich and reflective might our time become!"[104] This marking of time is a lofty principle, as articulated by the chief architect of the 1999 Platform, a Reform rabbi and leader in the Reform movement. But it is not consistently the reality for liberal Jews throughout the movement. Marking over a third of the calendar year as Jewish holy time is certainly not unequivocally endorsed. It is fair to say that a Reform Jew might no longer respond to ritual practice by saying, "I'm a Reform Jew, so I don't follow those Jewish customs..." But an integrated Reform ritual practice throughout the full calendar year is still not the norm for many individuals in the

[104] Levy, *A Vision of Holiness,* 142.

movement. However, the observance of *mitzvot,* while not mandatory, is no longer seen as an "Orthodox" thing to do.[105]

The Pittsburgh Principles end with a closing prayer that reminds the Reform Jew of his/her covenantal relationship with God. "*Baruch she-amar v'hayah haolam.* / Praised be the One through whose word all things came to be. / May our words find expression in holy actions."[106] God actively created the world and in response, we are asked to take part in it through actions that raise our lives to a level of holiness. By concluding with a prayer, the Principles model such holy, ritualistic behavior. It is the goal of this document to help Reform Jews reframe their lives in terms of the holy actions they can pursue. Rabbi Levy writes in his commentary of the Principles,

> May the words in this document...push us out the doors of our homes to pray, to study, to better our neighbor's lot, to wash a bit of the dirt away from the world, to polish the mirrors in which we may see the *tzelem Elohim* in our neighbors' faces, in strangers' faces, and even in the faces of the doers of wickedness. May these words surround the cups of wine on our table, the *lulav* and *etrog* in our *sukkot,* the words of confession and deeds of *teshuvah* as we begin the new year, and the Hebrew book from which our children lick honey as they head off to school.[107]

These ceremonial and ritual actions add meaning and purpose to life, enhancing its potential for holiness.

The 1885 Platform was a declaration of independence (as Wise called it) that established freedom for the Reform Jew *from* the tradition, ruling that many commandments were off-limits. It should be noted that these ritual limitations probably

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[105] Conversation with Rabbi Sue Ann Wasserman, Director of the URJ Department of Worship, Music and Religious Living. January 16, 2009.
[106] Meyer and Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader*, 208. *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism* (1999).
[107] Levy, *A Vision of Holiness*, 257-258.

did not feel restrictive, but rather a complimentary response to the Reform ritual culture of the day. Most people wanted permission "not to do." However, the level of autonomy suggested was very different from the 1999 Principles that, by affirming a commitment to study the array of *mitzvot,* allow each individual to respond to each *mitzvah* as it calls to him/her. Perhaps this concept of *mitzvah* further broadens the concept of Reform. On the other hand, the larger question of authority in the Reform movement remains unanswered: Who is to say what makes a Reform Jew? The fact that Reform platforms continue to leave religious authority to the individual is a telling indication of the movement's values. This discussion is also very relevant to the approach to ritual and ceremony in the twenty-first century. In the Reform movement today ritual practice spans the gamut of observance. There is, however, a growing trend towards exploration.[108]

Through the examination of the four major Reform platforms, we have traced the shifting dynamics of ritual practice in our movement. Before we conclude this part of our discussion, it should be mentioned that there is at least one more limitation on using these documents to study the movement's trends. Each platform strongly reflects the individual theology of its writer or chief architect. The major themes of the documents, the writers' respective theologies, sometimes serve more as a projection than an articulation of the movement's or its constituents' exact course of action: Kaufman Kohler in 1885 (Orthodoxy infringed on the merits of our forefathers); Samuel S. Cohon in 1937 (Without ritual, religion cannot survive); Eugene Borowitz in 1976 (A Jew in covenant with God is obligated to perform ritual *mitzvot*); and Richard Levy in 1999 (With the performance of ritual we transform our lives through holiness). Even though

[108] Conversation with Rabbi Sue Ann Wasserman, January 16, 2009.

the 1999 Principles were hotly debated among a task force of CCAR and HUC affiliates, it is reasonable to say that the idealistic thinking of the document has yet to be actualized. One thing is true of the final and fifth draft of the document, however. It is more in touch with the ritual temperature of the movement than its third draft written solely by Rabbi Levy.

> An informed response to the call of the mitzvot requires a disciplined commitment at every stage of our lives to learn Torah in the widest sense...Because Torah needs to be studied in an environment of *kedushah,* we commit ourselves to steer the course of our lives by creative celebration of the seasonal festivals and the other commemorative days of our calendar, delighting in the special foods and observing the somber fasts that nourish our modern souls. We will celebrate the seasons of our personal lives as well, through traditional and creative rites of entrance into the *brit,* God's covenant, for girls and boys, at stages in children's maturation, at marriage, at other milestones in the adult life cycle, at creative ceremonies of commitment to those closest to us, at times of healing, and when faced with death. Conscious always of our mortality, we are committed to filling our days with the joy of living as Jews.[109]

The discussion about this draft in 1998-1999, indicates that this particular version could never have been passed in Pittsburgh. It was argued that the document as it was written by Levy did not accurately reflect the current state of Reform Judaism.[110] The fifth draft, the work of a CCAR-HUC-layleader task force, eventually gained broader support.

A discussion with Rabbi Sue Ann Wasserman, Director of the Union for Reform Judaism's (URJ, formerly UAHC) Department of Worship, Music and Religious Living, revealed the following information regarding the current status of ritual in the Reform movement. The role of the WMRL Department is to provide Reform Jews,

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[109] "Ten Principles for Reform Judaism: Third Draft." Richard N. Levy, *A Vision of Holiness: The Future of Reform Judaism* (New York: URJ Press, 2005), 286.
[110] Levy, *A Vision of Holiness*, 12.

congregations and institutions with learning opportunities and resources so that they can make their own Jewish life decisions. They promote conversations about Jewish life by asking 'As a Reform Jew, living in this century, how do you make Judaism a part of your life?' The question is now framed in order to elicit a positive response, 'What do you do?' Not, 'What don't you do?' The Union and its departments do not take a stand on how to answer these questions; they simply pose them and support the discussion and exploration that arises from them.

The URJ compiles and distributes many surveys on worship trends and ritual. The most recent national survey was completed at the URJ Biennial in Houston, Texas in 2005. It explored dietary practice among Reform Jews. In a survey of some 526 attendees, comprising the national leadership of the Reform Movement at the local level, about as many respondents said they refrain from pork as light candles on Friday night, and more refrain from eating shellfish than attend Shabbat morning services. Even those who ignore the most well-known of the dietary restrictions say a blessing before eating. [111] The report indicates that they want to infuse some religious consciousness into their meals. This survey helps us understand the Reform practice of ritualization.

> Reform dietary practice is a way to turn mealtime into a spiritual occasion, whether through refraining from Biblically prohibited foods, using mealtime to alleviate harm to the environment or to workers in the fields and factories, imbibing of foods that help one sense the spiritual nature of a holiday, or saying words that bring God, "who brings forth bread from the earth," to the dining table. The leaders of the Reform Movement on the local level have succeeded in turning the dining room into a sanctuary, as

[111] "Is Dietary Practice Now in the Reform Mainstream?" A Survey of Attendees at the 2005 Houston Biennial. Report by Rabbi Richard N. Levy with Dr. Marc Gertz, 1. The survey was conducted by Dr. Marc Gertz of the University of Florida, under the auspices of the URJ Joint Commission on Worship, Music and Religious Living.

> the table has traditionally been seen as a reflection of the altar in the Temple.[112]

Participants represented in the survey expressed that the above dietary practice helps them feel Jewish. The survey also suggests that we need to continue widening the definition of Reform ritual practice. Even in a survey that focuses on one type of ritual, we find a variety of practices. Rabbi Wasserman states, "I would be loathed to describe a 'typical' Reform ritual practice. Nothing is typical because our congregants are so diverse."[113] The best we can do is talk about 'typical' in regards to specific congregations, camps, organizations, etc. We can generally articulate ritual practice in various institutional settings, but what is normative for a Reform Jew is extremely hard to describe. Not only do we have to factor that people make their own decisions based upon multiple variables in their lives, but in the Reform movement in particular, Jews come from broad perspectives and backgrounds - many from Conservative, inter-faith, secular, or non-Jewish backgrounds. This is a huge spectrum within which to find a norm.[114]

It is probably fair to say that most Reform Jews are familiar with a basic ritual Shabbat practice: lighting candles, and reciting the blessing over the wine and *challah.* Anyone who spends time in a Reform synagogue probably knows about the High Holy Days and fasting on Yom Kippur. Most Reform Jews also attend a Passover *seder* and light candles during the days of Chanukah. It is even more appropriate to say that what is typical of an active Reform Jew is "to try stuff." People are open to ritual like they never were before.[115] Take the *mikveh*, for example. The institution of Anita Diamant's *Mayyim Chaim- Living Waters,* a contemporary *mikveh* in the greater Boston area, sheds

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[112] Ibid., 2.
[113] Conversation with Rabbi Sue Ann Wasserman, January 16, 2009.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid.

light on the new exploration of ritual in liberal Jewish communities. Women reinterpret the use of *tevilah*, immersing in the waters of the *mikveh*. Some women, for example, do not visit the *mikveh* on a monthly basis in order to honor the *mitvah* of *taharat mishpacha,* family purity. They mark a variety of transitional moments in their lives ranging from chemotherapy treatments to the ninth month of pregnancy.[116] This innovation is true of many Reform rituals. Reform Jews are not becoming Orthodox; rather, they are open to what tradition has to offer them within the contemporary context of their lives. Reform Jews are asking themselves: What's out there? What Jewish values and practices can I draw upon? What will connect me with my community and to God? What will bring me greater meaning in my life?

One ritual that undergoes such thoughtful reinvention in the Reform movement is the wearing of a *tallit* by a *bar/bat mitzvah*. First of all, the *tallit* is not necessarily worn on that day by a child who assumes full responsibility of remembering and keeping the 613 commandments, the traditional symbolic meaning of an adult who wears this ritual object. Rather, it is worn perhaps because it is seen broadly as an adult thing to do, because it makes the day different and more beautiful than every other day (it is not seen as the beginning of a daily ritual), or because it is a gift from a relative or a reminder of Israel. Even though the blessing for wearing the *tallit* is still recited and the *tallit* is worn in the same way, the context and meaning of the ritual is reinterpreted. American culture with its value on materialism and individualization gives a boost to such ritual practice. Now, a *bar/bat mitzvah* can pick out a *tallit* in any color, length, or design. The ceremonialism becomes less about community norms and expectations and more about what holds personal meaning for the ritual performer and his/her family. The differs

[116] www.mayyimchayyim.org

from the traditional *bar mitzvah* rite of donning *tefillin* for the first time on that day. No Reform *bar mitzvah* students do this! Instead a ritual including the *tallit* was created.

For the purpose of this discussion on Reform ritual, I sent out a survey on ravkav, the list-serve connecting the alumni of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, to see what kind of observance of *sefirat ha'omer* existed in Reform congregations. I received twenty-eight responses. Only eight indicated that their congregations did not currently practice some form of ritual *Omer* counting. It is quite surprising to learn that more than seventy-one percent of the respondent's congregations count the days of the *Omer.* These results may, in no way, be indicative of the entire Reform movement. A limitation of the survey presents itself here: those more interested in the subject and open to *Omer* ritual practice may have been the ones inclined to respond. Therefore, the results of the survey should be valued for their qualitative, rather than quantitative, results. (See Appendix for survey results.)

I posed the following questions:

- Does your congregation formally count the days of the Omer?
  - If so, how and when? What liturgy do you use?
  - If you perform any ritual with the counting, please explain and attach any para-liturgical texts used.

- If you do not formally count the days of the Omer, why?

- How does your congregation's approach to ritual, in general, affect the choices you make regarding the rituals you perform?
  - How do you consider this to be "Reform" practice?

Out of the twenty respondent congregations who count the *Omer,* nine do so with ritual or liturgical elaboration. Two congregations have ornamental *Omer* counters posted in the sanctuary. Religious school children are called up to change the numbers

during Hebrew school services and on Friday evenings. One rabbi introduces the counting as a time of spiritual preparation for receiving of Torah. He offers *kavannot* based on the Kabbalistic *sefirot* associated with the day. Three congregations post or send out electronic messages regarding *sefirah.* This makes the ritual accessible to congregants at home and also provides the necessary resources for daily counting.

A few congregations partake in ritual that embraces the agricultural roots of *sefirah.* Temple Sinai in Washington, DC has congregants carry plants to the *bimah* to symbolize the offering that was brought to the Temple. Temple Emanuel of Merrimack Valley in Lowell, Massachusetts tries to symbolically re-enact the harvest planting itself. On the synagogue grounds, the religious school children sow the winter rye seed which sprouts in the spring. Each *Erev Shabbat* between *Pesach* and *Shavuot,* the rabbi clips a little of the growing rye and wraps the bottom of it. Children bring the sheafs to the *bimah* during the service just after the silent prayer. The custom is explained, the sheaf is raised, and the *omer* is counted. This ritual is performed each *Shabbat* and each week the growth of the sheaf is witnessed. This ritual was created by Rabbi Everett Gendler, a great innovator of Jewish nature rituals. Rabbi Neil Kominsky added to the ritual by having the Confirmands gather the 7 weeks' worth of grain and place it in the Ark on Shavuot. This innovation places importance on the completion and culmination of the *omer* period and gives the Confirmation students a role in celebrating the holiness of this special period.[117]

Three congregations note the study of *Pirkei Avot* during their *Shabbat* worship during this time period. As mentioned in Chapter Two, it is customary to study one chapter of *Pirkei Avot* every Sabbath afternoon beginning on the Sabbath after Pesach.

[117] See Appendix for survey results.

According to *Abudraham Hashalem*, this custom was originally observed on the six *shabbatot* between Pesach and Shavuot since it was considered to be an appropriate preparation for the receiving of Torah. It is also not surprising that this ethical text was adopted by congregations whose roots are in Classical Reform Judaism. Rodef Shalom in Pittsburgh even reads *Pirkei Avot* instead of the traditional weekly *Haftarah* portion.

A few general observations are evident from the information offered in the congregational surveys. Many congregations have ritual committees that are very involved in the development and selection of religious ritual in the synagogue. Some congregations follow a specific process when exploring ideas for new ritual. It seems common for the lay-led committee to accept ritual suggestions from the rabbi before a new ritual is implemented. In the case of *sefirat ha'omer*, it does not appear that it was an indigenous practice for any of the surveyed congregations. Many described the process through which such a ritual might come into practice. If this was the case, the rabbi expressed that the congregation welcomed the ritual as long as they had an understanding of its meaning. This phenomenon is true for those who adopt innovative ritual, even if it's not *sefirah.* Reminiscent of the 1976 Perspective, many spoke of Reform practice as "informed choice."

Those rabbis whose congregations do not ritually count the *Omer*, spoke about the ritual's "irrelevancy." Rabbi Jonathan Biatch in Madison, Wisconsin writes, "In this day of calendrical accuracy, [*sefirat ha'omer*] does not resonate at all with the folks in the synagogue that I have served. In general, we try to find new meanings in our established rituals, and we even create new rituals, but the *Omer* is the one that I cannot (yet) see a

proper place in our synagogue."[118] Rabbi Jeffrey Kurtz-Lendner of Hollywood, Florida finds the ritual to be anachronistic with no inherent spiritual meaning.

Others attribute the seldom ritualized practice of counting the *omer* to the nature of Reform congregational worship patterns. Most Reform synagogues only gather for prayer on Shabbat and do not hold daily religious services. Therefore, it was argued that to count on *Shabbat* does not provide for the routine counting on a daily basis and the purpose of linking *Pesach* and *Shavuot* is not achieved. Another rabbi expressed that only performing one-seventh of the ritual seems inauthentic and contrived. It is interesting that this "Reform perspective" expresses exactly the halachic opinion of the author of the geonic-era compendium, *Halachot Gedolot,* who says that if a day of the counting is missed the counting becomes obsolete.[119]

Other rabbis refer to their congregations' Classical Reform history when speaking about their congregations' ritual inclinations. As reviewed in the historical analysis above, Classical Reformers did not necessarily consider ritual *mitzvot* to be spiritually uplifting or necessary. They focused more on the practice of ethical *mitzvot.* One thing seems to be clear among congregations with Classical backgrounds who are now turning more towards ritual practice: congregations are generally onboard when it comes to adopting, innovating, or creating rituals if the practices are meaningful, relevant and rational. One survey response also suggests that the rituals and their liturgy have to be accessible. *Sefirat ha'omer* was not included in *Gates of Prayer*, the previous prayer book published by the CCAR. *Sefirah* is, however, included in *Mishkan Tefilah,* the most

[118] See Appendix for survey results.
[119] See Chapter Two, 16.

recent Reform prayer book.[120] (Unfortunately, though, the daily formula for counting in Hebrew or English is not provided.) According to the survey response, the inclusion in *Mishkan Tefilah* may make a difference in the increased appearance of this ritual in Reform congregations in the future.

I discovered two other contemporary resources for counting the *Omer.* One was prepared by Rabbi Kerri Olitzky with Rachel Smookler. The booklet entitled, *Anticipating Revelation: Counting Our Way Through the Desert – An Omer Calendar for the Spirit*, was published by Synagogue 2000, a national project created to transform the way American Jews worship. The booklet is similar to the concept of Olitzky and Forman's volumes, *Sacred Intentions: Daily Inspiration to Strengthen the Spirit, Based on Jewish Wisdom*[121] and *Restful Reflections: Nighttime Inspiration to Calm the Soul, Based on Jewish Wisdom*,[122] which provide a Jewish text and commentary for reflection each day of the year. The *omer* booklet simply provides a text and commentary for each day of the *omer,* using the kabbalistic *sefirot* as a guide. In this vein, the book is not an innovation, but it does offer an accessible and contemporary way to access a mystical and spiritual way to count the *Omer.*[123]

The second resource is the Religious Action Center's (RAC) *Social Justice Guide for Shavuot* which ties the period of the *Omer* to our ethical and moral responsibilities in the world. It explains,

> The *Omer* is also a period of spiritual growth. We look inward as we prepare symbolically to journey from

[120] *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur* (New York: CCAR, 2007): 570. See Appendix.
[121] Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky and Rabbi Lori Forman, *Sacred Intentions: Daily Inspiration to Strengthen the Spirit, Based on Jewish Wisdom* (Woodstock, Vermon: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999).
[122] Olitzky and Forman, *Restful Reflections: Nighttime Inspiration to Calm the Soul, Based on Jewish Wisdom* (Woodstock, Vermon: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001).
[123] See Appendix.

> redemption on the shores of the Red Sea, which we commemorate on Passover, to the moment of revelation at Sinai, which we celebrate on Shavuot. The texts of our traditions and their inherent ethical and moral principles were revealed at Sinai; hence, our spiritual preparation during the *Omer* leads us to social action.[124]

The booklet provides a few suggests of how we can be socially active during the *Omer.* The first is to study *Pirkei Avot,* emphasizing the connection between Torah and justice. The second suggestion is to 'read up on social action' by visiting the following website: www.socialaction.com/omer2000.html. This website lists a different article for each of the seven weeks of the *Omer*. Each article, in turn, provides a list of seven items, one for each day of that week. Titles include, "Seven Principles for Building a Community of Justice," "Seven Social Action Role Models" and "Giving as Justice: Seven Ways of Doing Philanthropy Which are Changing the World." These readings provide food for thought and suggestions for implementing social justice in our everyday lives.

Despite the negative or indifferent reactions to the above mentioned *omer* rituals and the many reasons one can find not to count the *omer,* many congregations are finding a way to mark Jewish time during the spring season. When I posed the question, "How is your practice of *sefirat ha'omer* a Reform practice?" a few rabbis went as far as to say, "[Counting] is a Reform practice because it is practiced by Reform Jews" and "How is it not Reform practice?"[125]

Thus, the questions that remain are: Why isn't *sefirat ha'omer* **more regularly** practiced in Reform congregations? Why are the previously mentioned Shabbat, High Holy Day, festival, and life cycle rituals chosen as those regularly practiced by Reform Jews? Why, for example, is the *chanukiah* lit for a period of 8 days, but the *Omer* not

[124] Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, *Standing Together: A Social Justice Guide for Shavuot.*
[125] See Appendix for survey results.

counted on a daily basis? Is seven weeks too long? Many experience a feeling of loss after the last day of Chanukah. The candle-lighting and latke-making are over. The special glow and light that has illuminated the house for the past week must wait until the following year to return. So, why is a longer period of marked sacredness, several months after the passing of Chanukah, not so readily commemorated? What would make *sefirat ha'omer* a sound candidate for Reform ritual practice? Several factors are at play. I will discuss these factors and keep them in mind when I suggest ideas for future *sefirat ha'omer* rituals in the next chapter.

The first reason that *sefirat ha'omer* has not been a dominant Reform ritual is that it was not historically practiced or taught within the boundaries of the movement. Many Reform Jews do not count the *omer* simply because they are unaware of the ritual. The period between *Pesach* and *Shavuot* is not recognized and highlighted in Reform religious schools in the way that the "major" festivals and holidays are.[126] The forty-nine days of the *omer* are not given major attention in a way that enables some rituals to be culturally ingrained in a society. Rituals themselves must be learned in order to be passed on. It also does not help that current *omer* rituals are not child-friendly.

This leads us to the second factor. Rituals that are sustainable and kept over time create and deposit lasting memories within those who perform them. The act of lighting the Chanukah menorah and taking part in the festivities that surround this ritual create positive and nostalgic memories. Symbolic associations are also built. For example, one might look forward to celebrating *Chanukah* at the first sign of winter because *Chanukah* is what marks this season for that person, contributing light and warmth to the otherwise

[126] Conversation with Rabbi Sue Ann Wasserman, January 16, 2009.

cold and dark winter days. The emotional and sociological connections that are built between the ritual and the ritual performer are strong.

As emphasized by Tom Driver, successful rituals provide opportunities for communal relationships. Many Jewish rituals that are regularly practiced offer a ritualized, ordered way to be with family. The Passover *seder* is a perfect example. The *seder* itself is known to be a family gathering. There are even prescribed roles and customs assigned to different members of the family. The elder of the family reclines, the youngest child recites the four questions, and others might take on creative roles that correspond to the ritual throughout the liturgical script of the *haggadah.* Perhaps someone always breaks the middle *matzah* and hides it as the *afikomen* or maybe someone always opens the door for *Elijah* or tells the Passover story. Each year, families look forward to Passover because it is understood as "family time." Synagogues also plan large communal *sederim* that bring many members of the congregation together. The celebrations are often multi-generational and can even be observed among specific cohorts: women who create a freedom *seder* or teens who create a chocolate *seder*, for example. Ritual brings people together and unites them in a common purpose. The experience is shared and gives those who participate a common platform upon which to reflect back and carry forward.

Sustainable Reform rituals offer a clear order of practice. They have a distinct performative beginning, middle, and end. For this analysis, we return to the ideas of Arnold Van Gennep who described these phases as separation, margin (the liminal), and aggregation. These phases most often refer to rites of passage, but can be applied to common Reform observances, *Shabbat* for example. The beginning, or separation, is

marked by a detachment from an earlier fixed period. Shabbat candles are lit as the busy week transitions to a period of calm and rest. A blessing is recited over wine in order to sanctify the day, marking it as holy. During the intermediary phase, families and individuals find time to relax, perhaps enjoying a meal with their family or finding some quiet, personal time on Saturday. The end of Shabbat is marked with the ritual of *havdalah* or a return to the typical pattern of the work week. To my knowledge, no *sefirah* ritual with these conditions has yet been created.

The ordered process of the above-mentioned *Shabbat* ritual also offers several points of transformation. Those who take part in this ritual sense a transition of physical and emotional status. It is easy to sense that Shabbat ritual actually *does* something. This encourages the practice of this ritual, making it a meaningful addition to Jewish life. Contemporary liturgy that now appears in the Reform *Siddur, Mishkan Tefilah,* articulates these feelings.

> ...Now we, in our turn, come into this sanctuary to affirm
> the sacredness of our lives.
> May we enter this place in peace.
> May holiness wrap around us as we cross its threshold.
> Weariness, doubt, the flaws within our human hearts,
> the harshness of the week – let these drop away at the door.
> In the brightness of Shabbat, let peace settle upon us as we
> lift our hearts in prayer.[127]
>
> ...Help me withdraw for awhile
> from the flight of time.
> Contain the retreat of the hours and days from the
> grasp of frantic life.
>
> Let me learn to pause, if only for this day.
> Let me find peace on this day.
> Let me enter into a quiet world this day.
> On this day, Shabbat, abide.[128]

[127] *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur,* 124.

Enduring Reform rituals also tell the narrative of the Jewish people. This factor is reminiscent of the teachings of the "myth and ritual" school of thought mentioned in Chapter One. Ritual is the expression of our cultural life story, an enactment of our mythological account. The celebration of Purim is a prime example of this phenomenon. Not only is the mythological story read from the Book of Esther, *Megillat Esther*, but the story is acted out, performed with costumes and elaborated with stylized responses to the reading. Jews relive the triumph over Persian oppression when they celebrate with extreme joy and revelry. This ritual factor is important because it increases a communal sense of identity. At the same time, the ritual allows the participant to find his/her place in the story of particular Jewish existence and the universal human condition. The ritual is often termed "meaningful" if it evokes an understanding of these life narratives. As revealed in the ravkav surveys, many Reform rabbis do not find the *omer* ritual and its implications to be very meaningful.

Finally, successful Reform ritual practice can be incorporated into a secular lifestyle. This factor is perhaps unique to a liberal Jewish approach to ritual which requires an amiable relationship with the Jew's surrounding environment and culture. Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman states, "The problem of ritual (if there is one), lies in the complex conditions of modern existence, which makes religious ritual harder to observe and the religious moment harder to recognize than happens with politics, sports, or family life, for example.[129]" Here we meet another challenge of Reform *omer* practice. Reform Jews do not live within the same culture out of which the *omer* ritual was created. They mostly do not live in agricultural societies, the basis of *sefirat ha'omer* as explained in

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[128] Ibid, 125.
[129] Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer:* 2nd ed., 36.

Chapter Two. Secular life follows the Gregorian calendar so that the marking of the Jewish calendar requires intentional effort. The general high points in the Jewish calendar seem to be established in the Reform community. In the spring, a great deal of attention is given to Passover preparation. Families gather from great distances, the house is cleaned, the shopping is done, the meal is prepared, the table is set, the *seder* is performed, and *matzah* is eaten for an entire week. By this point, it is hard for someone not to feel ritually fulfilled. All of this ritual observance may be "enough" [sufficient] to mark Jewish time in the spring season. We have already explored the implications of autonomy and choice in a Reform ritual setting. If the Reform Jew is not obligated to perform all ritual *mitzvot*, then this is precisely the time when crucial ritual decisions are made. The fact that *sefirat ha'omer* is ritually impoverished compared to *Pesach* is an important deciding factor.

In addition, the school-year "Spring Break" is given much attention in the secular calendar, whether or not it follows Passover, and the observance of Shavuot is nearly forgotten in some communities. The counting of the *omer*, from a classic rabbinic perspective, is intended to lead up to the climax of Shavuot. But, this is not a substantial Reform value. It is Passover that serves as the Reform climax. And it is Passover that more succinctly corresponds with other secular and non-Jewish seasonal observances (Easter and the Spring Equinox, for example). Against these challenges, an observance of the *omer* period by Reform Jews would take quite an effort.

Aside from the seemingly few Reform congregations that perform a *sefirat ha'omer* ritual with the above-mentioned factors in mind – history of Reform ritual practice, potential to build Jewish memory, relevant symbolic meaning, communal

elements, clear order of practice, possibility for transformation, enactment of narrative or myth, and incorporation into secular life - such a Reform *sefirah* observance does not exist. *Sefirah* does not have a strong Reform history. Not many Reform Jews would count the *omer* as one of their favorite Jewish practices. Many deem its symbolism to be irrelevant. It is not performed as a ritual that has the potential to build community, nor is it transformational. The existing *sefirah* rituals do not tell the narrative of our people in a compelling way, even though the ritual itself stemmed from our ever- prominent wilderness narrative. Finally, it is clearly a challenge for Reform Jews to perform daily Jewish ritual when secular routine and ritual may dominate their lives. It is important to note that every enduring ritual cannot reasonably account for all of these factors. But, I argue that the strongest rituals, those that leave a lasting impression on our Jewish identity and our essence as human beings, most definitely do.

This brings us to the final chapter. We are now ready to explore the implications for an innovative Reform ritual that marks the period of the *omer*. Where the early Reformers tried to disembody rituals that, on the surface, appeared to carry no spiritual significance, it is now our charge to re-embody these ancient Jewish rituals with contemporary meaning. Through the above historical analysis, we understand that a current Reform approach to ritual means recasting troublesome or seemingly outdated rituals in order to imbue modern phenomena with Jewish meaning. The ritual of *sefirat ha'omer* fits precisely within this paradigm. When examined through a different lens, a new meaning for its ritual performance is sown.

Chapter Four –
Reform Ritual Proposal for the Future

Introduction

As evidenced by the previous chapter, *sefirat ha'omer* does not have strong Reform Jewish roots. Ritual practice within the movement, however, is on the rise. We have identified several factors that will influence the dynamic of ritual observance for Reform Jews in the future and explored the implications that make certain rituals candidates for re-imagination. This chapter will propose an innovative ritual suggestion for *sefirat ha'omer* keeping these factors in mind: history of Reform ritual practice, potential to build Jewish memory, relevant symbolic meaning, communal elements, clear order of practice, possibility for personal transformation, enactment of narrative or myth, and incorporation into secular life.

Ritual Renewal and Innovation

We will begin by briefly exploring the concept of ritual innovation within the context of the Reform movement. Liberal Judaism began in Europe as a movement to change the aesthetics of worship in the synagogue. The introduction of decorum and instrumental music were changes that revitalized the previous style of worship. Since its inception the American Reform movement has also been dynamic, responding to the social, intellectual, and cultural influences of its day. Ritual innovation and renewal have become a few of its religious staples. Innovative rituals have evolved into prominent and lasting customs in American Reform synagogues. Some contemporary rituals are so prevalent that Reform Jews know them only to be 'traditional.' For example, many synagogue worship services would be incomplete without the singing of Debbie

Friedman's setting of the *Mi Shebeirach* prayer. This contemporary prayer for healing is most often rendered outside the traditional context of the Torah service (its original setting) and even finds its home in specific meditative and renewal services.

Thomas Driver calls one impetus for the creation or innovation of rituals "ritual boredom." In these cases, rituals in their form, content or manner of performance have lost touch with the actualities of people's lives and are thus unknowable or too mysterious. Sometimes, the people even lose their ability to apprehend their need for or the value of this very ritual.[1] This phenomenon is certainly true of *sefirat ha'omer.* Driver asserts, "To be fully alive and whole, we need to engage creatively in ritual performance. Whether in rites of passage, in ceremonies of healing or celebration, we should be active participants, taking possession of our rituals and opening them up to a truly transformative and liberating power."[2]

So, how exactly do we take possession of our rituals and open them up to transforming and liberating powers? A new ritual practice, in biblical times or our own, rarely emerges when a novel decree comes down from on high and is immediately understood, embraced, and enacted by the people. New practices do not come *min hashamayim*, "from the heavens," so to speak. Practices chronicled as new are already in the air; they are "news" that is not really new.[3] Quite often, ritual practices emerge first among the people because they address the current needs of the people and respond to contemporary interests and relevant issues in Jewish and secular society.

Contrary to what many people think, ritual does not have to follow a set script that is always played out in the same way. Such a meaning of ritual may be misleading, for it

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[1] Thomas Driver, *The Magic of Ritual* (Harper Collins, 1991), 7.
[2] Ibid., back sleeve.
[3] Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 65.

runs the risk of identifying ritual with repetition.[4] The meaning of ritual is never fixed and is always shifting because its meaning comes from its use. There can never be exactly the same meaning for any ritual act, because while the form might be held constant, the context which is inseparable from the form will always vary. Rituals also belong to human history and to historical process. They are subject to change over time. Rituals can be instruments of transformation but they are also transformed by the histories of which they are a part. [5]

Vanessa Ochs suggests that innovative Jewish rituals can be created from what she calls "The Jewish Ritual Toolbox." The tools in the toolbox are not foreign objects to the Jewish ritual scene; rather, they are familiar forms that are integrated in a specific context. In this way, innovative and new Jewish rituals already resonate with Jewish culture and language. Och's Jewish Ritual Toolbox has three compartments. They are:

- *Texts*. These can include primary resources such as biblical passages, the teachings of sages, folktales, and liturgy. Or, they can include secondary texts, writings that reference primary texts, or writings that have been reworded and given new emphasis. Secondary texts often have contemporary implications. [6]

Texts make the meaning of the ritual unambiguous.[7] They can communicate facts about the significance of the rite, reinforcing the meaning of the activity taking place. Texts can also be used to frame the ritual within the larger context of the time period, festival, rite of passage, etc. Texts can also dramatically actualize the roles warranted by the rite

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[4] Thomas Driver, *The Magic of Ritual* (Harper Collins, 1991), 184.
[5] Ibid., 185.
[6] Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 5.
[7] Joseph J. Schaller, "Performative Language Theory: An Exercise in the Analysis of Ritual," in *Worship* 62 (1988), 421.

itself, making the ritual performance more meaningful and expressive.[8] Finally, the text establishes and/or reinforces the existential relationship between the participant and God.[9]

- *Jewish ritual actions and objects.* These ritual actions are familiar and resonant and include actions such as blessing, praying, singing, lighting candles, or studying. Among the objects that can be used are the Torah scroll, a *tallit*, a *mikveh*, the prayer book, candles, or wine. [10]

Because traditional Judaism is ritually elaborate, the innovator can use objects or perform actions that connect the new ritual to the past, accomplishing the necessary goal or capturing the appropriate meaning in the present. When the new ritual is performed, the element that is borrowed is often highlighted. This makes the ritual feel like it is authentic and genuinely Jewish.

- *Enduring Jewish understanding.* These core Jewish ideas might include understandings about the presence of God, the merit of ancestors, the responsibility to lead a sanctified life, the significance of study, and the ethical obligations towards fellow Jews and all humankind.[11]

This last category includes values that make up the essence of Jewish practice. Ritual serves the purpose of enacting these ideas. It is important to note that creative Jewish ritual most certainly does not need to re-invent Judaism's enduring understandings. It is also appropriate to include Jewish values and directives that are not presently embedded in the ritual itself. For example, if Jewish life compels one to work toward social justice, then this can be experienced in the ritual setting as well as the political and social ones.[12]

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[8] Joseph J. Schaller, "Performative Language Theory: An Exercise in the Analysis of Ritual," in *Worship* 62 (1988), 423.
[9] Ibid., 425.
[10] Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2007)., 5.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 24.

In the case of *sefirat ha'omer,* we will consider how the enduring understandings of the traditional ritual can fit into a contemporary context. By doing so, we can engage texts, objects and actions that Jews have claimed in Jewish practice for centuries, but that they may not have associated with the *omer*. This is not to say that we can't also include other "foreign" or secular ideas and objects in our ritual toolbox. Ochs simply implies that the three tools mentioned above are the most important elements needed to make a practice an enduring Jewish ritual. She explains, "New rituals have a better chance to gain acceptance when overt links to major Jewish themes, ritual objects, and the Hebrew language are highlighted. The more the new ritual feels continuous with the past, the more plausible it seems."[13] Rituals that also speak to the needs of the Jewish community will last, and those that do not will fall into disuse.[14] Chapter Three illustrates this case in point regarding *sefirat ha'omer.* The Reform movement generally deemed this practice to be obsolete because its traditional meaning is not clearly relevant.

Debra Orenstein has a similar viewpoint to that of Vanessa Ochs regarding ritual innovation. She indicates that rituals are created in at least three ways: by simply recovering abandoned traditions, by using an existing rite or blessing in a new context, or by drawing on traditional texts, symbols, images, and ritual objects to create an entirely new composition. "The first two methods renew the old creatively, while the last creates the new authentically."[15]

The following ritual proposal seeks to creatively renew the old, simple ritual of *sefirat ha'omer*. By creating a new ritual that meaningfully restores valuable insight

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[13] Ibid., 29.
[14] Debra Orenstein, *Lifecycles*: *Volume I* (New York: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1985.), xxii.
[15] Ibid, xx.

from our tradition, we create holy moments that address the yearning for sanctification in our time.

Ritual Proposal

I recognize that a few creative Reform *sefirat ha'omer* rituals exist. Some congregations keep track of the days by changing numbers on a decorative *omer* counting board. Others mark the attributes of the days by relating them to the kabbalistic *sephirot* through practices of meditation. Some individuals journal during the days of the *omer,* seeking to use the time for self-reflection and improvement. Then, there are the few that remember the agricultural meaning of the ritual by planting and bringing a symbolic offering to the *bimah* during worship services. But it is not clear that these rituals contain the elements that could potentially make *sefirat ha'omer* an enduring and widespread Reform ritual. The following two ideas are offered with that goal in mind.

I introduce an active ritual whose purpose is to add a performative aspect to the act of counting each individual day of the *omer.* The liturgical script for counting each day has already been established with a blessing. I wish to preserve this rabbinic formula. (See below.) As long as the text is accessible to congregants in Hebrew, English and transliteration, it serves the purpose of providing a repetitive, structured, and Jewishly authentic way to number the days and weeks. But, without a ritual act of performance, the use of a ritual object, and the integration of enduring Jewish understanding (see Ochs above), this ritual will not have lasting contemporary implications.

To incorporate these important elements and address the factors mentioned in the previous chapter, I envision the ritual being enacted in the following way:

Proposal #1 – This ritual is performed every evening from the second day of *Pesach* until Shavuot.

Opening *Iyyun*:
God, we stand before You, ready and eager to perform the *mitzvah* of counting the *Omer.* As it is written in Your Torah, "You shall count from the day following the [festival day], from the day you brought the *omer* offering, seven full weeks shall be counted. You shall count until the day after the seventh week, you shall count fifty days."[16]
The counting for our ancestors originated in response to the uncertain conditions of the spring harvest season. The fruits of this season were the basis for their livelihood. They counted the days hoping to ensure that the days would pass with God's blessing. Even though we do not carry the agricultural burden of our livelihood, our days are filled with much uncertainty. We must pause to realize that each of our days is not a given. We are vulnerable – exposed to the rhythm and chaos of this mysterious world. We count the days this season with the hope for renewed health, for continued prosperity, and for blessing. In appreciation, we return to You each day, God, You who offer us the gift of another day of life. The act of pausing to consecrate holy time is precisely our act of gratitude.

We offer this psalm of praise. It consists of seven verses and forty-nine words, suggesting the number of seven weeks or forty-nine days of the *Omer.*

Psalm 67:1 לַמְנַצֵּחַ בִּנְגִינֹת מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר: [2] אֱלֹהִים יְחָנֵּנוּ
וִיבָרְכֵנוּ יָאֵר פָּנָיו אִתָּנוּ סֶלָה:
[3] לָדַעַת בָּאָרֶץ דַּרְכֶּךָ בְּכָל־גּוֹיִם יְשׁוּעָתֶךָ:
[4] יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים אֱלֹהִים יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים כֻּלָּם:
יְרַנְּנוּ לְאֻמִּים כִּי־תִשְׁפֹּט עַמִּים מִישֹׁר וּלְאֻמִּים
[5] יְשַׁמְּחוּ
בָּאָרֶץ תַּנְחֵם סֶלָה:
[6] יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים אֱלֹהִים יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים כֻּלָּם:
[7] אֶרֶץ נָתְנָה יְבוּלָהּ יְבָרְכֵנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵינוּ:
[8] יְבָרְכֵנוּ אֱלֹהִים וְיִירְאוּ אֹתוֹ כָּל־אַפְסֵי־אָרֶץ:

[16] Leviticus 23:15-16.

Psalm 67 For the leader; with instrumental music. A psalm. A song.
[2] May God be gracious to us and bless us; may He show us favor, Selah.
[3] that Your way be known on earth, Your deliverance among all nations.
[4] Peoples will praise You, O God; all peoples will praise You.
[5] Nations will exult and shout for joy, for You rule the peoples with equity, You guide the nations of the earth. Selah.
[6] The peoples will praise You, O God; all peoples will praise You.
[7] May the earth yield its produce; may God, our God, bless us.
[8] May God bless us, and be revered to the ends of the earth.

Blessing:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ
בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ עַל סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu al s'firat ha'omer.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who hallows us with *mitzvot*, commanding us to count the *Omer*.

Today is the _____ day, the _____ week and _____ day of the *Omer*.

1. הַיּוֹם יוֹם אֶחָד לָעֹמֶר.
2. הַיּוֹם שְׁנֵי יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
3. הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
4. הַיּוֹם אַרְבָּעָה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
5. הַיּוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
6. הַיּוֹם שִׁשָּׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
7. הַיּוֹם שִׁבְעָה יָמִים שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד לָעֹמֶר

8. הַיּוֹם שְׁמוֹנָה יָמִים שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד וְיוֹם אֶחָד לָעֹמֶר.
9. הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁעָה יָמִים שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד וּשְׁנֵי יָמִים לָעֹמֶר
10. הַיּוֹם עֲשָׂרָה יָמִים שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד וּשְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.

11. הַיּוֹם אַחַד עָשָׂר יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד וְאַרְבָּעָה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
12. הַיּוֹם שְׁנֵים עָשָׂר יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד וַחֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
13. הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשָׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד וְשִׁשָּׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
14. הַיּוֹם אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת לָעֹמֶר.

15. הַיּוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת וְיוֹם אֶחָד לָעֹמֶר
16. הַיּוֹם שִׁשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁנֵי יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
17. הַיּוֹם שִׁבְעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר
18. הַיּוֹם שְׁמוֹנָה עָשָׂר יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת וְאַרְבָּעָה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר
19. הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת וַחֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
20. הַיּוֹם עֶשְׂרִים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת וְשִׁשָּׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר
21. הַיּוֹם אֶחָד וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת לָעֹמֶר.

22. הַיּוֹם שְׁנַיִם וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְיוֹם אֶחָד לָעֹמֶר.
23. הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשָׁה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁנֵי יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
24. הַיּוֹם אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר
25. הַיּוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְאַרְבָּעָה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
26. הַיּוֹם שִׁשָּׁה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וַחֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
27. הַיּוֹם שִׁבְעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְשִׁשָּׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר
28. הַיּוֹם שְׁמוֹנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם אַרְבָּעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת לָעֹמֶר.

29. הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם אַרְבָּעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְיוֹם אֶחָד לָעֹמֶר.
30. הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם אַרְבָּעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁנֵי יָמִים לָעֹמֶר
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36. הַיּוֹם שִׁשָּׁה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם חֲמִשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְיוֹם אֶחָד לָעֹמֶר
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39. הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁעָה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם חֲמִשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְאַרְבָּעָה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר.
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46. הַיּוֹם שִׁשָּׁה וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שִׁשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְאַרְבָּעָה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר
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48. הַיּוֹם שְׁמוֹנָה וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שִׁשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְשִׁשָּׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר
49. הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁעָה וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שִׁבְעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת לָעֹמֶר.

Performance of the ritual:
(For each day of the *omer,* we add a seed/bead to our string necklaces. We may choose to wear the necklace every day as a reminder to count. Each day we also hope that we will be able to add a bead the next day. With the passing of the days, we feel the growing weight of the necklace. The weight is a reminder of the blessings God has given us.)

Time for sharing (if done in a small communal setting):
Every member of the family or community is given the opportunity to share what worries them this day. After hearing the ways in which everyone feels vulnerable today, the leader may offer a prayer of supplication. "God grant us....favor us with..."

Closing meditation:
Psalm 90:12 Teach us to count our days, that we may obtain a wise heart.

לִמְנוֹת יָמֵינוּ כֵּן הוֹדַע וְנָבִא לְבַב חָכְמָה׃ [12]

God, by taking notice of the days during this period of the *Omer,* we become more aware of Your wondrous creations. We count these days between Passover and Shavuot so that we might learn to thank You for the blessings You offer. As long as we sanctify time, O God, grant us compassion and the comfort of Your presence.

Analysis of Innovative ritual

This creative ritual addresses and re-affirms what was, most likely, the first mythic explanation for the counting of the days of the *Omer*: our ancestors felt a tremendous sense of vulnerability and uncertainty during the spring season. The harvest was tenuous and the weather unpredictable. People probably lived day by day wondering if they would survive. Hence, came the act of anxiously counting the days, I imagine. Another likely source of this custom is the "Farmer's Almanac" rule of thumb – the observation that the barley crop ripens about seven weeks after the wheat crop. So, counting off the days lets one know when to start harvesting the next crop. This is

practical agricultural knowledge. Even though we, as predominantly urban dwellers, no longer equate this season with the spring harvest, we can still relate to the ambiguity and insecurity that marks our days. In our time and in a Jewish context we can relate to an *omer* ritual that reminds us to gratefully sanctify each day, recognizing it as a blessing.

With the task of creating an efficacious *omer* ritual and accomplishing this meaningful goal, I have thoughtfully made certain ritual decisions. I conclude with a commentary on the formation of this innovative ritual which serves to explain exactly how and why this ritual has the potential to become an enduring Reform ritual. This discussion will also shed light on this ritual's creation in regard to the aspects of ritual theory that are addressed earlier in this thesis.

Regarding the history of Reform Ritual Practice

The first factor that I address is the anti-ritualistic history of the Reform movement. In order for this ritual to be counted as an important Reform practice, it must resonate with the community, having various entry points so that many people will be aware of and influenced by its practice. The construction of the ritual object could begin in religious school with an explanation of the *omer* period. With their peers, students of all ages could either make clay beads or pick out seeds/beads and string to use for the counting. The students could be encouraged to wear these necklaces everyday, counting at home with their families on a daily basis and bringing them to synagogue on *shabbatot* to count with the congregation. The ritual, the blessing and the counting can all be practiced and rehearsed in the setting of the classroom or family program. This project and the ensuing ritual can also take place solely in the home if resources and instructions are passed out. If the synagogue hosts a second-night Passover seder, the ritual can be

performed for the first time as a community in this public setting. The project for preparing for the *Omer* along with a teaching element can both be introduced. This provides for a collective anticipation of the *omer* period and equips congregants with the tools that they need to uphold the complete ritual of counting 49 days.

This stringing ritual also allows for a unique ritual object to be highlighted and to take on its own symbolic meaning. From Psalm 90 and our biblical text, we understand the act of counting our days to be a Jewish act with Jewish value, but we have yet to develop a contemporary ritual object that encourages the *physical* action of counting and marking our days. Ritual theory as mentioned in Chapter One emphasizes ritual to be the performance, concretization, or externalization of an intellectual or spiritual idea. The *doing* of the ritual is what produces the ritual's effects – its communal, transformational, and ordering qualities.[17] The action also emphasizes the meaning of the ritual. In this case, the stringing of beads/seeds makes the act of counting *central* to the meaning of the ritual. (This stringing ritual is meant to draw out what I consider to be the early mythic explanation of the *omer* period.) In addition, the kinesthetic element introduces another alternative for learning and experiencing. For some people, an idea or its meaning becomes real only when it is actualized.

The development of this ritual object also encourages the positive commandment of *hiddur mitzvah,* beautifying a commandment. We see this concept realized with the use of other ritual objects - seder plates, kiddish cups, tallitot – which are decorated and designed in many artistic ways. In our individualized and material culture, from which liberal Judaism can never be completely isolated, personal ritual objects have taken on great importance and value. Therefore, the creation of a ritual object that is subject to

[17] See Thomas Driver in Chapter One of this thesis.

elaboration and personalization can only enhance its use. Any type of bead, seed, or string can be used to count. The object can be adapted for different settings, as well. Mosaic tiles glued together each day to make an image can also be used for counting. With all of these options, the object has the potential to relate to each individual, regardless of age, gender, or interest.

In encouraging and publicizing the performance of this ritual, the synagogue can capitalize on these aspects of the ritual object. Sisterhoods could sell stringing/beading *omer* kits equipped with learning material and instructions. Workshops can be developed in anticipation of the *omer* counting. Participants could create containers for the beads/seeds. I have used a 7-day pillbox with 7 compartments in which I count out the seeds in advance. The container could be découpaged with the *omer* blessing, the formula for counting, or an *iyyun.* Personal or seasonal decorations could also be added.

Finally, the ritual can culminate on *Shavuot* with the unveiling or revelation of an art gallery displaying all of the individual and unique counting necklaces or mosaics. With the value of *hiddur mitzvah* in mind, this display beautifies and acknowledges the *mitzvah* of counting a complete period of the *omer.* On the day of the counting's culmination, within the context of the blessings that were counted during the seven weeks, the community can celebrate God's ultimate gift and blessing: Torah.

Regarding the Potential to Build Jewish Memory

An enduring ritual must be memorable, one which its participants eagerly await to perform. This does not necessarily mean that the anticipation has to be with excitement (although this is probably the best case), but one must look forward to performing the ritual because of its power to add rhythm and meaning to one's life. Any ritual that has a

performative aspect has the potential to create memory. When the ritual objects are used in a symbolic manner, strong and often personal associations are linked to the act of doing. The stringing ritual carries much possibility for the creation of memory. Because it can be enacted with an entire process of preparation, the possibility for meaning-making is greater. This preparation process is another example of *hiddur mitzvah,* in the same way that preparing for *Shabbat* is considered a positive commandment.

Another aspect of the ritual object lends itself to creating lasting memories. Objects can be gifted and passed down to others. Children or adults can receive *omer* counting kits or materials on the second night of Passover. Or perhaps they can be given as a reward to the one who finds the *afikomen* the previous night. After the counting ritual is completed each year, one is left with a memorable token of the *omer* period. The necklace or mosaic creations might take on a unique identity each year, depending on the materials that were used and chosen for the ritual. Therefore, by the time of its completion, each object becomes an ornament or a symbol representing a specific period or context of a person's life. These creations can also be gifted to others.

Repetition also increases the potential for memory and meaning-making. Seven weeks of spring is a significant period of the season. If one counts the complete period of the *omer,* I assume that the season of spring, itself, would be easily and automatically linked to the act of counting the *omer.* If one reasons that spring is not "spring" without the counting of the *omer,* then we have established a very strong, memorable, and meaningful ritual.

Regarding the Communal vs. the Individual

Another important aspect of ritual is its ability to bring people together physically and unite them emotionally. We have the need to share experiences that express our values in a communal setting. The above ritual script provides an opportunity and a reason for individuals to gather in a group setting.

Sefirat ha'omer traditionally takes place during evening worship. Its performance in a communal worship setting was adopted early in its ritual history. However, we have heard many Reform leaders express that their synagogues do not gather communally on a daily basis. Therefore, a Reform *omer* ritual must meet the needs of a worship community that gathers only on *Shabbat* and it must be appropriate for all types of home settings. (It would even be beneficial to create an understanding that in a Reform context one marks the O*mer's* days at home and its weeks on *Shabbat* at synagogue.) Depending on the decorum of the worship service, pausing to allow congregants to add a bead to their necklaces may or may not be appropriate. If it is, this may be an enjoyable moment to share with others before the close of the service. If it is not, the ritual can be performed after the service, perhaps in the social hall or the lobby. In terms of the home setting, this ritual could be performed alone or with friends or family. It could become a "before dinner" or a "bedtime" ritual in order that it is given a special designation of time each day. The stringing activity and the provided script/liturgy offer a ritualized way to spend time with family. Roles can even be developed if the family shares one counting necklace. The flexible communal and individual nature of the counting ritual is very important.

Besides being conducive to communal and individual settings, the ritual itself must include communal and individual elements. The wearing and creating of a necklace is the strongest individual element. Each day that an individual wears the necklace, he/she is reminded to count the next day. Throughout the entire forty-nine day period, the individual is physically reminded of and connected to the ritual. It also becomes an individual responsibility to count each day. The liturgy and the script of the ritual are also relevant in an individual setting. If needed, the language can be changed from "we" to "I." The reflection question can also be answered individually or can inspire a personal journaling topic for the day.

The way the ritual itself was crafted is communal in nature. It addresses feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty that by expressing and sharing with others may give us a shared sense of strength. The act of sharing sacred conversations builds strong communal ties. Many congregants come to the synagogue because of the relationships they build within its walls. Offering opportunities and a Jewish context to relate to others only strengthens our communities, creating a *kehillah kedoshah,* a holy community.

Regarding the Order of Practice and Transformation

With the purpose of facilitating transformation, the ritual must have a clear order of practice, a beginning, a middle (the liminal), and an end. These stages are especially easy to distinguish with the *Omer* because it constitutes a specific period of time. The counting begins on the second night of Passover, it continues for seven weeks, and it culminates with the celebration of *Shavuot.* The verbal act of counting also establishes these distinctions, as the total amount of days increase. The ritual can emphasize these stages. The beginning can be set apart by the preparation process, the anticipation to

begin counting, and the formality of the first day of counting, especially if it takes place during second-night *seder.* The days of counting keep one (while progressing a little each day) in a stage of liminality where the status of the ritual participant is ambiguous or unstable. The individual must keep counting day after day until he/she reaches *Shavuot.* This period can also symbolize the period of time our ancestors wandered in the desert from their redemption in Egypt to God's revelation at Sinai. No matter the context of the counting, *sefirat ha'omer,* the liminal period, can be a tremendous time for spiritual growth. In this stage, one is also exposed more directly to the sacred. In the case of our stringing ritual, the individual encounters the weight of God's blessings as they grow day by day. The use of the ritual object is what makes the transformation tangible. In the third phase, the passage is complete. At *Shavuot* we reach the climax of the spring season and celebrate the ultimate blessing of our lives, Torah.

Regarding the Myth or Narrative

Jewish rituals actively and perpetually tell the narrative of the Jewish people. The narrative or myth enacted depends on the assigned or chosen context of the ritual. As Vanessa Ochs explains, innovative rituals have the power to re-contextualize the religious narrative. This is exactly what we have done with the stringing ritual. The opening *iyyun* introduces the idea of counting our days because they are filled with uncertainty. The ritual proceeds to address this meaning through other actions – sharing our vulnerabilities with others, adding a bead to count our blessings, and praying for God's compassion and favor. The use of liturgical and scriptural texts also reminds us of our responsibility to continue the narrative of the Jewish people as a whole.

The focus of the narrative in the ritual script or action strongly influences the meaning that the ritual will hold for its participants. For example, the same type of stringing ritual can be used to enact a different narrative, the progression from redemption to revelation, or the growing closer to God through the exploration of the kabbalistic *sefirot.* In these cases, I would have written a different opening *iyyun* and used different texts.

The ritual action alone can tell a narrative. Consider other rituals that I brainstormed for this project. Counting with the help of a 24-hour hourglass could have reminded us of the natural order of the universe, the cycle of the seasons, and the act of God's creation. The eating of Israel's seven species (olives, grapes, pomegranates, dates, figs, wheat and barley) could have reminded us of the agricultural cycle in the land of Israel or it could have helped us recount the Zionist narrative. *Sefirah* rituals already performed throughout our movement are another example of actions that provide a narrative for ritual. Journaling provides the course for a personal journey of discovery. Studying *Pirkei Avot* links this season with *matan Torah,* the receiving of Torah. Planting recalls the spring harvest season and the *omer* offerings that were brought to the Temple. In these many ways ritual expresses our individual and collective life story. Innovative rituals seek to ask the question: Where in this narrative do we find ourselves now? The answer to this question, will, of course depend on the day. This is the reason why rituals can be meaningfully revisited time and time again.

Regarding its Application in Secular Culture

Our examination of Reform ritual history leads us to a strong conclusion that enduring Reform rituals must be compatible with a secular lifestyle. Reform Jews thrive

within the cultures that surround them. Ritual, therefore, cannot take away from their participation in the greater society. A traditional counting of the *omer* bears this burden. If the innovative ritual takes the same amount of time, or more, to perform than the traditional one, it must, all the more so, present a meaningful reason for its practice. The above analysis sheds light on the many ways this new ritual can be meaningful for Reform Jews. In an age when more and more Jews are finding it important to mark Jewish time, this ritual presents a valuable option.

A few more elements of this ritual allow for its performance in the context of a secular society. Counting requires a daily commitment. In our mobile society, it may be hard to return home each evening at the same time to count the *omer.* But, the stringing necklace and the ritual script can go anywhere. The ritual can be as short as one wishes it to be, as well. Finally, it is evident that Reform Jews are proud of their identity. The wearing of a *sefirah* necklace may spark others to ask curious questions. For some, this may be a great opportunity to articulate their beliefs and share their faith with others.

Conclusion

I recognize that there are existing alternative rituals for counting the *Omer.* They may work for their respective communities as meaningful ways to mark this period. I do not wish to replace them. Rather, I have provided an innovative ritual here that seeks to directly and specifically respond to my previous exploration of ritual theory and its application to the Reform movement. Even if this ritual does not find its way into every Reform community (and it won't!), I hope that its implications and the factors it addresses will influence the way rituals are created in our movement in the future.

Conclusion

In this thesis, ritual theory is utilized to understand the important functions of ritual, the aspects that make ritual meaningful to people's lives and the reasons why humans have the need to practice their religion in ritual ways. Ritual is a powerful, transformational mode of expression and experience. It unites our bodies and our beings with our social and cultural identity to encounter a divine realm. In ritual, these encounters are transformed into symbolic experiences of the divine. These stylized and ordered expressions of ritual allow us to interact with the world and build an awareness of the environment and the people surrounding us.

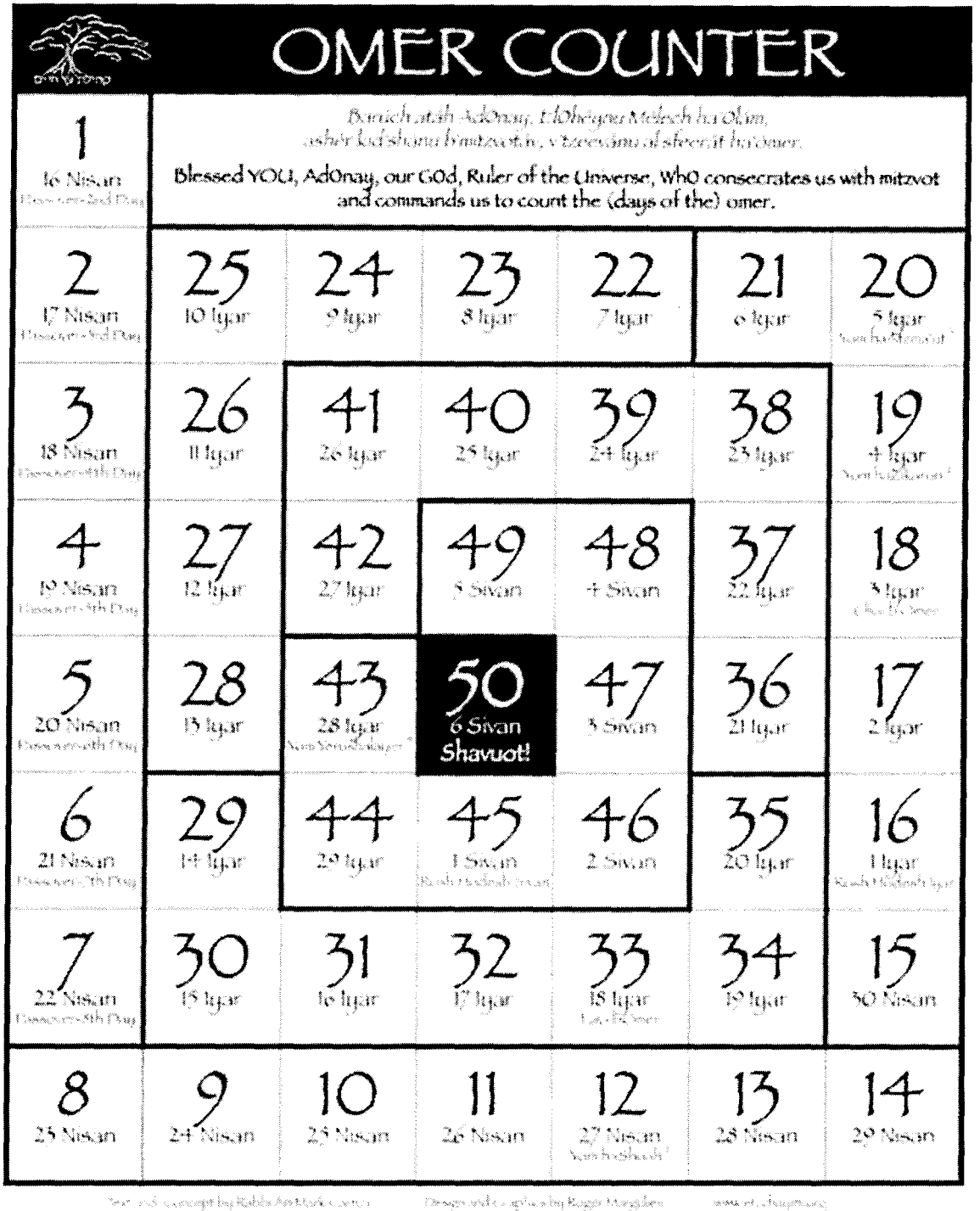
Ritual enactment provides a microcosm of the experience of life. Jews and Jewish communities continually shape and reshape these patterned ways of doing, living their lives according to a sacred calendar. Over time, when the life of a people changes, the festivals of the people, respectively, change and assume a new character. The ceremonies and rites, to a great extent, remain but they take on a new meaning. The biblical mitzvah of *sefirat ha'omer,* which begins as a rite to mark the days of the harvest season, has come to symbolize many aspects of the Jewish experience: the Temple cult in Jerusalem, the festival calendar, our people's journey from redemption to revelation, the commemoration of tragic events that happened in our history, and so on.

Ritual, in the broadest sense, enables us to mark time in a meaningful way. The ensuing logical questions are: How can ritual accomplish this transformation and what elements must the ritual have in order to be meaningful? This thesis explored these two very important questions. Because the techniques of ritual employ narratives, objects,

forces, and laws that are culture-dependent, it was necessary to study a specific ritual within the context of a specific culture. I chose a study of *sefirat ha'omer* in the American Reform movement. After internalizing the ritual theory formulated in Chapter One, and integrating the historical analysis of the *omer* in Chapter Two and the study of ritual in the Reform movement in Chapter Three, I was able to offer a few reflections regarding the status of ritual in the Reform movement. There is strong evidence to conclude that seven factors will be essential in determining the destiny of innovative ritual in our movement: the history of Reform ritual practice, the ritual's potential to build Jewish memory, its engagement with the individual and the community, its order of practice, its possibility for transformation, its potential to enact a resonant narrative or myth, and its incorporation into secular life. This information was helpful in creating what hopefully will be an enduring ritual for counting the *omer*.

It will be crucial to utilize these factors when considering ritual innovation in the future. A conscious effort to create relevant and meaningful ritual should include a thoughtful reflection process. Of course, an extensive study such as this thesis may not be reasonable, but its method of analysis and exploration is useful. This information empowers us to create, contextualize, and reclaim effective ritual. The goal is a meaningful Judaism with both a contemporary and authentic feel.

Appendix Contents



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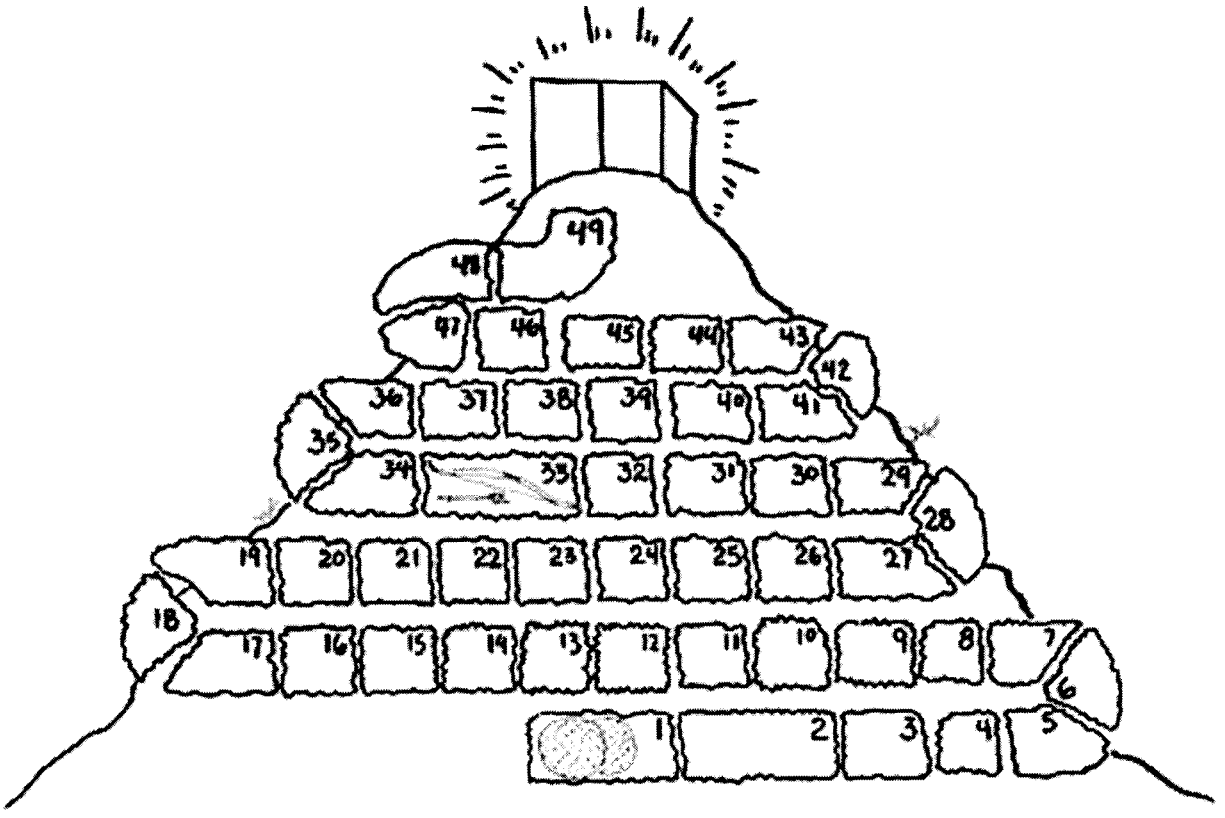

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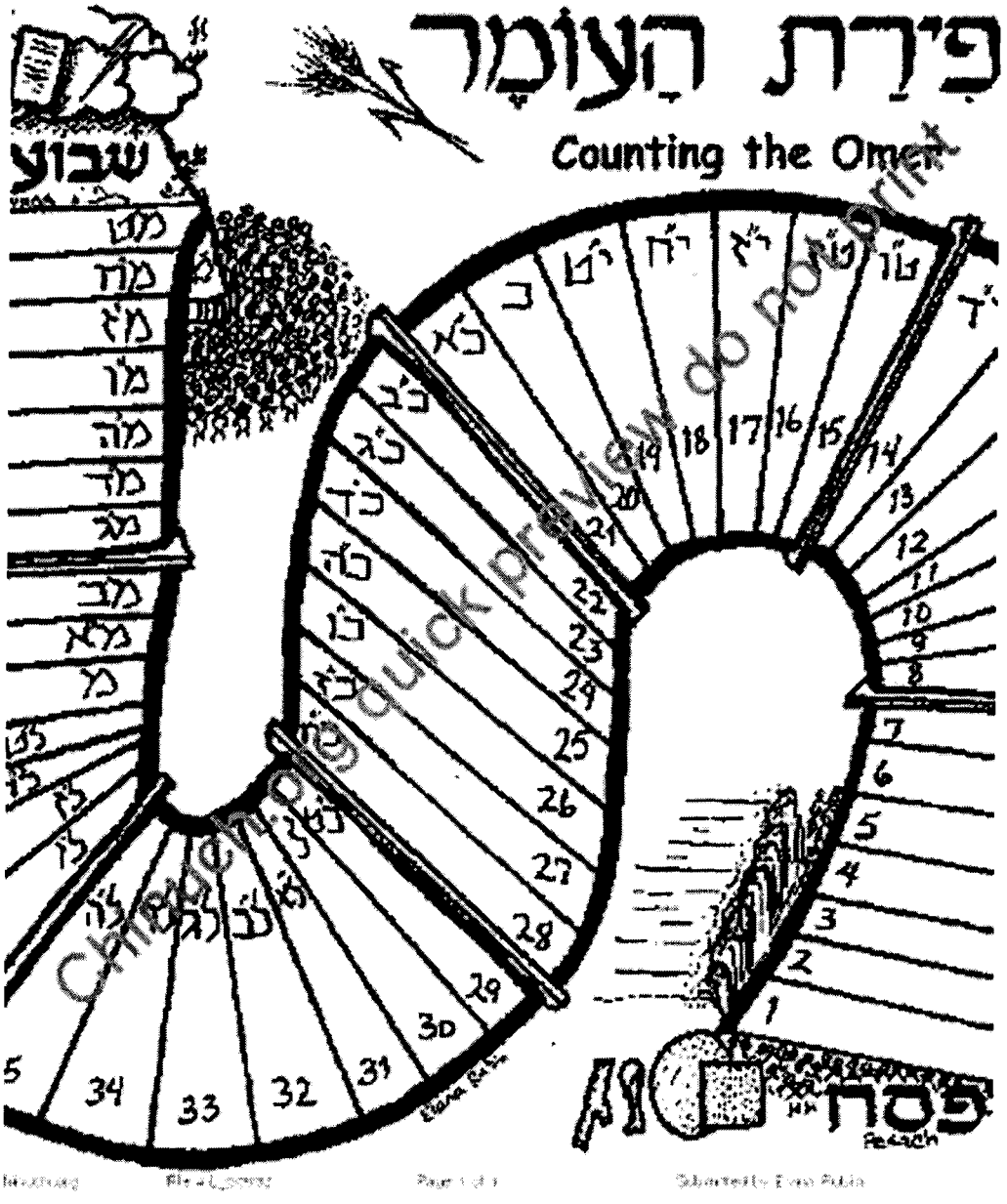

Sefiras Ha'Omer ChartBy : Elana Rubin School : CLP Staff , Saint Louis , Missouri
Grades : Early Childhood, Elementary www.chinuch.org

HUC Ms. 799 Counting of the Omer, early 19th c.
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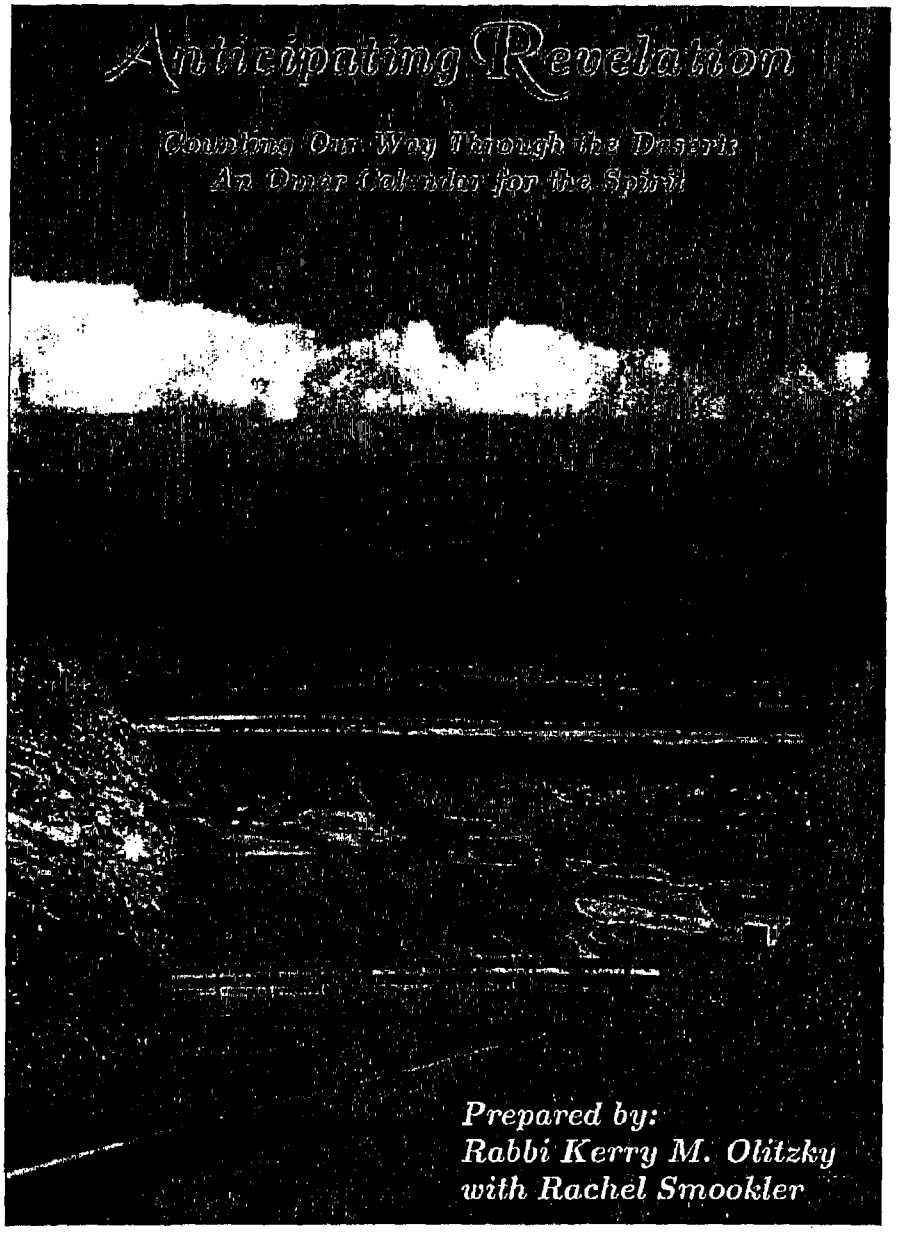

Synagogue 2000

Anticipating Revelation

Counting Our Way Through the Desert:
An Omer Calendar for the Spirit

Design by Joel M. Hoffman.

More information about Synagogue 2000 can be found electronically at http://www.syn2000.org/

Prepared by:
Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky
with Rachel Smookler

Synagogue 2000

About this calendar

This calendar has a simple purpose: to provide you with a spiritual context in which to count the Omer. In doing so, it will guide you on your own travels through the desert. It provides each of us, regardless of where we are in our evolving connection to Judaism, with a way to get in sync with the spiritual rhythm of the Jewish calendar and of Jewish life — while reinvesting a ritual with its profound spiritual meaning.

Why count the Omer

We are excited, though anxious, about the revelation that is to take place at Mount Sinai, the initial covenantal meeting between God and the Jewish people — and the spiritual renewal that comes with it. It is an unparalleled moment in time, deeply embedded in our memories. We anticipate revelation and try to recapture that distant memory by counting down the days from Pesach until Shavuot — that's when we finally received the Torah.

According to the tradition of Jewish mystics, there were forty-nine gates in the desert which our people had to pass through in order to shed the layers of impurity that they had accumulated as slaves in Egypt. As each gate closed behind them, a new gate of possibility, potential and optimism opened in front. As they passed through each gate, they achieved an increasing level of purity. According

to Jewish mystics, each gate is named for an intersection of two of the emanations of God, called *sefirot* in Hebrew. Likewise, each day of the counting of the Omer takes on the psycho-spiritual character of the combined power of one emanation within another. They help us stay in rhythm along our journey. Each week permits us to spend time with facets of an emanation of God for several days in a row. These "sefirah gates" serve as road markers for us along the way. Each step the Israelites took in the desert brought them closer to purity. As a result, they were able to ready themselves to receive revelation at Sinai. Through the desert experience, they became "a community of priests and a holy nation." We can do the same.

According to this same mystical tradition, God wanted to create the world by filling the world with Divine Light. But the finite world could not contain all of God's light. Thus, God moved the Divine Light to one side. That left what appeared to be an empty space. In that space, God created our world. In other words, God created a place that was emptiness. This kind of idea is part of the peculiarity of spiritual logic. Like a lumberjack who clears a place in the forest for a home to be built, it is sometimes necessary to create emptiness. This kind of emptiness doesn't just occur on its own. Such emptiness provides us with the potential to make room for God's presence and the holy in our lives.

In every generation, we should look upon ourselves as if we had been personally delivered from Egypt. This is the essential message of Pesach and its celebration. Egypt was more than just a place to our

ancestors and to us. Egypt (*mitzrayim*, from the Hebrew word *tzar*, 'narrow') is also a state of mind. Our challenge is to break out of the narrow places, out of the constraints of daily living, to burst free in anticipation of living to our fullest potential in life. Perhaps the miracle of the Exodus was that the Israelites could envision freedom even when they had not yet achieved it. They could anticipate revelation before they experienced it.

Some background on counting the Omer

The Omer refers to an offering brought to the Temple on the 16th of Nisan, thus giving the name to the period between Pesach and Shavuot. In Leviticus 23:9ff, we are taught, "when you enter the land which I am giving you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the first sheaf (*omer*) of your harvest to the priest ... the priest shall wave it on the day after the Sabbath." (The rabbis read this Sabbath as Pesach.) The priest took the offering in his outstretched hands and moved it from side to side, then up and down. After the waving, a burnt offering was made, as well as an offering of flour and a libation of water. Afterwards, it was permissible to eat of the new harvest. According to the Talmud, the rabbis interpreted the ceremony as a prayer to God for the protection of the harvest from damaging winds and other calamities (Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 62a). Once the omer offering was discontinued, the rabbis invited the community to count (*lis-por*, from the same root as *sefirah*) the forty-nine days. Because of the similarity between this Hebrew word for counting and the word that

describes the mystical emanation of God (likewise *sefirah*), the mystics developed a matrix for seven of these emanations; they applied one of them to each of the weeks of the Omer, and one, again, to each day within each week. Thus, the counting was given a mystical character. Counting in this way provides the entire period with a psycho-spiritual quality.

When to count the Omer

This short ritual takes place after sunset, following the evening service, from the second day of Passover until Shavuot. We may feel like we have to wait to count the Omer at the synagogue, but we don't have to do so. We can count it each day on our own, as part of our own religious ritual. In this daily regimen, which may demand some personal discipline to remember to do it, one may find a spiritual center to daily life during this period.

How to count the Omer

We count the Omer while standing each evening during the Omer period. Begin by reading the meditation on the page that follows this section. Then reflect on the words of Psalm 67. Say the prayer that follows it, and then say the blessing for counting. Then turn to the specific day in this calendar. Use the formula for counting and note the specific day. Read over the selection of sacred text

and the "calendar comments" that follow. Remember to record your thoughts and feelings — as you desire — in the space provided as "questions from the derekh" or on the back of each page. Write down a reaction to the text, to the calendar comments, or anything else that is on your mind for the day. A question is included to help you. It may seem a little awkward at first, but after a few days, the ritual will flow easily. In this way, the calendar may serve as a journal of sorts. Whatever it takes to help you find your way!

A meditation

Hineni, I am about to fulfill the mitzvah of counting the Omer, as it is written in the Torah, "And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of wave offering — the day after the day of rest — you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete" (Leviticus 23:15).

A Psalm-song

For the leader, with instrumental music.

May God be gracious to us and bless us.
May God turn the Divine face toward us, selah,
So that Your way may be known on earth,
Your redemption among the nations.

Let the peoples give thanks to You, O God.
Let the peoples give thanks to You, all of them.
Let the nations be glad and joyfully sing,
For You will judge the peoples equally,
And lead the nations on the earth. Selah.

Let the peoples give thanks to You, O God.
Let the peoples give thanks to You, all of them.
The earth yielded her produce.
May God, our own God, bless us.
May God bless us,
And be revered to the ends of earth.

Psalm 67

A Prayer

We pray to You. Reach out to us in our captivity with your mighty and outstretched arm. Accept the joyful prayers of your people. Lift us and purify us, Revered God. O Mighty One, guard those intimate ones who meditate on Your unity. Bless them; purify them. Have mercy on them. Be charitable toward them. O powerful and holy Being, in Your abundant goodness, lead Your congregation. Turn to Your people who are mindful of your holiness — You who are the only and exalted God. Accept our prayer and respond to our cry, since You know all of our secrets. Praised be Your Name whose glorious domain may be established for ever and ever.

A Blessing

Praised are You, Sovereign of the Universe who has made us holy with mitzvot and instructed us to count the Omer. *Barukh ata Adonai Elohenu Melekh ha-olam asher kidshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-omer.* בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר.

The Counting

Now turn to today's page and actually count this day of the Omer using the traditional formula which appears at the top of today's page.

. . . today is the first day of the omer . . .
היום יום אחד לעמר.

Pure Love

Hesed in Hesed

As an eagle stirs up her nest,
Hovers over her young,
Spreads abroad her wings, taking them,
Bearing them on her pinions.

Deuteronomy 32:11

You shall be my special treasure from all the peoples;
For the whole earth is Mine,
And you shall be to Me a community of priests
and a holy nation.

Deuteronomy 19:5–6

Calendar Comments

Our journey has just begun. We are far from our destination, and yet we have come a long way. The Exodus out of Egypt was only the beginning. As Jewish tradition suggests, our lives have to become the desert even as we prepare to make our way through it. We realize that the Israelites did not fully experience freedom until the completion of their journey. So we anticipate tasting its sweetness with increasing intensity each step along the way.

Questions From The Derekh

How have I experienced an act of pure love today?

. . . **today is the second day of the omer** . . .
היום שני ימים לעמר.

Powerful Love

Gevurah in Hesed

One must extend the quality of mercy even to one's enemies. It may be necessary to punish those who wronged us, but one must not rejoice at their suffering. When the Egyptians were drowning in the sea the angels wanted to sing songs of exultation, but the Holy One disapproved, saying: "The work of my hands are drowning in the sea, and you are singing!" The same thought is expressed in a custom of the Passover Eve Seder ritual. When we, as Jews, recite the story of the plagues suffered by the Egyptians, we pour out from our cups of wine a drop for each plague. For we do not consider our "Cup of Salvation" complete when it comes through the suffering of any of God's children.

Adapted from David Aronson, The Jewish Way of Life

Calendar Comments

Rituals provide us with mooring in the shifting desert sands of our journey. That's why we "make Passover" each year, regardless of how well we know the story of the Exodus. Our suffering may be over for a time, but redemption is still incomplete. We have to vividly recall each step of the journey so that we may share the memories of our travels with others. Because of what we learned, perhaps their expedition will not be so difficult.

Questions From The Derekh

In what way did I feel the commanding power of God's love today?

. . . today is the third day of the omer . . .
היום שלשה ימים לעמר.

Immanent Love

Tiferet in Hesed

Rabbi Abba once said: "Companions who do not love one another pass away from the world before their time." All the companions in the time of Rabbi Simeon loved one another with heart and soul, and therefore the secrets were revealed in his generation.

Zohar iv, 190b

Calendar Comments

Unlike some other experiences in life, we do not take the trip through this desert alone. We travel with the many others who, like us, are leaving the narrow places of Egypt behind. Together as we share in the secrets of the journey, we can discern its wisdom together.

Questions From The Derekh

How did I serve as a vehicle today for the immanent presence of God's love?

[154]

COUNTDOWN TO TORAH

A new ritual for counting the omer

TEMPLE SINAI
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202/363-6394

Introduction

The custom of the counting of the omer is rooted in the ancient Temple service. In ancient times, the priest waved a measure of barley at the Temple altar on the second day of Pesach to mark the beginning of the harvest, which concluded seven weeks later at the festival of Shavuot. With the destruction of the Temple, the counting of the omer became a way of marking the fifty days from the exodus to the making of the covenant between God and Israel. Each day from the second day of Pesach to the festival of Shavuot was marked with the blessing "praised are You . . . who has sanctified us with mitzvot and has commanded us to count the omer," followed by the announcement that "this is the first," the second, and so on to the forty-ninth day of the omer.

The mystics took great interest in exploring the ramifications and possibilities of this period between exodus and covenant, between the first sheaf and the last. In our time, in our latitude, it is the time between first green and early summer, a beginning.

Meditations

Just as one who awaits a most intimate friend on a certain day, counts in ardent expectation the days and even the hours till his coming, so we count the days from the anniversary of our departure from Egypt till the festival of the giving of the Torah. For that latter was the aim and object of the Exodus from Egypt.

* * *

In marking this time we create a sense of God's essence, the *Eyn Sof*, the "without end," beginning a journey from the unknowable to humankind. We picture this radiance pouring itself from vessel to vessel, each further from the Source yet still of the source. Through ten vessels, ten *S'phirot*, ten aspects of God's being, until the last is reached—*Malkhut*. The mystics called it "kingship," the most accessible dimension of God's being: in this time of concern for the survival of the earth, we might name it stewardship.

"This is the last world I shall make. I place it in your hands: hold it in your trust." Thus does the divine essence overflow upon us and the world.

* * *

Isaac asked the Eternal: Ruler of the world, when You made the light, You said in Your Torah that it was good; when You made the expanse of heaven and earth, You said in Your Torah that they were good; and of every herb You made, and every beast, You said that they were good; but when You made us in Your image, You did not say of us in Your Torah that humanity was good. Why, God?

And God answered him: Because you I have not yet perfected, because through the Torah you are to perfect yourselves and to perfect the world. All other things are completed; they cannot grow. But humankind is not complete; you have yet to grow. Then I will call you good.

I. Counting the Omer

We have begun this journey with our people that will take us from slavery to freedom.

On this journey, we will form a community.

On this journey we will receive Torah.

On this journey we will learn to use our freedom.

On this journey we will give thanks to God for the blessings of the spring harvests.

We begin to count the days between now and Shavuot. In so doing we take the next step on the journey away from the slavery of all those forces which prevent the divine spark in each of us from glowing. We journey to freedom, to Torah, to the holy community of Israel, to the Messianic time.

We count these days from the offering of an omer of barley till Shavuot so that we too might learn to thank God for our blessings and prepare ourselves to go from slavery to freedom, to living the life of Torah.

[56]

Seven for the seven days of creation.

Seven for the days of the week.

Seven for the seventh day on which we recall the creation of the world and the exodus from Egypt.

Seven for the Sabbatical year when the land rested.

Seven times seven for the jubilee when land was returned to the original family owner, and all acknowledged that the land is ultimately God's: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. You are but strangers resident with Me."

Seven for the weeks from achieving freedom to receiving the Torah.

Seven are the weeks when we ascend from the degradation of slavery to the freedom of living Torah.

Seven are the weeks to prepare ourselves to receive the Torah anew.

Seven for the weeks in which all planes of life—creation, revelation, redemption—become one.

Seven for the weeks during which God and Israel court, coming together at Sinai to start the ketubah (marriage agreement) we are still writing.

Seven are the weeks during which we become the people of Israel, the people of Torah.

II. From Egypt to Sinai

At this season, as our earth is released from the grip of winter,
Our people went out from the house of bondage.
At this season, as we again experience the miracle of life renewing itself,
We celebrate the birth of our people and rejoice in our deliverance.

At this season, our people journeyed from slavery to freedom,
From Egypt to Sinai,
From serving Pharoah to serving God.

We wandered in the desert on the road to Sinai,
Where we stopped for a moment in time to enter into a covenant with God,
To become a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.

As we return each year at this season, we hear echoes of that day,
For we are links in the chain connecting us to those slaves in Egypt.
As we challenge the Pharaohs of our time and prepare for our own march into the wilderness,
Leading us again to stand at Sinai.

What must we do to prepare ourselves?
Let these fifty days remind us of the chains that still shackle us,
As we search for God's outstretched arm, that invisible source of strength to guide us,
And our own pillar of fire to illuminate the darkness of our way.

So that amid thunder and lightning—or in the stillness of the night—or in the clamor of our daily lives,
We can hearken unto the voice,
To hear what we could not hear before,
To see what we could not see before.

Each year at this season,
Let us draw from the fountain of our tradition,
To grow in strength of spirit,
And become ready to take on more of the responsibility
That will confront us at Sinai,
To be partners with God in the work of the world.

III. From Freedom to Responsibility

Great was our people's joy,
after generations of bondage, to be free!
Today each of us struggles for freedom,
Freedom from the bondage of our own past,
That shackles our spirits in an Egypt of our own making.
Hear O Israel: Our people were commanded to be free.

Now we, their children, triumph in our heritage of freedom.
Exultant and awed, they sang and wept;
The people in chains were free!

With freedom comes responsibility,
With our heritage of liberty comes our heritage of Torah.

Our deliverance from bondage was not an end, but a beginning:
A journey across the wilderness that leads to Sinai.

Each year as we gain a measure of freedom to choose our own way,
As we walk to that sacred place, to enter into partnership
with the Holy One,
To say we will do. Perhaps, we will hear.

As our people grew in strength and numbers, word and deed,
So do we each year pass from freedom to responsibility.

We are witness and messenger, bearers of the knowledge of God for all time. Every generation of Israel is called to affirm its loyalty to the God of Israel and God's law of life.

O God of Israel, may the vision of Sinai remain with us to strengthen our faithfulness to Your convenant.

And may our children and their children learn the joy of Mitzvot, that they may love and revere Your holy name, and hold fast to Your purpose forever.

IV. Our Countdown to Torah

We praise You, God, who is very great.
The whole world sings of You.
You make the wind and rain,
And cause the flowers and plants to grow.
So we have beauty in the world,
And bread to eat.
You make the moon to mark the seasons,
And the sun to mark each day.
Now we are marking seven weeks as the seasons change and crops ripen from the time of our freedom to the time of our Torah.
We thank You, God, for the seasons,
As we count the days from Pesach to Shavuot,
From freedom to Torah.

For forty years our people lived in the desert.
They wandered there until they came to Sinai.
They were no longer slaves,
But not ready to receive the Torah.
Today we do not wander,
And the Torah is ours,
To read, to guide us,
To lead us to God.

For many generations, our people have counted time.
We count days and weeks,
We count holidays and seasons,
Year after year.
So do we count the days to Shavuot,
The time of Torah.
Let us count the days of the omer,
In our countdown to Torah.

V. The Omer Ritual

We are about to take part in an ancient tradition with its roots in the Torah, where it is written:

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הֲבִיאֲכֶם אֶת־
עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שֶׁבַע שַׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה עַד מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת
הַשְּׁבִיעִת תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם:

You shall count off seven weeks, from the day after the holy day, from the day you first brought the omer offerings. Count seven complete weeks and one day more: fifty days of omer offerings."

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ
בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר:

We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who has consecrated us by mitzvot and commanded us to count the omer.

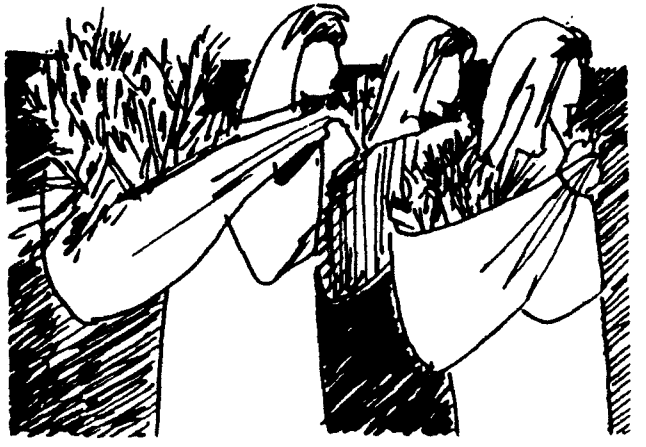
Today is the ____ day of the omer. Today is the ____ day since our Exodus from Egypt. There are ____ days to Sinai.

(While bringing flowers and greenery to the bimah:)

At this season, our ancestors brought sheaves of barley to wave in gratitude for the bounty of the harvest.
At this season, as our earth unfolds and springtime ripens into summer,
Filling us with hope and the sense of renewed life,
We celebrate the bounty of our earth.

Psalm 67

אֱלֹהִים יְחָנֵּנוּ וִיבָרְכֵנוּ,	God be gracious to us and bless us,
יָאֵר פָּנָיו אִתָּנוּ, סֶלָה.	and smile upon us.
לָדַעַת בָּאָרֶץ דַּרְכֶּךָ,	Let Your ways be known upon earth,
בְּכָל־גּוֹיִם יְשׁוּעָתֶךָ.	Your deliverance among all nations.
יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים, אֱלֹהִים,	Let the peoples praise You, O God,
יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים כֻּלָּם.	Let all the peoples praise You,
יִשְׂמְחוּ וִירַנְּנוּ לְאֻמִּים,	Let the nations shout for joy,
כִּי־תִשְׁפֹּט עַמִּים מִישׁוֹר,	for You rule the world with justice.
וּלְאֻמִּים בָּאָרֶץ תַּנְחֵם, סֶלָה.	You judge the peoples with equity,
	and guide the nations of the earth.
יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים, אֱלֹהִים,	Let the people praise You, O God,
יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים כֻּלָּם!	Let all the peoples praise You!
אֶרֶץ נָתְנָה יְבוּלָהּ;	The earth has yielded its harvest;
	May God, our God, bless us.
	May God bless us,
	and be revered to the ends of the earth.



Notes and Sources

Introduction (inside front cover):	By Naomi Kaminsky
Meditations (p.1):	'Just as one..." by Moses Maimonides "In marking this time..." by Naomi Kaminsky "Isaac asked..." by Edmond Fleg, from a midrashic source, taken from *Gates of Prayer*, pp.667-68.
Counting the Omer (p.2):	From Rabbi Adam D. Fisher, "Sefirat Ha'Omer for Today"
From Egypt to Sinai (p.3):	By Nelly Urbach
From Freedom to Responsibility (p.4):	By Rabbi Fred N. Reiner and Nelly Urbach, with selections from *Gates of Prayer*, pp. 460-61 and pp. 498-99.
Our Countdown to Torah (p.5):	By Rabbi Fred N. Reiner
The Omer Ritual (p.6):	Adapted from the traditional Omer counting ceremony.
Psalm 67 (p.7):	Translations adapted from *Gates of Prayer*, pp. 505-6. The mystics of our tradition found that Psalm 67 consists of seven verses and forty-nine words, corresponding to the seven weeks and forty-nine days from Pesach to Shavuot. Hence they introduced the reading of this psalm during the days of counting the omer.

ORIGINAL ARTWORK BY
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Standing Together:
A Social Justice Guide for Shavuot

Shavuot commemorates the anniversary of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. On Shavuot, we remember the moment when we stood in the Presence of the Eternal One as we received the Torah and became a people, bound together by a sacred covenant. The period of the *Omer*, the forty-nine day bridge between Passover and Shavuot, and the evening of Shavuot itself, are traditionally times of preparation for this moment of re-living revelation. Hence the entire season of Shavuot encourages us to re-engage with Torah.

It has been said that the entire Torah exists to establish justice. Thus, through the study of Torah and other Jewish texts, Shavuot offers us an opportunity to re-commit to *tikkun olam*. Moreover, aspects of the holiday of Shavuot and the period of the *Omer* lend themselves to the study of and engagement with particular social action issues. This guide offers programmatic suggestions for the *Omer*, Lag BaOmer, *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, Shavuot day and confirmation.

In particular, Lag BaOmer and *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* lend themselves to social action. During the *Omer*, many Jews refrain from celebrating *simchahs*; however, on Lag BaOmer, the thirty-third day of this period, this prohibition is lifted. Because so many festivities occur on this day, Lag BaOmer can be a time to consider ways to incorporate social action into our rejoicing. *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, the late or all-night study session on Shavuot eve, offers a significant period of time that can be used for studying social justice and for engaging in *tikkun olam*.

This guide will focus on four issues connected with Shavuot: economic justice, the environment, world Jewry and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) issues and advocacy. Each of these topics is covered in a thematic section. Sections begin with an explanation about the connection between the social justice theme and Shavuot and the *Omer*. After the general introduction, families, social action chairs, confirmation classes, youth group leaders and other synagogue groups will find programs, projects and study topics that connect Shavuot and the *Omer* with these themes.

For information on how to count the *Omer*, organize a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* or celebrate Shavuot, visit the holiday website of the URJ Department of Religious Living: **www.urj.org/holidays**.

The *Omer*: In Preparation for Revelation

Beginning on the second day of Passover and continuing for the forty-nine days (seven by seven weeks) to Shavuot, Jews celebrate the ritual of counting the *Omer*. Originally, this was an agricultural activity, marking the days between the barley harvest around the time of Passover and the wheat harvest around the time of Shavuot. The term "*omer*" means "barley sheaf" and refers to the barley offering that was brought to the Temple on the second day of Passover. Then, on Shavuot, two loaf offerings (made of wheat) were brought to the Temple. The period of the counting of the *Omer* was a time of agricultural growth between what the community hoped would be two successful harvests.

The *Omer* is also a period of spiritual growth. We look inward as we prepare symbolically to journey from redemption on the shores of the Red Sea, which we commemorate on Passover, to the moment of revelation at Sinai, which we celebrate on Shavuot. The texts of our traditions and their inherent ethical and moral principles were revealed at Sinai; hence, our spiritual preparation during the *Omer* leads us to social action.

Study *Pirkei Avot* and Social Justice

In many communities, it is traditional to read from *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers, during the period of the *Omer*. *Pirkei Avot* includes many moral teachings and emphasizes the connection between Torah study and justice. The following sections from *Pirkei Avot* are particularly appropriate for social justice study during the *Omer*. You may wish to study one or more of these texts before or after engaging in social action. Or, focus on a different text each Shabbat during the period of the *Omer*.[1]

> Simon the Righteous was one of the last of the Great Assembly. His motto was: "The world stands on three things – the Torah, the [Temple] service, and loving acts of kindness." (Avot 1:2)
>
> [Hillel said,] "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself alone, then what am I? And, if not now, when?" (Avot 1:14)
>
> Rabban Shimon, the son of Gamliel, said, "The world stands on three things: on truth, on judgment, and on peace; as it is stated [in Scripture]: 'Execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates.'" (Avot 1:18)
>
> [Hillel said,] "In a place where there are no human beings, try to be one." (Avot 2:5)

[1] All texts are taken from *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics*. Kravitz, L. and Olitzky, K. eds. and trans., New York, UAHC Press, 1993.

Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said, "Where there is no Torah, there will be no good conduct; where there is no good conduct, there will be no Torah. Where there is no wisdom, there will be no reverence; where there is no reverence, there will be no wisdom. Where there is no understanding, there will be no knowledge; where there is no knowledge, there will be no understanding. Where there is no bread, there will be no Torah; where there is no Torah, there will be no bread." (Avot 3:17)

To what shall be compared one whose wisdom is greater than one's deeds? To a tree whose branches are many, but whose roots are few, so that, when the wind comes, it will uproot it and overturn it, as it says, "One shall be like a tamarisk in the desert and shall not see when good comes; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness." [Jer. 17:6] To what shall be compared one whose works are more numerous than one's wisdom? To a tree whose branches are few, but whose roots are many, so that, even if all the winds of the world were to come and blow upon it, they could not move it from its place, even as it said, "For one shall be as a tree planted by the water, that spreads out its roots by the river. It shall not fear when heat comes, for its leaf shall be green. It shall not worry in a year of drought, for it shall never cease yielding fruit." [Jer. 17:8] (Avot 3:17)

There are four kinds of people who would give to charity (*tzedakah*). One wishes to give but [believes] that others should not. That one's eye is evil to those others. One [wishes that] others give and that he should not. His eye is evil toward himself. One [wishes that] he should give and so should others. That one is a saint. [The] one [who believes that he] should not give nor should others is a sinner. (Avot 5:13)

Read up on Social Action

Visit **www.socialaction.com/omer2000.html**. This website lists a different article for each of the seven weeks of the *Omer*. Each article, in turn, provides a list of seven items, one for each day of that week. Titles include, "Seven Principles for Building a Community of Justice," "Seven Social Action Role Models" and "Giving as Justice: Seven Ways of Doing Philanthropy Which are Changing the World." These readings provide food for thought and suggestions for implementing social justice into our everyday lives.

A Spiritual Guide to Counting the Omer
Rabbi Jeffrey W. Goldwasser
2008

The Counting of the Omer is the period from Passover to Shavuot. During these 49 days, we count the days and weeks that take us from the time of our liberation from Egypt to the the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

The Jewish mystical tradition suggests a *kavanah* (intention) for each day of the Counting of the Omer. This *kavanah* is a unique pairing of divine emanations (*sefirot*) that serves as a point of contemplation or meditation on our spiritual lives.

Consider the questions each *kavanah* raises about your behavior and choices in life. Think about specific ways in which you can refine your thoughts and behaviors to reflect the changes you wish within yourself. You may choose to keep a journal of these reflections over the 49 days of the Counting of the Omer.

Traditionally, there is a blessing to be made on each day of the counting of the omer: *Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of all being, who has sanctified us with mitzvot and who enjoins us to count the omer. Today is day __, making __ week(s) and __day(s) of the omer.*

Each day begins at sunset on the previous date.

Week 1 — Love

Day 1 — April 21, 2008. Love within Love. How does my quality of love show itself? Do I give my love freely, or is it strained by conditions or limitations?

Day 2 — April 22, 2008. Strength within Love. Am I disciplined in the way I share my love with others. Do I practice "tough love" when relationships are clouded by dependence or mistreatment?

Day 3 — April 23, 2008. Balance within Love. How does the love I share with others shine more brightly by being in balance? How can I deepen my love by striving toward harmony and balance?

Day 4 — April 24, 2008. Endurance within Love. What keeps my love going through the bumps of life? How is my love ready to "go the distance"?

Day 5 — April 25, 2008. Humility within Love. Love can humble pride. Do I allow my love to quiet my ego and inspire me to the experience of awe?

Day 6 (7^{th} day of Passover) — April 26, 2008. Bonding within Love. Love requires attachment. How do the ways I form connection with others help or hinder me in expressing love?

Day 7 (1 week) — April 27, 2008. Nobility within Love. How can I draw upon my maturity and experience to make love a deeper and more fulfilling experience.

Week 2 — Strength

Day 8 (1 week and 1 day) — April 28, 2008. Love within Strength. Strength without love becomes tyrannical and cruel. How does my love temper the way I use my strength?

Day 9 (1 week and 2 days) — April 29, 2008. Strength within Strength. The strongest people are the ones who have mastery over their own strength. How do I discipline my strength?

Day 10 (1 week and 3 days) — April 30, 2008. Balance within Strength. Self-discipline requires self-forgiveness. Am I gentle with myself in judgment, or do I beat myself up over my flaws?

Day 11 (1 week and 4 days; Yom HaShoah) — May 1, 2008. Endurance within Strength. Personal resolutions for improvement require long-term commitment. Does my self-discipline endure?

Day 12 (1 week and 5 days) — May 2, 2008. Humility within Strength. Power without humility leads only to arrogance. Is my exercise of self-discipline selfish or does it open my heart to others?

Day 13 (1 week and 6 days) — May 3, 2008. Bonding within Strength. Self-reliance alone does not necessarily make a person strong. How does my strength come from my attachment to others?

Day 14 (2 weeks) — May 4, 2008. Nobility within Strength. Self-discipline should not lead to self-abasement. Does my self-discipline help me to realize my most noble qualities?

Week 3 — Balance

Day 15 (2 weeks and 1 day) — May 5, 2008. Love within Balance. Does the love I share with others help me to achieve an inner harmony and balance? Do I allow my love to bring me peace.

Day 16 (2 weeks and 2 days) — May 6, 2008. Strength within Balance. Life shines with splendor when it is held in a vessel of wise choices and self-discipline. Do I use my strength to bring radiance to life.

Day 17 (2 weeks and 3 days) — May 7, 2008. Balance within Balance. Does lack of compassion for my own shortcomings keep me out of balance? How can self-care help me feel more balance in my life?

Day 18 (2 weeks and 4 days; Yom Ha'atzma'ut) — May 8, 2008. Endurance within Balance. A harmonious life is not one without striving. How does my ambition bring greater harmony to my life?

Day 19 (2 weeks and 5 days) — May 9, 2008. Humility within Balance. Is my desire for harmony selfish, or does it help me let go of ego and selfishness? Am I modest in my pursuit of a balanced life?

Day 20 (2 weeks and 6 days) — May 10, 2008. Bonding within Balance. Seeking balance in life should not be isolating. How do my relationships enhance the peace and balance in my life?

Day 21 (3 weeks) — May 11, 2008, Nobility within Balance. Seeking balance should not be passive. How do I take leadership to bring harmony and balance into the lives of others?

Week 4 — Endurance

Day 22 (3 weeks and 1 day) — May 12. Love within Endurance. Does my ambition derive from caring for others, or is it driven by selfishness? How are my life goals informed by compassion?

Day 23 (3 weeks and 2 days) — May 13. Strength within Endurance. True endurance comes from self-discipline. Is my drive to achieve rooted in my spiritual strength, or just the fear of failure?

Day 24 (3 weeks and 3 days) — May 14. Balance within Endurance. Ambition to do what is right can change the world. Do my ambitions match the size of my vision of the world as it should be?

Day 25 (3 weeks and 4 days) — May 15. Endurance within Endurance. How reliable am I? Is my "will power" a power that lasts? Do I persist for what I know is right?

Day 26 (3 weeks and 5 days) — May 16. Humility within Endurance. Does my recognition of my limitations help me to dream big, or does it just give me an excuse not to try?

Day 27 (3 weeks and 6 days) — May 17. Bonding within Endurance. Do I invite others to draw strength from my ambition and drive? Do I build my dreams on my feeling of connection to others?

Day 28 (4 weeks) — May 18. Nobility within Endurance. Is my ambition dignified? Does it come from the highest place within me?

Week 5 — Humility

Day 29 (4 weeks and 1 day) — May 19. Love within Humility. True humility lowers the ego, but it lifts the soul. How does love for those around me lift me out of selfishness and up toward selflessness?

Day 30 (4 weeks and 2 days) — May 20. Strength within Humility. Just as discipline must inform love, humility must inform ambition. Am I disciplined in the way I temper my ambitions with my humility?

Day 31 (4 weeks and 3 days) — May 21. Balance within Humility. Unchecked, humility can veer down into self-degradation. Is my humility balanced? Does it lift me or degrade me?

Day 32 (4 weeks and 4 days) — May 22. Endurance within Humility. Modesty is energized by the determination to seek wonder. Is my humility activated and vitalized with the awakening of awe?

Day 33 (4 weeks and 5 days; Lag Ba'Omer) — May 23. Humility within Humility. Is my humility real or is it a cover-up for arrogance? Can I deepen my humility by appreciating the qualities of others?

Day 34 (4 weeks and 6 days) — May 24. Bonding within Humility. Does my humility isolate me from others, or does it draw me close to others by allowing me to better appreciate their qualities?

Day 35 (5 weeks) — May 25. Nobility within Humility. The spirit soars when we release ourselves from ego. Does humility release my need to feed my ego and help me to express humility with dignity?

Week 6 — Bonding

Day 36 (5 weeks and 1 day) — May 26. Love within Bonding. Do I allow compassion into all my relationships? Do I sometimes treat people as a means to an end, or do I appreciate their humanity?

Day 37 (5 weeks and 2 days) — May 27. Strength within Bonding. Do I practice self-discipline in the way I draw people close to me? Am I rigorous in being honest and honorable in my relationships?

Day 38 (5 weeks and 3 days) — May 28. Balance within Bonding. Do I allow other people to shine, or do I demand all the limelight? Do I allow balance in my relationships?

Day 39 (5 weeks and 4 days) — May 29. Endurance within Bonding. Am I willing to do the hard work of maintaining my relationships? Do my connections to others endure?

Day 40 (5 weeks and 5 days) — May 30. Humility within Bonding. Does my ego get in the way of forming relationships with others? Do I allow myself to appreciate the needs and desires of others?

Day 41 (5 weeks and 6 days) — May 31. Bonding within Bonding. Are the relationships I form with others real? Am I superficial or distant in places where I should be genuine and committed to others?

Day 42 (6 weeks) — June 1. Nobility within Bonding. Are all of my relationships dignified? Do they enhance my ability to take ownership of my life? Do I draw the highest qualities out of others?

Week 7 — Nobility

Day 43 (6 weeks and 1 day) — June 2. Love within Nobility. Am I gracious and caring for others in the ways I exhibit leadership. Do I use authority in ways that nurture compassion?

Day 44 (6 weeks and 2 days) — June 3. Strength within Nobility. Am I disciplined in the ways I use my authority? Do I help others to become better by restraining my use of power?

Day 45 (6 weeks and 3 days) — June 4. Balance within Nobility. Is there balance and harmony in the way I lead others? Am I clear with people about what I want from them?

Day 46 (6 weeks and 4 days) — June 5. Endurance within Nobility. Is my leadership invigorated by my idealism and striving for improvement? Do I use authority to make changes for the better?

Day 47 (6 weeks and 5 days) — June 6. Humility within Nobility. Do I allow authority to feed my arrogance, or am I humbled by the responsibilities of leadership?

Day 48 (6 weeks and 6 days) — June 7. Bonding within Nobility. Does my authority over others keep me distant from them, or does my authority continue to emerge from connection to others?

Day 49 (7 weeks) — June 8. Nobility within Nobility. Do I constantly strive to take the next step in my own development. How do I become the champion of my own life?

Rav Kav Survey - *Sefirat Ha'Omer* in the Reform Movement, 2009				
Congregation, Size, Contact	**Count?**	**If so, how?**	**If not, why?**	**Congregational Ritual Approach - How is it Reform?**
Monroe Temple Beth-El Monroe, NY 360 units Ronnie Pressman	**Yes**-Erev Shabbat & weekday evenings with Rel.School	Say Bracha. Numbers viewed on wooden block posted in front of podium. Kids called up to change #'s		Collaborate decisions with Clergy and Ritual Committee
Congregation BJBE Glenview, IL 930 units Cantor Jennifer Frost Rabbi Karen Kedar	**Yes**-at Kabbalat Shabbat.	Have beautiful counter in the sanctuary that congs. Made. Rabbi sends out daily omer messages to the congregation via email		Discuss rituals all the time - yet ritual committee is not really representative of the community. Working on trying to engage others in an effective way to discuss ritual on the congregational and personal level. Always involving lay leadership in any ritual discussions that make and create anew.

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Congregation Adas Emuno Leona, NJ 120 units Cantor Kerith Spencer-Shapiro	**Yes**-Fri. eve Shabbat Services	use http://contzius.com/Omer.html		Congregation is open to ritual as long as they have an understanding of why we do what we do. Always include an explanation of any ritual that is new (or even if it's not new, but something we don't do very often. Reform practice is founded on making ritual choices based on informed choice. Ritual committee is very open to clergy ideas and allows her to try anything. Talk afterwards and make choice to continue.
Temple Sinai Washington, DC Rabbi Mindy Portnoy	**Yes**-	Every Fri. eve btwn Pesach and Shavuot congs walk to bimah with small plants. Use "Countdown to Torah *A New Ritual for Counting the Omer*" made in-house		see appendix for copy of booklet
Beth Hillel Temple Kenosha, WI Rabbi Dena A. Feingold	**Yes**-Fri. eve Shabbat Services	Use photo copied booklet (parts taken from above) with poem by Rabbi Feingold		They choose one reading each week and then "V." If services needs to be abbrev. Just do "V." Explain before beginning.

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Temple Israel of New Rochelle, NY Cantor Eric Contzius	**Yes**-Fri. eve before sermon and Saturday morning without blessing.	**Cantor created http://contzius.com "Omer Counting Guide" Rabbi gives introduction leading up to Shavuot and Confirmation.		Historically footnotes the omer offerings and highlighting the build up to Shavuot and Confirmation for 10th grades since confirmation tradition is strong.
Congregation Shir Hadash Los Gatos, CA Rabbi Melanie Aron	**Yes**-whenever they gather for services	Sing Wally's song (???)		
Temple Sholom Floral Park, NY (small) Rabbi Shelley Kovar Becker	**Yes**-Count at 2nd night seder as well as Fri. eves.	use liturgy from Birnbaum siddur. Begin by reading notes aloud at bottom of page. Read blssngs in Hbw. and Eng. End w/ P.646 (gender neut.).		
Congregation Kol Ami Flower Mound, TX Geoffrey Dennis	**Yes**-acknowledge at large gatherings-svcs, school, etc.	Mention tradition and recite blessing, count. May teach in appropriate venue.		"Pesach doesn't end until Shavuot."

[of 1]

Temple Sinai Cranston, RI 400 units Rabbi Peter Stein	**Yes**-2 weekday services + Fri eve and Sat. morn.	Introduce with explanation. On 6 Shabbatot read 6 chapters of Pirke Avot***FROM RODEF SHALOM! They read P'A in lieu of Haftarah.		
Congregation Beth Israel North Adams, MA 125 units Rabbi Jeffrey Goldwasser	**Yes**-eve. Service	Introduce counting as time of spiritual preparation for receiving of Torah. Use kavannah based on sefirot associated with day. Moment of silence to reflect.		Attached kavannah interpretation. This year put document on congregational website, plugged it in newsletter and discussed it at Shabbat morning Torah study. It is Reform practice because it is practiced by Reform Jews.

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Temple Emanuel of Merrimack Valley Lowell, MA Rabbi Neil Kominsky (began under Rabbi Everett Gendler)	**Yes-**	In fall, RS students sow winter rye seed. It sprouts in spring. Each Erev Shabbat rabbi clips a little of the growing rye and wraps the bottom and puts it on the bimah. During the service, just after silent prayer, explain custom and hold up sheaf. Count. Count only at Shabbat, so each week sheaf grows. On Shavuot, Confirmation, gather the weeks' worth and place them in Ark as symbol of what our ancestors gave us. Children bring shoots of winter wheat up to bimah. Wheat grew on synagogue grounds.		The practice is Reform precisely in its willingness to innovate boldly within the context of a traditional symbol system, responding to the same rhythms that Jews across the spectrum acknowledge, but doing it in a way that brings meaning and relevance to the practice in our world.
Congregation B'nai Israel Boca Raton, FL Richard Agler	**Yes-**eve. Service	Say blessing followed by counting. Give brief intro to yetziat Mitraim-Matan Torah. Sefirah links the two.		This practice is consistent with the way we see ourselves, hopefully bringing meaning to congregants' lives by making the rituals accessible and comprehensible to them.
Temple Emanuel of Baltimore Reisterstown, MD Cantor Rhoda J.H. Silverman	**Yes-**began 8 years ago. Insert before Aleinu. Note the season. All rise, count, then go into Aleinu	Simple-bracha, counting, chant blessing in nusach.		Omer is marking of Jewish time that connects two major festivals in our calendar. How is it not Reform practice?? It provides us one more way, and a tangible one, to connect to the Jewish calendar!
Congregation Or Ami Lafayette Hill, PA 390 units Rabbi Kenneth Carr	**Yes-**at conc.of Fri.eve serv, right before hamotzi.	Bracha and count.		Ritual is very powerful and helpful way to reinforce the lessons and meanings of our tradition. Omer is a Reform practice because we count it, not as a replacement of sacrificial offering, but as a way of linking the freedom of Pesach with the covenantal responsibility of Shavuot.

Temple Har Zion Thornhill, Ontario CANADA Rabbi Cory Weiss	**Yes**-at Shabbat and weekday services (morn. Svc. Every other day)	Traditional liturgy. Do announce day at morn. Svc w/o blessing.		Rabbi Cory Weiss inherited practice! It's first synagogue where he's worked that they count. It's good Reform practice because it's part of tradition that they find meaningful. It adds to the keeping of sacred time that is so important in Jewish life. As we follow the parashot each week, the cycle of weeks, months, and years, the festivals, and the Omer, we are constantly aware of Jewish time even as we live by the Gregorian calendar in our secular lives.
Temple Israel Minneapolis, MN Wendy Schwartz, R.J.E.	**Yes**-observe with e-learning program	email that runs twice a year - during Elul and Omer.		
Temple Sinai of Massapequa, NY 100 units Rabbi Janise Poticha	**Yes**-Fri. eves	Brief intro, blessing from Sim Shalom and count. Brief study of Pirkei Avot each week. Include contemporary explanation....		How and what we count gives meaning to our lives; not wanting to throw out a ritual just because the Temple no longer exists; the offering of something special; being aware of our traditions and how they impact our lives.
Temple Emanu-El Rochester, NY Rabbi Michael Herzbrun	**Yes**-Fri eve	Older member of congregation for whom counting is important. He reads from his place in the congregation, reciting the count from memory. At times teaching moment follows from rabbi.		

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Temple Beth El Madison, WI Rabbi Jonathan Biatch	**No-**		Counting is one of the few Torah based rituals that I have not been able to find suitable and satisfying modern-day analog, so don't do it.	In this day of calendrical accuracy, this ritual does not resonate at all with the folks in the synagogue that I have served. In general, we try to find new meanings in our established rituals, and we even create new rituals, but the Omer is the one that I cannot see (yet) a proper place in our synagogue. The approach we take to ritual is to look toward tradition to see whether it resonates. Then we determine what will aesthetically help our worship environment.
Isaac M. Wise Temple Cincinnati, Ohio Rabbi Lewis Kamrass	**No-**		Do not have daily services, so to count only on Shabbat does not provide for the routine counting on a daily basis, the purpose of linking the two holidays is not achieved if the counting is not daily.	In prioritizing what ritual observances we want to bring to our congregation with which they may not be familiar or actively engaged in their own life, s'firat haomer does not end up high on that list of prioritization.

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Temple Emanu-El of West Essex **450 units** **Livingston, NJ** **Rabbi Mark Kaiserman**	**No-**		Indifference on my part is the primary reason. Counting the Omer requires continual explanation as it has very low familiarity. There is no liturgy in Gates of Prayer, so we'd have to print liturgy.	As we move to *Mishkan Tefilah,* it should be easier to include. Although, I am disappointed that it doesn't include the Hebrew for each of the days of the Omer to help the congregants. I expect Omer will be added to services beginning Spring 2009 as we me to *Mishkan*. Lack of familiarity and unavailable liturgy were big impediments to our counting. Omer is a daily ritual and we only meet on Shabbat, so we're only doing 1/7 of the ritual collectively. In my heart, there is no reason we shouldn't be counting the Omer and as we change prayer books, I expect we can start familiarizing our congregants with the practice.

[stl]

Temple Emanuel Davenport, Iowa Rabbi Henry Jay Karp	**No-**		Our congregation's history is that of classical Reform. The congregation is not ready to take on this practice. Aside from that, counting the Omer is a daily ritual and we do not have daily services. To count the Omer just on Shabbat seems inauthentic and contrived.	The classical Reform history of the congregation requires that the introduction of rituals into the worship life of the congregation must be done gradually and thoughtfully. The congregation must be weaned into more traditional practices. Before introducing any ritual, it must first be chewed over carefully by the Ritual Committee and then, if approved, presented to the congregation with a thorough educational piece as to what is the ritual, what meaning does it have within both the traditional and contemporary contexts, and why do we think that it is worthy of introduction into our worship life at this time. After that, the ritual is considered only to be in a probationary stage. After some time and congregant feedback, the entire matter is re-evaluated and considered. This is most certainly Reform practice. Considering the high value that Reform Judaism has consistently placed on personal autonomy and the spirit of experimentation and exploration, it is well within the realm of Reform practice to alter and alter again our approaches to worship practices, seeking worship expressions tha
Temple Solel Hollywood, FL Rabbi Jeffrey Kurtz-Lendner	**No-**		This practice seems anachronistic and irrelevant to modern Reform Jewish practice with virtually no spiritual meaning from the ritual.	Most of our ritual decisions are based on congregational history. As the rabbi, I introduce changes to ritual by suggesting to the Ritual Committee and then we discuss whether and how to implement them. Most are rabbinic driven in terms of what I think the members will respond to. It's Reform practice because it's a conversation between the rabbi and the participants under rabbinic guidance and leadership but with member involvement in deciding which practices people find to enhance spirituality in their worship and in their lives

[9+1]

Beth Am Temple Pearl River, NY 240 units Rabbi Daniel Pernick	**No-**		I don't believe it has specific relevance from a ritual perspective, although the linking of Pesach and Shavuot is a good concept.	The congregation's approach to ritual is keeping things fairly status quo, though I try to nudge them in a more traditional direction. I am conscious of and sensitive to where my congregation is at, as I try to move them towards more of an embrace of Jewish tradition. Reform means making informed decisions.
Segaljl@aol.com	**No-**		Consistent with the history of Reform Judaism, I see no existential value to it.	We ask "what's the purpose and how will the congregation relate to it?" Existentialism is Reform practice.
The Temple-Congregation Shomer Emunim 560 units Toledo, OH Cantor Jen Roher	**No-**		Neither clergy person has expressed an interest in doing so.	The congregation has a classical Reform heritage (as recent as 40 years ago) and is moving towards more tradition. So, decisions must be made with respect to where the congregation is. It's a Reform practice to meet people where they are and engage in education from there.

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