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Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by

Efrat Zarren-Zohar

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

**The Sefirat Ha'omer Period and Lag Ba'omer:
An Investigation of Customs and Liturgy Throughout the Ages**

It is hard to imagine a set of scholarly problems more complex than those occasioned by the period known variously as "the Omer" (from the biblical prototype characterizing the period as the time in which you waive the omer, "the sheaf offering"), and as the Sefirah, the name preferred later, when the emphasis changed from the agricultural waiving of sheaves to the liturgical act of sefirah -- "counting" the days between Passover and Shavuot. By the late Middle Ages, folk tradition had established many customs for the period, some of which have legitimate origins in antiquity and some of which do not. But which are which? How and when did Sefirah traditions arise? When was the period associated with mourning customs? And what is the role of Lag Ba'omer, the 33rd day of the Omer period? These are some of the tangled questions that Efrat Zarren-Zohar attempts to answer in the work in question.

In general, the strengths of the work are its comprehensive scope and its reasoned approach rooted in a close reading of Jewish sources. While not every question could be answered with equal surety, the evolution of the Sefirah period is evident in the changing nature of the omer in Jewish tradition. Finally, in keeping with the changing shape of the Sefirah from generation to generation, Ms. Zarren-Zohar offers suggestions regarding the ritual use of the Sefirah period for modern liberal Jews.

Theories behind the omer traditions in the biblical period are compared in some detail. Following H. L. Ginzberg, Zarren-Zohar explains the omer as originally an act of counting the seven weeks from whatever time it was that an individual's barley harvest matured, and only later as a public rite followed by every farmer at the same time. She dismisses Julian Morgenstern's proposal that the practice be explained by an ancient pentecontad calendar. One may question whether either theory has sufficient evidence for a certain etiology, but both are given here, and the reader may decide whether to side with the author in preferring one over the other.

By the Pharisaic period, we find debates arising over the date from which one is to count. Here the author brings us Louis Finkelstein's celebrated solution, part his more general theory of Pharisaim's origins among the urban working class, and the rival Sadducean party representing the old rural aristocracy. Whatever the reason, we find the Pharisaic counting method being accepted by Jewish tradition, despite the necessity to interpret "Shabbat" as something other than a Sabbath.

By tannaitic times, we find also the first hints of the Sefirah as an ominous period. The wicked are judged in Gehinnom then, for instance. Rabbi Akiba's students died in a

plague at the same time. Note that we do not get the association of mourning customs with the period yet, even though the traditions of death and last judgement are already present. Later, mourning customs will be added to the Sefirah and read back anachronistically especially to the legend of Akiba's students' demise, but that development is very late, post-talmudic, in fact, as is the celebration of Lag Ba'omer, the day on which the plague was eventually believed to have ceased, and a day, therefore, on which mourning customs were temporarily lifted.

It is the geonim who first attach mourning customs to the halakhah of keeping the Sefirah, though some scholars believe that actual mourning practices go back to the Bar Kokhba revolt, at which time rabbis were killed; the legend about Akiba's students dying during the Omer would then be rooted in the reality of the period's politics. At any rate, whether present in early folklore or not, weddings are not expressly prohibited until a ninth-century responsum. Abstinence from work after sunset is mandated a hundred years later. (Prohibition of cutting one's hair is modern, even contemporary, and reflects modern Orthodoxy's general preference for harsh regulations regarding mourning.) The geonim also instituted a blessing for the counting. Lag Ba'omer is probably also geonic, though it is carried only in a thirteenth-century report. Sephardim kept is the end of the mourning period, whereas Ashkenazim used it as a special day of rejoicing. All of this changed, however, with the advent of kabbalistic observances in the sixteenth century, during which time a number of folkloristic practices were added to the day. Nowadays, Sephardim and Hasidim visit the grave of Shimon bar Yochai in Meron, and mistakenly attribute it to the Kabbalists.

The author is to be commended for this rather encyclopedic work. Her textual competence is evident throughout, as is her analytic skill at determining what the text means, and how serious to take conflicting claims of secondary literature. The Hebrew citations are generally typed in Hebrew script, and helpful appendices demonstrate how moderns make religious use of the Sefirah period. In general, therefore, Ms. Zarren-Zohar has given us a well researched and well-presented thesis for which we are grateful.

Respectfully submitted,

Lawrence A. Hoffman

THE SEFIRAT haOMER PERIOD AND LAG baOMER: AN INVESTIGATION OF CUSTOMS AND LITURGY THROUGHOUT THE AGES

by

Efrat Zarren-Zohar

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Thank you is due to Professors David Sperling and Baruch Levine who helped steer me in the right direction during the biblical chapter. Also thanks to Andy Bossov, who got me started with some of his material on Lag baOmer.

Gratitude is due to all my former professors, but especially to my thesis advisor, Dr. Hoffman. "Larry" as he is known around HUC is one of the most dynamic and inspiring professors I have ever had the privelege to study with. He helped correct my grammar (but not this last sentence!) and always had an encouraging word. His editing and advice were much appreciated, but it was his warm personality that I looked forward to encountering at each of our meetings. Todah!

DEDICATION

TSION ZOHAR
my husband, my teacher, my friend

I could not have succeeded in this project
without his help and support

I count myself blessed for his part in my life

To Zohar, in love and in friendship, I dedicate this thesis

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INTRODUCTION

In our own generation, few liberal Jews are even acquainted with the words "Sefirat haOmer," and even fewer observe its accompanying customs and rituals. The idea of counting a sheaf of grain for forty-nine days sounds a bit ridiculous to the modern ear, while the practices prohibiting marriage and haircuts seem irrational, if not irrelevant. Furthermore, the ritual of counting the Omer is one of the few mitzvot "dependent upon the land of Israel" (*מצות התלויות בארץ*) that continue to be observed, not just in Israel, but in the Diaspora as well--a fact that makes this practice even more peculiar and exceptional. All in all, the Sefirah season is perhaps the least understood and least observed time within the Jewish calendar.

Particularly on account of these afore-mentioned reservations, students of Jewish thought and history should be curious to investigate what the sources have to say "in defense" of this period, its customs and its rituals. Indeed, the goal of this thesis is to provide the reader with the fruits of just such an investigation.

Organization of the Thesis

This work is divided into five chapters, comprising three main topics: 1) a chronological and historical examination of how the Sefirah period and its attendant

practices developed from biblical times until the present; 2) an in-depth study of the folklore and customs observed on Lag baOmer; 3) a philosophical/ theological inquiry into the reasons for and interpretations of the counting ritual according to ancients and moderns alike.

At this point, a few words of explanation are necessary concerning the technical aspects of this work.

Regarding the translations: All translations of Hebrew and Aramaic texts are mine, unless otherwise noted in a footnote. With that said, I did make an effort to check my work with Rabbis Lawrence Hoffman and Tsion Zohar. In addition, I would occasionally consult the following English translations of Jewish texts: Tanakh--The Holy Scriptures, the New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text; Mishnayoth, edited by Philip Blackman; the Babylonian Talmud and Midrash Rabbah, published by Soncino Press. Of course it goes without saying (but I will say it anyway) that responsibility for any errors of translation found within this thesis rest solely with the author.

Regarding the transliteration: The system outlined by Werner Weinberg in Guide to Hebrew Transliteration according to Israeli Pronunciation [New York, UAHC, 1977] and presented in modified form by Dr. Lawrence Hoffman in

"The Thesis Student's Guide to Style" has been quite helpful to me. I have however favored transliterating Hebrew words in a manner that comes closest to resembling how these words sound in Hebrew. For example, "שבועות" is rendered "Shavuot," not "Shabuot" or "Shabu'oth." Perhaps more surprising to the reader is my decision to transliterate "ר' עקיבא" as R. Akiva instead of R. Akiba. Concerning the always problematic decision regarding how to transcribe the letter "ח," I have formulated my own rule of sorts. When "ח" appears at the beginning of a word, such as "ראש חדש," I have used the letter "h" in English as an equivalent. When "ח" is written in the middle or end of a word, such as in "פסח," I spelled in using the English letters "ch." Articles and prepositions in Hebrew have been transliterated using the lower case unless they form part of a person's name, thus "Lag baOmer" but "Menachem HaMeiri." Finally, I have not underlined English versions of Hebrew words familiar to the knowledgeable Jewish reader, such as "minhag," "halachah" or "Tachanun."

CHAPTER ONE
SEFIRAT haOMER AND LAG baOMER IN THE BIBLICAL PERIOD

I. Definition

Sefirat haOmer, literally translated as "counting of the sheaf," is the rabbinic name for a period of time which comprises fifity days, ending with what Deuteronomy 16:10 calls "the Feast of Weeks" (חג שבועות) and Leviticus 23:20 terms "a holy convocation" (מקרא קדש). The period took its name from Leviticus 23:15 in which the people of Israel were commanded: "Count for yourselves seven full weeks, from the day after the Sabbath, from the day of your bringing the sheaf for presentation." The underlined words designate those words from which the name for the period was taken.

The word, "עומר," can variously mean a sheaf of grain or a measure approximately equal to 1/10 of an ephah. (1) On the other hand, H. Louis Ginsberg chooses to translate it as "an armful," (2) and the Evan Shoshan Dictionary (3) defines it as a bundle of ears of cut grain. In any case, for our discussion, **what** is counted during the period is less important than **how** the period is counted.

The only thing we know for certain about when the counting period was to begin is that **there is no uniform agreement about its beginning,** even among the authors of the Bible.(4) It is also important to note that there are only two references (in Deuteronomy 16:9 and Leviticus 23:15) in the entire Bible concerning counting a fifty-day period culminating in the Feast of Weeks or alternately, a holy

convocation. (5) In several sections of the book of Exodus we would expect to find a statement concerning this period of counting: namely, Ex. 23: 14-19, Ex. 34: 18-26 where the three pilgrimage festivals are listed as a group. Yet there is no such statement. Thus, the following questions must be asked: Why is there no mention of counting in the Exodus accounts of Passover and Shavuot? Since counting is mentioned only in Deuteronomy, Numbers, and Leviticus, can we consider the Sefirat haOmer period to be a later development within the Israelite calendar? If so, what did the earlier calendar look like, and how were the Passover, Feast of Unleavened Bread and Feast of Weeks festivals determined?

Finally, it must be stated that there is absolutely no reference or implication in any biblical text to the thirty-third day of the sheaf counting period, later known as "Lag baOmer." ["לג" being the Hebrew letters denoting the number 33] It can be stated **with certainty** that the distinction accorded to the thirty third day is not of biblical origin.

II. The Importance of Determining the Exact Dates of the Sefirat haOmer Period

There are two references in the Bible regarding the start of the counting period--Deuteronomy 16:9,10 and Leviticus 23:15,16--both of which are found in books considered to be "late" in terms of the documentary hypothesis theory. For the readers convenience, they are presented below:

Deuteronomy 16:9-10
Count for yourself seven weeks; start to count the seven weeks when the sickle is first put to the standing [mature] grain. And then you should keep the Feast of Weeks...

Leviticus 23:15-16
Count for yourselves seven full weeks, from the day after the Sabbath, from the day of your bringing the sheaf for presentation. Count until the day after the seventh week--fifty days. Then you should bring an offering of new grain to the Lord.

According to the former, the Sefirat haOmer period is meant to serve as a means of determining the date of the Feast of Weeks, "*חג שבועות*." According to the latter, the Sefirat haOmer period is used to designate when one should bring an offering from the new crop to God and on that day, celebrate a "holy convocation," *מקרא קדש* (v.21).

In addition, Leviticus 23:15 links the start of the Sefirat haOmer period (and thus, the Feast of Weeks) with the Feast of Matzot in the phrase: "Count for yourselves from the day after **the Sabbath**..." To which Sabbath is this phrase referring? While there is much disagreement, most commentators believe the "Sabbath" in question has some connection to a day within or following the Passover week.

In sum, the Sefirat haOmer period is important in order to determine the date of Shavuot. In turn, Shavuot is influenced (through the determination of when to begin counting) by the date of the Passover week. Thus, in order to address the issue of the Sefirat haOmer period, it will be necessary to: a) investigate the holidays of Passover/Feast of Matsot and Shavuot/Feast of the Harvest, and b) attempt to construct a calendar (or calendars) as to

when these holidays fall in the year in order to fix the Sefirah period more exactly.

III. Examining the Bible in order to Determine the Dates of the Sefirat haOmer Period within the Ancient Calendar

Since the Feast of Weeks is one of three pilgrimage festivals incumbent upon all male Israelites to observe (according to Exodus 23:14; 34:23), it is clearly one of the most important dates in the festival calendar. Yet, despite this distinction, there is only one <u>explicit</u> passage within the Bible as to when the Feast of Weeks should to be celebrated (i.e., Leviticus 23:9-21) and this passage has been the subject of much controversy. The remainder of the Biblical references to Shavuot are far more vague concerning the date of the festival and how it should be celebrated.

In Exodus 23:14-19 the Israelites are commanded to observe three pilgrimage festivals per year:

1) **את חג המצות** תשמר שבעת ימים...למועד חדש האביב
2) **וחג הקציר** בכורי מעשיך אשר תזרע בשדה
3) **וחג האסיף** בצאת השנה באספך את מעשיך מן השדה

In Exodus 34:18 and 22 we find a parallel passage concerning the three pilgrimage festivals:

1) **את חג המצות** תשמר שבעת ימים...למועד חדש האביב
כי בחדש האביב יצאת ממצרים
2) **וחג שבועות**...בכורי קציר חטים
3) **וחג האסיף** תקופת השנה

These passages raise three main questions: a) Should the word חדש be read as "month" or "new moon"?; b) Is there a difference between חג הקציר (Festival/Pilgrimage of the

Harvest) and חג השבועות (Festival/Pilgrimage of Weeks) or are they the same?; c) Are the first fruits mentioned in Exodus 23 the same as the first fruits of the wheat harvest mentioned in Exodus 34? Note that in both Exodus passages, there is no set time or date for the either festival/pilgrimage.

Other passages in Exodus concerning the Passover sacrifice and the Festival/Pilgrimage of Matsot demand parallel examinations. The facts relevant to our discussion are presented below:

> Exodus 12:1-20
> The Passover sacrifice is performed on the fourteenth day of the first month of the year at twilight at home. This day should be a חג for God. The Festival of Unleavened Bread should be celebrated seven days, the first and last of which are מקראי קדש. Begin eating the matsot on the fourteenth day of the first month of the year at night. This day is a memorial because it was on that day that God brought you out of Egypt.
>
> Exodus 12:21-28
> After you have slaughtered the Passover sacrifice, do not leave your house.
>
> Exodus 12:43-51
> Eat the Passover sacrifice in one home. It was on this day that you went out of Egypt.
>
> Exodus 13:1-10
> You went free on this day בחדש אביב. In this חדש you should observe the following practice--seven days eat matsot and on the seventh day observe a חג for God.

Deuteronomy 16:10 tells us that the Feast of Weeks is meant to be celebrated seven non-sabbatical weeks after the beginning of the counting period. When does the counting period begin? The Deuteronomic author (6) states that

counting should begin "when the sickle is first put to the standing [mature] grain." Needless to say, this clarification does not provide for a standard--that is to say, a specific day that can be observed at the same time every year or even at the same time from farm to farm within a year.

In addition, it is unclear whether one should celebrate the Pilgrimage/Festival of Weeks on the last day of the seventh week (the forty-ninth) or the day after that (the fiftieth). The text simply states: "You should count seven seven-day-periods. Begin to count seven seven-day-periods when the sickle is first put to the standing grain. And then you shall observe the Feast of Weeks..." Significantly, the interpretation of "And then" can mean the difference between celebrating the Festival forty-nine or fifty days from the start of the counting period.

Concerning the Passover sacrifice and the Festival of Weeks, Leviticus 23:9-21 states that it is necessary to count seven **full** weeks (*שבע שבתות תמימות*) from the day that you (plural) bring the first bundle of sheaves from your harvest to the priest. On the day after the seventh week, namely, the fiftieth day, you should celebrate a *מקרא קדש*, a sacred occasion.

However, in order to be more explicit concerning the day on which these sheaves should be brought and the day counting should begin, the priestly author writes that the day of counting and bringing the Omer should begin "on the day after the Sabbath." While seeming to be more

specific, this phrase is obviously open to a great deal of interpretation depending upon how one interprets the word "*שבת*." Moreover, it is unclear what "full weeks" are and whether they are sabbatical (i.e., counted from Sunday to Saturday) or non-sabbatical (i.e., a seven-day period beginning on any particular day).

In Numbers 28:26, the *מקרא קדש* is called *יום הבכורים*, Day of the First Fruits. As in Leviticus, on this day, no work is to be done and a new meal offering, among many others, is to be made. Significantly, this day is also named *שבועותיכם*, translated as "your Feast of Weeks." (7) Thus, the day known only as *מקרא קדש* in Leviticus is identified as *יום הבכורים* in Numbers and *חג השבועות* in Deuteronomy.

Clearly, the various biblical accounts of the Passover sacrifice, Feast of Unleavened Bread and Feast of Weeks are in conflict to a greater or lesser degree. It is nearly impossible to determine which phrases may be glosses by a later redactor and which are original. Thus, our attempt to reconstruct the stages of the biblical calendar, and thus the development of the Sefirat haOmer period, is greatly complicated.

There are many theories concerning the various calendars used by the Israelites throughout the biblical period. Presented below is the theory of H. Louis Ginsberg, whose publications on the subject of the biblical calendar are considered by many biblical authorities to be the most authoritative available today. (8)

A. H. Louis Ginsberg's Theory with reference to the Sefirat haOmer Period

Stage One/ Pre-Deuteronomic (9)

Ginsberg groups Ex. 12:21-13:7, and Ex. 23:14-19 together as pre-Deuteronomic passages. According to his theory the Israelites are instructed to slaughter the Passover sacrifice (*הפסח*) at home *בחדש האביב*, on the new moon of milky grain,(10) a stage in the growth of cereals when the grain is not yet hard and ripe. On the same night as the Passover sacrifice, a seven-day period of eating unleavened bread begins. However, it is **only on the seventh day** of this period that a pilgrimage (11) called *חג המצות* is prescribed. Thus, on the first day of the Aviv month, the Passover is slaughtered at home and seven days later (on the seventh of Aviv), a pilgrimage to the local sanctuary takes place.

With respect to a second pilgrimage festival, the one ordinarily associated with Shavuot, Ginsberg interprets the phrase "*חג הקציר בכורי מעשיך*" in Ex. 23:16 in such a way as to deny that it has anything to do with Shavuot at all:

> "'Also the Pilgrimage of the Harvest, of the first fruits of your produce...' This means the first grain that you reap. The pilgrimage must be made, according to this text, **at the very beginning of the grain harvest**, not, as is gratuitously assumed in light of the other festival calendars, seven weeks later. Since barley ripens from 10 to 14 days earlier than wheat does in the same locality, the first fruits offered on this pilgrimage necessarily consisted of barley." (12)

Since no calendar date is given for the Pilgrimage of the

Harvest, Ginsberg maintains that every farmer chose his own date for presenting his first fruits at the local sanctuary depending upon when his barley crop ripened. In sum, the pre-Deuteronomic calendar consisted of: a Passover sacrifice, which was slaughtered on the new moon (Aviv) when the barley was not yet ripe; a seven-day period of eating unleavened bread, with a group pilgrimage to a local sanctuary on the last day (7 Aviv); an individual pilgrimage to the local sanctuary in order to present first fruits, whenever each farmer's barley crop began to ripen (mid-Aviv).

It goes without saying that the pre-Deuteronomic calendar as Ginsberg describes it differs greatly with our current calendar. First, Passover and the Festival/Pilgrimage of Matsot fell on different days entirely. Secondly, the pilgrimage was made on the last, not the first day of the seven-day period. Thirdly, both of these observances occurred **before** the barley crop grew ripe.

Stage Two/ Deuteronomic Reform (13)

At this stage, due to the Deuteronomic innovation of centralizing cultic practice, the Passover sacrifice is transformed from a ritual performed at home into a one-day pilgrimage to the Temple:

> Deuteronomy 16:5-6
> You may not sacrifice the Passover in any of your gates [settlements]...only at the place where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name...

Thus, the pilgrimage set for the seventh day of the

Unleavened Bread period is transferred to the first day of the period (i.e., month). Meanwhile in place of the seventh-day pilgrimage, the Deuteronomist substituted an עצרת, a concluding festival, on the seventh day.

All this was done because travel to the Temple would require several days time for those who lived in the extremes of the country and would fall very close to the beginning of the barley harvest, a crucial time in the life of the farmer.

As in the pre-Deuteronomic stage, the passover sacrifice takes place on "the new moon of milky grain," a phrase which Ginsberg chooses to employ:

> "in order to avoid making a proper name of the word אביב; for we simply do not know what the month which began with that new moon was called--or indeed whether it was always the same month, since the text seems to mean the first new moon that is due after the first ears of grain appear, which does not happen at exactly the same time every year." (14)

What of the Festival of the Harvest, in which the first-fruits were to be brought on an individual pilgrimage? Clearly, if they were now to be brought to the Temple, there would be a logistical problem. Reaping is the busiest season of the year for the farmer. It would have been unfeasible for all but those farmers who lived close to Jerusalem to bring their first-fruit sheaves to the Temple at the beginning of the harvest. Thus, the Deuteronomist introduces a seven-week delay ("שבע שבתות תספר לך מהחל חרמש בקמה") for the farmer to finish harvesting his grain crops

and only then is he expected to make a pilgrimage (aptly renamed "חג השבועות") to the one legitimate temple.

The newly-created Festival/Pilgrimage of Weeks, as the Deuteronomist calls the delayed date for offering the first fruits, is therefore not the same as the Festival/Pilgrimage of the Harvest mentioned in Exodus 23:16, when only the barley sheaves were brought.

Moreover, since the command to count the weeks is written in the third person singular, תספר, it is reasonable to conclude that each individual farmer started to count whenever he began to harvest the barley. Thus, the date for this new Festival/Pilgrimage of Weeks would fall on a different day, depending upon when each farmer's grain was ripe enough for cutting. Again, as in the pre-Deuteronomic stage, no fixed date exists for the second pilgrimage festival, the bringing of the first fruits.

Stage Three/Utilizing the Numbered Month Calendar Similar to the One Employed in Babylonia (15)

This last stage is drawn from the testimony supplied in Lev. 23:4-44; Num. 28:16-29:39; and Ezek. 45:18-45.

According to this new calendar, the Feast of Booths is moved from its original date to the fifteenth of the month (full moon), and Ginsberg believes that the Feast of Unleavened Bread was likewise moved from the first to the fifteenth of the month out of a desire for symmetry, i.e., two pilgrimmages of approximately one week's duration,

exactly six months apart. (16)

The Sefirat haOmer period undergoes remarkable changes at this new stage of the calendar. First, according to Ginsberg, the grain harvest pilgrimage is abolished altogether. This is why both Leviticus 23 and Numbers 28-29 avoid using the word חג, (i.e., pilgrimage) preferring instead to refer to the day after the counting period as a מקרא קדש. On this מקרא קדש, the fiftieth day of the counting period, designated loaves made from the wheat crop are offered as first fruits. Furthermore, since the day was to be observed as a sacred occasion on which "you shall not work at your occupations **in all your settlements**," Ginsberg interprets these highlighted words to mean that people were keeping this special day **at home**, in their settlements, and not at the Temple in Jerusalem. Therefore, the pilgrimage which took place on the fiftieth day of the counting period, as in Dt. 16:10, was intended in Leviticus and Numbers to be celebrated at home.

Secondly, though Leviticus accepts the Deuteronomic delay of seven weeks between the beginning of the harvest and its celebration, there is an insistance that the new grain not be consumed until an offering is made from the new crop. As a result, a new ceremony of desacralization is created at the beginning of the harvest, a ceremony which served as a rite that gave to God the first of the new crop, thus releasing the rest of it for ordinary human use. (17)

Ginsberg explains the motivation behind this new ritual:

"...the priestly mind felt a need for some token

> presentation of first fruits to the Deity before men might partake of the new crop, and so he devised for the very beginning of the harvest the ceremony of vv.9 ff., in which the first omer of grain reaped anywhere in the country is formally presented at the Temple on behalf of the community, thereby making the use of the crop permissible to everybody everywhere." (18)

Finally, Ginsberg argues that the phrase *ממחרת השבת* found in Lev. 23:11 and 15a are glosses because they fit awkwardly into the two sentences in question and also because they must designate a day, whereas the word *שבת* in vv. 15b and 16 can only mean a week. Therefore, he concludes that the words "*ממחרת השבת*" were inserted into the text in order to emphasize that counting should begin on a Sunday. This latter possibility can be entertained only if the author of Lev. 23:15 was deliberate in his use of *שבתות* for weeks instead of *שבעות* (as in Dt. 16). He would thus have stressed that counting had to be executed according to sabbatical weeks (i.e., a Sunday to Sabbath week), which would make the day after the seventh sabbatical week, the fiftieth day and the date of the harvest festival, a Sunday.

Yet, Num. 28:34 (another priestly source) expresses the idea of weeks by using the contrary term *שבעות*. Thus, it is no wonder the Sefirat haOmer period is the subject of controversy among various sects in Judaism from antiquity to modern times.

How then does the day after Passover (the fifteenth of Nisan) come to be identified as the first day in the counting period? As Ginsberg opines, the shifting of the

beginning of Passover from "the new moon of milky grain" (when grain is still in the Aviv stage--not yet ripe) to the **full moon** of the first month of the numbered-months calendar, cause Passover to fall at a point in the year when fully ripe barley had appeared in many areas of the country. Thus, the proximity of the Passover festival to the beginning of the barley harvest made it natural for people to search for a connection between the festival and the first day of counting.

While Ginsberg's theory is perhaps the best on the subject of the biblical calendar, it is not without its weaknesses.

IV. The Problem of "ממחרת השבת" in Leviticus 23

The phrase "ממחרת השבת," found in vvs. 11, 15a, and 16a of the book of Leviticus, has engendered great controversy among various groups within Judaism, not to mention Biblical commentators. The key question that must be addressed is, What does the term "שבת" mean in these verses? Is it the "Sabbath day," i.e., Saturday, or is it a festival day that had "Shabbat-like" qualities or is it designating a week ending on the Sabbath day, known as a "sabbatical week."

Whatever the determination, clarification of the meaning of the phrase was vitally important because it would determine: 1) when the correct date was to present the Omer to the priest (as part of a first-fruits tithe) and thus, on what day the counting period began; 2) how soon grain

from the harvest could be eaten; and 3) the date of the last (fiftieth) day of the period, which is called a *מקרא קדש* and identified with the festival of Shavuot.

Verses 15b and 16a

In the phrase "*שבע שבתות תמימות תהיינה*" (v.15b), it is obvious from the context that the word "*שבתות*" refers to "weeks" rather than Sabbath days since it makes little sense to use the modifier "full" in counting a particular day over such a long period of time (i.e., seven seven-day periods). Jeffrey Tigay states, "That *שבת* refers to a week at least once in the Bible is clear from the adjective *תמימות*, 'full,' which modifies *שבתות* in Lev. 23:15b, but whether this passage refers to sabbatical or non-sabbatical weeks depends upon the meaning of *ממחרת השבת*, 'the day after the Sabbath,' in vv. 11 and 15a." (19) Consequently it can be inferred that "*ממחרת השבת השביעית*" in v. 16 means "the day after the seventh week." (20)

Verses 11 and 15a

In his commentary to Leviticus 23:11, Baruch Levine writes, "The Hebrew words *ממחרת השבת*, repeated in verse 15a, are problematic because it is not specified which Sabbath is intended." (21) Six possibilities have been suggested:

A. Counting from the day after Passover/15th of Nisan (*שבת* = festival day, first day of the festival)
B. Counting from the Sunday after Passover (*שבת* = Sabbath day within Passover week)
C. Counting from the day after the week of Unleavened Bread (*שבת* = festival day, seventh day of the festival)
D. Counting from the Sunday after the week of Unleavened

Bread (*שבת* = Sabbath day after Passover week)

E. Counting from the Sunday after the harvest began (*שבת* = Sabbath day after harvest)

F. The Day After the the Old Assyrian "sapattum" (i.e., a period of days intercalated between two pentecontads in order to fill up or "complete" the year)

A. Counting from the day after Passover/15th of Nisan (*שבת* = festival day, first day of the festival)

The Pharisees, whose interpretations came to be normative after the destruction of the Second Temple, supported the idea of interpreting the word "*שבת*" in Leviticus 23:11 and 15a as a reference to the first yom tov day of the week-long Festival of Unleavened Bread (22). Thus, counting the Omer began on the day after the first day of the festival (the sixteenth of Nisan) and consequently, Shavuot was observed fifty days later on the sixth of Sivan.

The best evidence for the "Pharisaic" understanding of the word "*שבת*" is in the Septuagint. Here, "*ממחרת השבת*" is rendered in v. 11 as "on the morrow of the first day," (i.e., of the seven day Festival of Unleavened Bread). Thus, the counting period would begin on the day after the first day, namely, the second day of the festival week.

However, the Septuagint complicates matters by translating "*שבת*" in v. 15a not as it did in v. 11 (namely, first day), rather as "Sabbath." Van Goudoever attests that the word Sabbath in Greek can mean either the seventh day of the week or the entire week, but not a festival day (23). In any case, the question remains, Why was the Septuagint not consistent with its translation? One approach is to

argue that v. 11 was explicit in its definition of *שבת* as the first day while v. 15a was more literally translated, but was supposed to be understood in harmony with what came before in v. 11.

The Aramaic Targums of Jerusalmi and Onkelos interpret verse 11 as the Septuagint does. Targum Jerusalmi states in both vvs. 11 and 15a: "after the first festal day of Passover." In the same passages, Targum Onkelos states: "from the day after the festival day." However, in Onkelos there is no clarification as to which festival day is meant--the first or the seventh day in the Passover week. (24)

Philo, too, upholds this tradition, "Within the festival of Unleavened Bread there is another festival following directly after the first day." Josephus states, " From the second day of Unleavened Bread, they count 50 days." (25)

Finally, another exegisis of "on the day after the Sabbath" can be found in Joshua 5:10-11 where it is written:

> "So the Israelites encamped at Gilgal and performed the Passover [*פסח*] on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening in the plains of Jericho. Then they ate of the crop of the land <u>on the day after the Pesach [*ממחרת הפסח*]</u>--unleavened bread [*מצות*] and parched grain [*קלי*] on that very day [*בעצם היום הזה*]."

This passage in Joshua clearly harks back to Leviticus 23:14 in which it is stated: "*ולחם וקלי לא תאכלו עד אצם היום הזה*". In Leviticus, "that very day" is the day of bringing the offering for God (i.e., the day of presenting the first cuttings of the Omer to the priest). The account in Joshua 5 strongly supports the Pharisaic reading of "*ממחרת השבת*" as

the day following the first day of Passover (i.e., the sixteenth of Nisan). Moreover, Joshua 5: 10-11 attests to the antiquity of the Pharisaic tradition in the matter of "*ממחרת השבת*."

Aside from commentaries and translations, it is important to also examine the linguistic evidence. In the Bible, the word, *שבת*, is not applied to any *חג* (i.e., pilgrimage festival). However, the word *שבתון* is found in parallel to *שבת קדש* once (Ex. 16:23). And like *שבת*, *שבתון* is meant to be a day of rest.

The term *שבתון* is applied to the holidays of Rosh Hashanah (Lev. 23:24) and Yom Kippur (Lev. 23:32) and even more significantly, to the first and last days of the week of Sukkot (Lev. 23:39), which is a *חג*. Thus, it may be possible to make an inference from the word *שבתון* to the word *שבת*, the former having been applied to the first day of the festival of Sukkot, the latter to the first day of the festival of Passover. Baruch Levine notes:

> "The emphasis on sanctity, to be expected in priestly legislation...Even the term *שבתון*, also an innovation of priestly literature, echoes this theme. **Sacred occasions are "Sabbath-like,"** and the characteristics of the Sabbath day serve as a paradigm for the festivals, as well." (26)

According to Louis Finkelstein, the passage from Joshua 5 proves that the Pharisees were preserving an ancient tradition, from which the Sadduccees differed purely out of self-interest (27). In addition, he adds:

"A more profound issue was also involved: the

> nature of the biblical Sabbath. The Pharisaic interpretation of the word Shabbat in the chapter dealing with the 'Omer' and Shabuot emphasized the conception of the Sabbath as a day of delight... These repeated uses of the words 'Shabbat' and 'Shabbaton' for 'festival' and 'holiday' suggest a deliberate effort to stress a particular notion. Scripture is emphasizing the idea of **the Sabbath as a day of festivity**." (28)

B. Counting from the Sunday after Passover (שבת = Sabbath day)

From rabbinic sources we learn that the Boethusians, who are generally identified as a sub-group of the Sadduccees (29), interpreted the word שבת in Leviticus 23:11 and 15a as referring to the Sabbath day within the week-long Festival of Unleavened Bread: "For the Boethusians held that the Feast of Weeks must always be on the day after the Sabbath." (30) Thus, counting the Omer for the Sadduccees began on the day after the Sabbath day within the Passover week, namely Sunday. Hence, Shavuot was observed fifty days later, also on a Sunday.

Many commentators (31) believe that this interpretation follows the original meaning of Leviticus 23:11 and 15, especially since the primary meaning of the word שבת is the seventh day of the week. As noted above in subsection A, the Septuagint translates the word שבת in Lev. 23:15 as 'Sabbath day'. Moreover, according to Van Goudoever, there is a marginal note in the Greek version to v.11 which states 'the day which is after the Sabbath' and similarly in v. 15, one which states 'from the first day after the Sabbath' (32).

In reference to the phrase in Lev. 23:15 'You shall count...seven weeks. They should be complete (תמימות),' Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai interprets 'complete weeks' as meaning weeks counted from Sunday to Sunday: "The latter verse [v.15] refers to the time when the first day of the Festival of Passover falls on the Sabbath." (33) In Pesikta de Rav Kahana, R. Hiyya interprets v. 15 similarly (i.e., complete weeks are counted from Sunday to Sabbath). (34)

The Samaritans also maintain the tradition of counting fifty days from the Sunday after Passover. Ironically, just as the Sadducees and Pharisees would later split, the Samaritans themselves were divided into a priestly and non-priestly group. However, in contrast to the outcome within rabbinic Judaism, the interpretation of the Samaritan priests--counting fifty days from Sunday--remained normative in the Samaritan sect (35). Van Goudoever asserts:

> "It is not likely that the Samaritan priests borrowed their counting of the 'omer' from the Boethusian priests in Jerusalem, or that the Boethusians borrowed theirs from the Samaritans. Both traditions could have been independent of each other, but it is more probable that both groups preserved an older calendar practice." (36)

C. Counting from the day after the week of Unleavened Bread (שבת = festival day, seventh day of the festival)

In Targum Onkelos Leviticus 23:11 and 15, we find "You shall count...from the day after the festival day," but as noted above in subsection A, it is unclear which festival

day is meant, the first or the last day of the Passover week. The Syriac translation of these same verses reads, "After the latter of the two festival days or after the last day. Van Goudoever maintains:

> "This interpretation means that the week of Unleavened Bread is completed before the 50 days. It is interesting that such a calendar also occurs in Syriac-Christian writings. The Holy Week before Easter is there called the week of Unleavened Bread. This week is characterized by fasting." (37)

D. Counting from the Sunday after the week of Unleavened Bread (*שבת* = Sabbath day)

In the Book of Jubilees an alternative calendar is spelled out in detail. The year begins on a Wednesday. Likewise, the Festival of Unleavened Bread also begins on Wednesday, the fifteenth day of the first month, and ends on a Tuesday, the twenty-first day of this month. According to Baruch Levine, the calendar in Jubilees was also used by the Qumran sect or at least known to it:

> "To those operating on this system, the formula *ממחרת השבת* in Lev. 23:11 and 15a must have been literally taken to refer to the first Sunday after the seven days of Passover, the 26th of Nisan. This is because Jubilees(16:4) gives the date of the Pentecost as the 15th of Sivan, which is the 50th day after the 26th of Nisan." (38)

E. Counting from the Sunday after the harvest began (*שבת* = Sabbath day after harvest)

According to the Encyclopedia Miqra'it, this explanation is accepted by many modern interpreters, who unfortunately for our study remain unnamed. (39) See footnote 39 for

reports that the Karaites also followed this tradition.

F. The Day After the the Old Assyrian "sapattum" (i.e., a period of days intercalated between two pentecontads in order to fill up or "complete" the year)

In order to explain this interpretation of the phrase *ממחרת השבת*, it will be necessary to outline the pentecontad theory. A pentecontad calendar is one in which fifty-day periods were counted successively throughout the whole year. Perhaps the earliest pentecontad calendar we know of was used in Old Assyria; later it is found in Babylonian documents as well. According to Hildegard and Julius Lewy, two calendars were used there simultaneously, one based upon the fifty-day period as time-unit and a second reckoned according to months (40). In the former calendar, a year will naturally comprise seven full pentecontads for a total of 350 days (i.e., 50 x 7 = 350). However, since a solar year consists of 365 days, a certain number of days had to be inserted in this calendar in order to make to year full. The Lewys maintained that these extra days were inserted between two pentecontads, just as the leap month of an extra Adar is inserted between two regular months in the Jewish calendar today. (41) They discover that in several Assyrian documents there was in fact a two-week period of intercalary days inserted between two pentecontads called a "sapattum." (42) Taking their cue from the similarity of the words *שבת* and "sapattum," they conclude:

> "If we interpret the term 'sabbath' in the sense of the Old Assyrian sapattum--i.e., as a period of days intercalated between two pentecontads in order to fill up or 'complete' the year--, the expression *ממחרת השבת* is unequivocally determined: it refers to the first day of the first pentecontad which, in the ancient Amorite calendar, immediately followed the sapattum...The correspondence between the 'sabbath' preceding the wave-offering of the first-fruits [in the Bible] and the Old Assyrian sapattum is all the more striking since the latter...was immediately followed by the 'pentecontad of the first- fruits.'" (43)

They point out another similarity between the Bible and the Old Assyrian pentecontad calendar. In Deuteronomy 16:9, we are enjoined to begin counting seven weeks "*מהחל חרמש בקמה*," from when the sickle is first put to the standing grain. Similarly, in the Assyrian calendar, the first day of the first pentecontad was called "sibit niggallim," the seizing of the sickle (44). Moreover, the first pentecontad (fifty-day period) comprised the season of the grain harvest just as it does in the Biblical calendar.

The main problem with the theory that the Bible reflects a pentecontad calendar is that while there are similarities between the pentecontad calendar and the Sefirat haOmer period, there is no proof that it was ever used by the Israelites. In fact, the Lewys themselves state that the Assyrians soon abandoned the pentecontad calendar for a luni-solar one. (45) In addition, they note:

> "...it is conspicuous that the occurrence of both the Babyonian 'sibut sattim' and the Assyrian 'hamustum' [50-day periods] is strictly limited to the documents of the Amorite period of Babylonia and Assyria; neither the numerous older Sumerian or Babylonian texts nor the hundreds of business documents of later periods from both countries

contain any reference to those time-units." (46)

The reason the Assyrians and Babylonians were quick to abandon the pentecontad calendar may have been because "the pentecontad calendar was bound to raise certain difficulties in a larger country in the various parts of which different climatic conditions prevailed." (47) It would have been very difficult to standardize such a calendar and yet, maintain the flexibility necessary for agriculturally-based seasons and festivals over a large area of varying weather.

Admittedly, the counting of fifty days is a part of many ancient Israelite traditions--among the Therapeutes sect in Egypt, the Qumran community, the Essenes, and the mainstream Biblical tradition that dictates counting fifty days from during the Sefirat haOmer period. However, in non-rabbinic Jewish groups, the counting was more elaborate and played a more important role. (48)

Even more damning to the Lewy's pentecontad theory is **their admission** that the time-unit pentecontad has disapppeared from the extant Jewish calendar (49). In other words, even if it can be said that at one time the Israelites had used a pentecontad calendar, by the biblical era, they are no longer using it. And even if it can be said that at one time the year was divided up into fifty-day periods such as the one between the beginning of the harvest and Shavuot, this particular pentecontad is all that remains. There is no evidence in the Bible to hint at, let alone prove, the existence/pre-existence of a pentecontad calendar for the entire year.

In fact, the earliest attested post-biblical writing concerning the Israelite agricultural year and calendar is the Gezer calendar, which has been dated to the years surrounding 925 BCE. (50) In this calendar, a year is composed of twelve months-- ירחים--and the agricultural seasons lasted for one or two month periods. There is no mention or implication of fifty-day time-units. In sum, the vast majority of scholars have accordingly discounted the pentecontad theory of the calendar.

V. Morganstern's Theory Concerning the Pentecontad Calendar and the Date of Lag baOmer

Julian Morgenstern, past President of the Hebrew Union College, was a contemporary of Hildegard and Julius Lewy. He placed great weight upon their theory that originally the Israelite calendar had been a pentacontad one. He too felt that the year was once divided up into seven fifty-day periods. However, Morgenstern stresses that the two intercalary weeks were not, as the Lewy's maintained, a 'saputtum' that was placed together before the grain harvest pentecontad. Rather, Morgenstern claimed that the intercalary weeks were separated. One was the Sukkot week, which was celebrated immediately following the fourth pentecontad and the other was the Passover week, which immediately followed the seventh pentecontad. Since the Passover week was celebrated during the final week in the year, it was followed immediately by a New Year's Day, on

which the outstanding ritual was the cutting by each farmer of the first sheaf of his new crop. (51)

Morgenstern then continues to spin out the theory and relate it to Lag baOmer:

> "From all this it is clear that in the reckoning of the pentecontad calendar, this pentecontad, intervening between the Massot and the Sabu'ot Festivals, must have commenced eight days (the eight days of the Massot Festival + the New Year's Day Festival) later than is the practice of the present-day Jewish calendar. Therefore what is now the thirty-third day of the Omer period, intervening between the two festivals, would have been, under the conditions of the pentecontad calendar...the twenty-fifth day of the fifty days period. In other words, this day would have marked the close of the first half of the Omer period...And not at all improbably some particular significance of ritualistic character must have marked this twenty-fifth, this middle day of the Omer period and imparted to it something of the nature of a semi-holiday." (52)

As mentioned above, the Pentecontad calendar is a seductive theory because it is so neat--the math works perfectly if played with enough, the holidays seem to fall where they do with precision instead of at whim. Ultimately, however, there is no strong proof that this was indeed the original calendar of Israel, let alone that it continued in official use "very probably until the adoption of the present official calendar of Judaism near the beginning of the fourth century B.C.," as Morgenstern asserts. (53) Aside from the fifty-day Sefirat haOmer period, there is no other mention of another pentecontad in the Bible. There are no non-Biblical records regarding the use of such a calendar. Rather, the one record that we do

have of a calendar--the Gezer calendar--is entirely non-pentecontad in nature.

In addition, by stating that the Sefirat haOmer period must have begun eight days later than it begins in our present calendar, Morgenstern has assumed that the Matsot Festival in the days of the pentecontad calendar was fixed on a particular date rather than beginning whenever the grain was close to ripening. This assumption contradicts the basic agricultural nature of the pentecontad calendar as detailed in the Lewy article. The intercalary weeks at the end of the year (which Morgenstern identifies as the Passover week) were meant to be added according to the amount of time needed for the grain to ripen by the beginning of the year/first pentecontad. Thus they could hardly be a set and fixed number of days if the calendar was to remain responsive to agricultural conditions.

Moreover, his theory raises many questions. Today, the Sefirah period begins on the 16th of Nisan, and Passover week falls between the 15th and the 21st. Thus, some grain must be ripe by the 16th of Nisan, and farmers as well as traders would be anxious to "desacrilize" it as soon as possible in order to eat or sell it. If the Sefirah period was postponed eight more days according to the pentecontad calendar, then the harvest too would have been postponed more than a week after the grain was ready for reaping. Consequently, eating of the grain and selling it would have been delayed as well. This sort of delay for an agricultural society would have been very difficult to bear.

And finally, how is it that Lag baOmer, of which nothing is mentioned in Jewish sources until the early middle ages, survived as a "mid-pentecontad" holiday from the fourth century B.C. centuries and centuries after such a calendar is discarded? If such a holiday had continued to be observed, we would expect some mention of it in Jewish sources between the adoption of the official calendar of Judaism and its actual appearance in the texts over a thousand years later. If Morgenstern's theory were correct, we might expect that after the demise of the pentecontad calendar, the holiday would have been **reinterpreted** to have some other significance. And yet, we do not even find this in our sources.

Even if we assume, as Morgenstern does, that the pentacontad calendar provided for a fixed starting date every year and thus, for a fixed "mid-pentacontad" day (the 25th of the pentacontad), we might argue that another culture (the Babylonians?) who also had followed the pentecontad calendar would have preserved this date as a quasi-holiday. Although the Israelites were no longer using the pentecontad calendar, they might have borrowed the holiday celebration from this other culture and celebrated it as their own. However, this possibility is fatally flawed in that: a) a fixed date within the Babylonian pentecontad calendar would correspond to different dates within the official Jewish luni-solar calendar (i.e., the 25th of the pentecontad would correspond to the 30th day of Omer counting one year and the 40th day the next year

depending upon the length of the lunar months and the necessity for an extra month of Adar); b) most other cultures that utilized the pentecontad calendar (for example, the Babylonians) eventually switched to a luni-solar calendar themselves. Thus, neither the Babylonians nor the Jews would have been keeping time according to the pentecontad calendar. Yet, Morgenstern would have us believe that the so-called mid-pentecontad holiday of Lag baOmer was still being observed.

As will be shown in chapter four, Lag baOmer is a holiday that originated in the geonic era at the earliest and quite possibly arose later in the early Middle Ages.

CHAPTER TWO
SEFIRAT haOMER AND LAG baOMER IN THE RABBINIC PERIOD: TANNAITIC AND AMORAIC

I. The Controversy Between the Pharisees and the Sadduccees

As we saw in the last chapter, the words "*ממחרת השבת*" engendered many different interpretations and specifically, led to a bitter controversy between the Pharisees and the Sadducees regarding the date upon which the *עומר* was to be cut. In this chapter, we shall focus upon rabbinic literature (namely, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, and Midrash) in an effort to determine how the Sefirat haOmer period developed further, and once again, whether by the the amoraic period, Lag baOmer is designated as a special day within the Jewish calendar.

The Pharisaic interpretation of "*ממחרת השבת*" is most clearly explicated in Sifra Emor, piska 12, and Menachot 65b, "*ממחרת השבת, ממחרת יום טוב*." Repeated several times throughout rabbinic literature, it is surely an attempt to emphasize the importance of this view over and against the multiplicity of interpretations extant in the Jewish world (as detailed in the previous chapter). In T. Sotah 11:16-19 (1), the Israelites are said to have eaten the manna that fell in the desert until the sixteenth of Nisan (i.e., the day upon which the omer was offered and the new crops were allowed to be eaten). Thus, the "festival day" mentioned in Sifra is explicitly identified in T. Sotah as the first day of Passover.

In contrast, the Sadducees are reported to have interpreted "*ממחרת השבת*" as meaning the day after the Sabbath day, presumably the first Sabbath day in the Passover week. In Menachot 65a we find a statement attesting to this Sadduceean method of interpretation, "For the Boethusians held that Atseret [i.e., Shavuot] must always be on the day after the Sabbath."(2)

Who are these Boethusians? They seem to be a branch of the Sadducees, whose theological views they shared. However, the Boethusians were loyal to the Herodians, whereas the Sadducees supported the Hasmonean dynasty (3). For the Boethusians, Shavuot consistently fell on a Sunday (the day after the Sabbath day) because counting of the omer had likewise begun on a Sunday. In contrast to Pharisaic counting, by which Shavuot must fall on the sixth of Sivan every year (exactly fifty days from the sixteenth of Nisan), Sadduceean counting caused the date of the Sunday upon which Shavuot fell to vary from year to year because the date of the Sunday on which the counting of the omer began varied yearly.

Louis Finkelstein posits several reasons for the controversy between the two groups and stresses that the dispute regarding the date of the omer offering is actually of secondary importance to that about the date of Shavuot. Several times in the Talmud (for example, Pesachim 68b, Gittin 56a), the Rabbis identify Shavuot as the day upon which Revelation of Torah occurred at Mount Sinai. The Sadducees, however, would accept no such interpretation.

According to Finkelstein:

> "The Pharisees gave Shabuot a fixed day because, they said, it commemorated the Sinaitic theophany which occurred on the fiftieth day after the Exodus. The Sadducees denied that the festival had any historical allusion or that the date of the revelation was known." (4)

The Sadducees insisted upon regarding Shavuot as a simple agricultural festival--the festival of the wheat harvest--because, according to Finkelstein, the controversy was bound up with material interests:

> "The material interest of the priesthood in fixing the date of Shabuot on Sunday derived from the system of priestly service in vogue at the Temple...When the festivals occurred during the week, the clan then officiating at the Temple found its term of service and income curtailed...when Shabuot occurred on Sunday, the priests ministering the preceding week had but to remain in Jerusalem one day to share in the festival income. The clan entering on its service on the Sabbath preceding Shabuot joined the other priests in the celebration of the pilgimage, receiving part of the additional emoluments of the festivals, besides the regular ones from sacrifices which would be offered also on weekdays." (5)

On the other hand, the Pharisees were motivated to attach historical significance to the festival of Shavuot because they were urban scholars who were divorced from agriculture. Moreover, their devotion to Torah would doubtless have led them to wonder why the Revelation on Sinai was not celebrated by any festival. (6) This lack of a day celebrating Revelation combined with the perception of the Sabbath as a day of joy akin to a festival prompted the Pharisees to interpret the phrase "ממחרת השבת" as referring to the day after the first festival day in Passover, and

thus, fixing the date of Shavuot from year to year. This perhaps explains why the Pharisees went to such great lengths in order to underscore the validity of their point of view.

For the Pharisees, fixing the date of the Omer-cutting on the sixteenth of Nisan, the day after the first day of the festival, was of utmost importance. The clearly polemical nature of their arguments stem most likely from reciprocal Boethusian/Sadduceean opposition to them. Proof of its importance to the rabbis can be detected immediately upon analyzing M. Menachot 10:1 and 3.

In M. Men. 10:1, R. Ishmael attempts to determine the amount of barley that must be cut if the Omer is brought on a Sabbath or a weekday. He concludes that less grain should be reaped and offered on the Sabbath day and more on the weekday. The majority (i.e., "the Sages") disagree. R. Hanina, the prefect of the Priests, also attempts to distinguish between Omer reaped on the Sabbath versus a weekday. He believes that only one man should perform the work of reaping on the Sabbath, while on a weekday, he permits three men. However, the majority rules that "It is all one whether it was a Sabbath or a weekday."

Additional evidence of the importance the Rabbis place on their method of counting can be found in M. Menachot 10:9 and T. Menachot 10:23, in which reaping the Omer for the Temple offering overrides the prohibitions of the Sabbath! The Pharisees even went so far as to proscribe a Omer-cutting rite, not mentioned in the Bible:

> "What was the procedure [for reaping the Omer]? The agents of the court would go out on the day before the festival [of Passover] and tie the grain in bunches while it was still not reaped to make it easier to reap. All the inhabitants of the nearby towns gathered there so that it could be reaped with great display [or pomp]. When it grew dark he called out, 'Has the sun set?' And they answered, 'Yes.' 'Has the sun set?' And they answered, 'Yes.' '[Should I reap] with this sickle?' They answered, 'Yes.' '[Should I reap] with this sickle?' They answered, 'Yes.' '[Should I gather the barley] with this basket?' They answered, 'Yes.' '[Should I gather the barley] with this basket?' They answered, 'Yes.' On the Sabbath he would say to them, '[Should I reap] on this Sabbath?' They answered, 'Yes.' '[Should I reap] on this Sabbath?' They answered, 'Yes.' 'Shall I reap?' And they answered him, 'Reap!' 'Shall I reap?' And they answered him, 'Reap!' Three times [did he call out] for each [separate] matter and they answered him, 'Yes. Yes. Yes.' **And why so much [pomp]? Because of the Boethusians who used to say, 'One should not reap the Omer on the evening following the festival day.'"** (7)

Why would the Rabbis, who placed such great weight upon the sanctity of the Sabbath day, who stressed the importance of not violating the אבות מלאכות, who would certainly prohibit reaping on the Sabbath in any other context, permit and even encourage a grand display of Sabbath violation with large attendant crowds? The answer is contained in the last two sentences of the mishnah quoted above. All this was done as a highly visible and popular polemic against the Sadduceean opinion that the Omer should be cut on the day after the Sabbath.

Similarly, another example of polemics between the Pharisees and Sadducees may be found in M. Hagigah 2:4. There the disciples of Hillel and Shammai argue about the day for slaughtering the עולה sacrifice connected to the

Festival of Shavuot. The statement is made that if Shavuot by chance fell on a Sabbath, "the day for slaughtering is after the Sabbath. And the High Priest may not put on his raiment, and mourning and fasting are permitted so as not to promote the views of those who say 'Atseret [Shavuot] falls on the day after the Sabbath.'" Clearly the Pharisees are intent upon taking every precaution so that people will not follow the Sadduceean determination of the date of Shavuot.

II. Quasi-Ominous Characteristics of the Sefirat haOmer Period

The earliest Jewish source that alludes to the unusual nature of this season is found in M. Eduyot 2:10 concerning the amount of time the wicked are punished in Gehinnom. Rabbi Akiva asserts that "the judgment of the wicked in Gehinnom lasts twelve months," while Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri maintains that the judgment endures "**from Passover until the Atseret [Shavuot].**"

Elsewhere judgment during this period is mentioned in respect to agriculture. M. Rosh Hashanah 1:2 maintains that "the world is judged at four periods in the year: on Passover for grain, on the Closing Festival [Shavuot] for fruits of the tree..." In Rosh Hashanah 16a, this theme is elucidated in more detail:

> "R. Judah said in the name of R. Akiva 'Why did the Torah state that we should bring an Omer on Passover? Because Passover is the season of grain. Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'Bring before Me an Omer on Passover so that your grain in the fields may be blessed.'" (8)

Indeed, there is a great deal of fear concerning the state of the crops during this period. A description of the manner in which the Omer is supposed to be waved is found in Menachot 62a, where R. Jose b. R. Hanina and R. Jose b. R. Abin are both quoted as asserting that this rite averts violent winds and harmful dews during the grain harvest (9). In M. Ta'anit 1:7, rainfall after the month of Nisan was viewed as a sign of divine anger. As Lou Silberman proposes in his article on the Sefirah season: "...it is not at all far-fetched to suggest that part of the shadowy character of the season derived from a sense of anxiety lest the crops be smitten."(10)

Another sign of the ominous nature of this season stems from the account that many students of Rabbi Akiva died during this period. There are two sources which refer explicitly to the Sefirah season--Yevamot 62b and Kohelet Rabbah 11:6,1. In Yevamot we find the following report:

> "It was said that R. Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of disciples, from Gabbat to Antipatris. And all of them died at the same time because they did not treat each other with respect...A Tanna taught that all of them died between Passover and Atseret. R. Hama b. Abba or perhaps R. Hiyya b. Abin said that all of them died a cruel death. What was it? R. Nachman answered--croup."

In Ecclesiastes Rabbah:

> "R. Akiva says, 'I had twelve thousand disciples from Gabbat to Antipatris, and all of them died in

> my lifetime between Passover and Atseret, so that finally I had only seven remaining'...He said to them, 'The previous ones died only because they were envious of one another in knowledge of Torah. You should not act so.'"

Two other sources report the death of Rabbi Akiva's disciples but do not mention when this took place. In Genesis Rabbah 61:3, the following is written:

> "R. Akiva had twelve thousand disciples from Acco to Antipatris, and they all died **at the same period** [*בפרק אחד*]. Why? Because they were envious of one another. Finally, seven remained...He said to them, 'My sons, the former disciples died only because they were envious of one another. See to it that you do not act so."

In Tanhuma, Hayye Sara 6, the number of Rabbi Akiva's disciples who died is said to have been only three hundred and nothing is mentioned as to when they died.

As we shall see in the next chapter, this event serves as the basis for the various mourning customs practiced during the Sefirah period in post-talmudic sources. Yet, as we have seen above, these accounts are not consistent and not all of them are clear concerning the time period in which these deaths took place. Moreover, since by all accounts the students died as a result of their own sinful behavior, it is odd (and somewhat unbelievable) that we would be enjoined by later sources to commemorate their deaths.

It should be noted that nowhere in rabbinic literature do we find a reference to any particular observance or custom of mourning during the Sefirah period. Rather, in Taanit 17b mourning is forbidden from the eighth of Nisan until

twenty-first of Nisan (i.e., the close of the Passover festival), while today, in contrast, customs of mourning are observed from the sixteenth of Nisan onwards.

Moreover, there is a statement in Menachot 65b that "counting is a duty upon everyone." Yet, no mention is made anywhere in rabbinic literature of a formula for counting the Omer. In the following chapter, the liturgy of the Sefirah period from talmudic times onwards will be discussed in detail.

III. Lag B'Omer as a Celebration of the Manna Falling

Julian Morgenstern proposes that on Lag baOmer the manna began to fall in the wilderness, and the people saw it as the day of their salvation. (11) Based upon Exodus Rabbah 25:4, where this event is reported, he concludes, "Therefore this day of the first appearance of the manna, and with this the salvation of Israel in the desert, is celebrated as a semi-holiday of joyous character." (12)

However, there are two problems with this suggestion. First, no post-talmudic commentator cites this event as a possible reason for the celebration of the thirty-third day of the counting of the Omer. Secondly, Morgenstern's reading of the text appears to be flawed. In Exodus Rabbah 25:4, it is written:

> "'And the whole congregation of Israel complained [Exodus 16:2]' Why did they complain there?

> Because the provisions that they took out from Egypt constituted for them only sixty one meals, which they ate for thirty one days. When the last of the dough was finished, that same night they complained...The Holy One, blessed be He replied, 'They did what they did. And I will do as I will do. Tell them--in the morning the manna will descend for you.'"

The problem with Morgenstern's reading lies in his interpretation of the words "that same night." It would seem that this would refer to the thirty second day after leaving Egypt and thus, manna would have fallen on the morning after, namely, the day of the thirty second. In addition, he must have forgotten that the Omer was counted from the evening of the sixteenth of Nisan, whereas the Israelites are reported to have left Egypt on the fifteenth of Nisan. Therefore, the manna would have fallen on Iyar 17, rather than on Iyar 18, as is the current practice.

In conclusion, we cannot justify basing the celebration of Lag baOmer upon the account concerning when the manna began to fall. Nor can we find references to folk customs of mourning associated with this period. Nor is a liturgical formula for the counting described in any of the literature from this era.

CHAPTER THREE
THE MOURNING CUSTOMS AND LITURGY OF SEFIRAT haOMER

In this chapter, two areas will be investigated. The first section will consist of an analysis of the mourning customs connected with the Sefirat haOmer season, customs which are first mentioned in the sources only after the geonic period. In addition, we will discuss the process by which these customs were transformed into halachah. The second section will examine how the liturgy for counting the Omer developed. Folkloric customs observed on Lag baOmer will be addressed in chapter four. However, as we shall soon see, Lag baOmer also affects the halachic discussion concerning the length of time mourning customs should be observed.

I. Mourning Customs Connected with the Sefirat haOmer Period

Three customs associated with mourning are discussed in detail by the commentators and they are: abstention from marriage, haircuts, and work after sunset (1). According to the vast majority of sources, observance of these customs is explained by the death of Rabbi Akiva's students during the Sefirah period due to some sort of plague. (The sources describing this incident may be found in chapter two.) Yet, it seems odd that customs would arise to memorialize students who who are remembered best for not treating each other with respect. Therefore, it seems logical to look elsewhere for the true reason behind these mourning

practices.

There are hints in the tradition that the period between Passover and Shavuot was the beginning of the Bar Kochba Revolt, during which Rabbi Akiva's students were martyred by the Romans. Historian and folklorist, Yom Tov Levinsky explains, "From the moment that the Bar Kochba revolt ended in failure, **our Fathers transferred mourning for the thousands of soldiers that died by the Roman sword to the days during which the Omer is counted** because the revolt began in the month of Aviv and the campaign of Julius Severus...began in the days of Passover and continued in force during the entire period until Atseret." (2)

In the letter which bears his name (3), Rav Sherira Gaon also blames the Romans for the deaths of Akiva's students:

"והוה שמדא על התלמידים של ר' עקיבא"

That is to say, there was some sort of persecution or decree against them issued by the Roman government.

In his commentary on Yevamot, Adin Steinsaltz likewise proposes that the students of R. Akiva joined with the soldiers of Bar Kochba and were later killed along with them when the revolt was defeated (4). Similarly, Gedaliah Alon states that historian's generally accept the theory that Rabbi Akiva's students went out to battle and were killed en masse. According to Alon, even the word for plague mentioned in Yevamot 62b, "אסכרה," may have been a reference to a kind of execution by the Romans (5). Eliezer Levi advanced the hypothesis that the Talmud is in fact condemning Akiva's disciples and their lack of respect for

advanced the hypothesis that the Talmud is in fact condemning Akiva's disciples and their lack of respect for one another, "due to a lack of coordination and unified command." (6) All in all, whether Akiva's students were killed by Romans or by plague, because of their participation in the revolt or their disrespect for one another, there are no references in the Talmud to mourning customs observed in their memory. One would expect that if such an event had been so traumatic as to become the basis for mourning practices attested to in geonic sources, there would have been some mention of them in the Talmud itself. It would seem more likely that if the mourning customs are truly related to anyone at all, they arose to memorialize the many martyrs who died during that time-period in the Bar Kochba Revolt.

A. Geonic Sources Regarding Mourning Customs (7)

The earliest geonic source we possess is a responsum of Natronai Gaon (Sura: 853-858). (8) He received the question, "Why should we not betroth and marry between Passover and Atseret? Is this due to a halachic prohibition or not?" Natronai responds that this practice is not "*משום איסור*" --i.e., it is not a matter of halacha--rather it is practiced "*משום מנהג אבלות*"--in other words, it is minhag.

He further explains that mourning customs observed at this season are practiced due to Rabbi Akiva's students, who

died between Passover and Atseret. From that time on, he claims that "the sages in those days" observed the custom not to marry during this time period. Then he adds, "One who takes his bride into his house [thus formalizing the marriage] without asking an authority should not be punished, neither with a penalty nor with flogging, but if he came and asked before doing so, we teach him not to get married." Lastly, addressing the subject of betrothal, he writes that whoever wants to get betrothed between Passover and Atseret can do so since the main celebration (i.e., the חופה) takes place at marriage.

From the question posed, we can conclude that by the ninth centurey, there was a custom not to enter into betrothal or marriage during the **entire** Sefirah period. The word "entire" is emphasized because as we shall see, some authorities specify that the custom should be practiced only for a part of this period. We may conclude from his response that Natronai believes the custom of prohibiting applies to rituals of celebration connected with marriage rather than all rituals connected with the marriage process. Furthermore, he maintains that the custom arose in the days immediately following the deaths of the students--a very early attribution indeed. Finally, in the beginning of his responsum, he clearly states that this prohibition is a custom and then at the end, also underscores his opinion by refusing to punish a person who gets married during the period without checking with an authority.

Hai Gaon (Pumbedita: 998-1038) received a similar question and responded with essentially the same ruling as Natronai--i.e., one can get betrothed during the Sefirah period but if a person asks an authority if he can get married, the answer is no, because of the deaths of Akiva's students. In addition, Hai rules that if he does get married despite being told not to do so, he should be flogged but not fined (presumably for not following the ruling of an authority, even though the practice is a custom and not halacha). (9)

Isaac Ibn Giat (Spain: 1020-1089) writes that it was a custom of all Jews not to get married between Passover and Atseret. (10) He recapitulates the answer of Natronai, quoting his responsum almost word for word, and attributes his reply to geonic teachings. (11) Lastly, Menachem HaMeiri (Provence: 1249-1306) records an entirely different observance from those mentioned above: "A tradition received from the geonim--that on the day of Lag laOmer [sic] the dying ceased...and thus, it is customary for that reason not to get married from Passover until this time." (12)

Here is the first report of a tradition regarding Lag baOmer (which will be examined in the next chapter.) Moreover, it is the first mention of a tradition prohibiting marriage that limits the custom from Passover until Lag baOmer. (13) Therefore, we may conclude from the Meiri's report that two parallel customs were observed concerning the mourning period by the thirteenth century at least and

quite possibly earlier. One custom limited weddings during the entire period of the Sefirat haOmer and the other limited weddings from Passover to Lag baOmer. .11

The only other custom mentioned in our sources from the geonim is the prohibition against working after sunset. In another responsum by Hai Gaon, he replies to a question requesting the reason behind this custom, "Because of the students of Rabbi Akiva, all of whom died at sunset and were buried after sunset, when the people were free from work." He then adds the words "זעזו" and offers a further explanation, i.e., that just as work on the land is forbidden during the Shemittah year so one should cease working after sunset [during the Sefirah period]. (14)

Significantly, the word "זעזו" may indicate that even Hai himself doubts his first explanation concerning the students' death at sunset. Since there is no midrash (extant today) that states what time of day the students died, the basis for this tradition is uncertain. Sensing this tenuousness, Hai attempts to find a more textually based reason by linking this practice to the prohibition against work in the fields during a Shemittah year as mentioned in the Torah.

Another practice which is not mentioned in geonic literature, although it is mentioned in later works, is the custom of not cutting one's hair during the Sefirah period.

Three other geonic works--namely, the Sheeltot of Rav

Ahai Gaon (Sura: 756 and later in Palestine), Sefer Halchot Gedolot of Yehudai Gaon (Sura: 757-760) and Seder Rav Amram (Sura: 858-870)--address the halachic issue of what to do when one forgets to count on the first night. However, none of them refer to any mourning customs practiced during the Sefirah period. Since the former two are works from the eighth century, it is possible that they were unaware of these customs, since they may only have arisen a century later in the time of Natronai. Amram, Natronai's predecessor in Sura, would however have been aware of them. He may, nevertheless, have omitted them in his work because they were so new.

In sum, it is apparent from the geonic sources that there are two different customs concerning the time period in which weddings were prohibited during this season. Yet, in the majority of the sources, the custom, whether it be abstinence from getting marriage or work, is in force for the entire Sefirah period. It is clear that Jews are also confused about the reason these customs are being practiced. Lastly, every one of the geonic responsum as well as the traditions reported from the geonim by later authorities cite the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's students as the reason underlying the prohibition against getting married. Hai Gaon tries to link this event with the custom forbidding work after sunset, but even he finds this connection tenuous.

B. Post-Geonic Sources Regarding Mourning Customs: As Found in the Tur and the Shulchan Aruch

In the following pages, we will examine the historical development of the mourning customs practiced during the Sefirah period. We will see that while the discussions of the customs concerning marriage and working after sunset are simple and lucid, the custom of not cutting the hair is complex and difficult to follow. Regarding the practice of haircutting, we will make an effort to summarize the main ideas as clearly as possible, but as the reader will soon discover, this task is not very easy. Since the discussion of the custom connected to marriage is based upon that concerning haircuts, we will begin by investigating the latter.

1. The Custom of Not Cutting the Hair

In the Tur (15), Jacob ben Asher (Germany 1275-Spain 1340) wrote, "There are places in which it is customary not to get a hair cut [during the entire period between Passover and Atseret]. And there are those who cut their hair from Lag baOmer and onwards, saying 'it was then that they ceased dying.'" According to this citation, already by the time of the Tur, there are two parallel traditions regarding the prohibition against cutting one's hair (just as there were regarding marriage as we saw from the Meiri); namely, not cutting hair for the entire Sefirah period versus not

cutting hair until Lag baOmer. Since this custom is not mentioned by the geonim, several questions may be asked: Was this a later tradition than those concerning marriage and work after sunset? When was the first report of it in the sources?

It is unclear whether the custom of not cutting the hair is a later tradition, since not all the responsa and writings of the geonim have survived. It could have been a custom during the geonic period, but the sources reporting it were somehow lost. On the other hand, the custom might not have evolved until later, since the first person we know who mentions it is Zerachiyah HaLevi (Spain 1125-Provence 1215). (16)

In their commentaries, which tend to focus exclusively upon halachic questions, neither the Rif (Isaac al-Fasi, Algeria 1013-Spain 1103) nor the Rosh (Asher ben Yechiel, Germany 1250-Spain 1327) mention customs connected to the Sefirah period. Similarly, no mourning customs are mentioned by the Rambam (Moses Maimonides, Spain 1135-Egypt 1204) in his work Mishnah Torah.

In "Beit Yosef" Joseph Caro (Spain 1488-Tsfat 1575) states that the custom of not cutting one's hair during the entire Sefirah period is was widespread in the community of Joshua Ibn Shuib (ca. Spain 1330) according to a sermon given by Shuib on the first day of Passover. In order to support the practice of not cutting hair between Passover and Lag baOmer, (a custom he himself favored) Caro cites a

tradition that was passed down by the Radah (David Abudraham, Spain: late 13th-early 14th century) in the name of Ibn HaYarchi (Avraham HaYarchi, Provence 1155-Spain 1215) in the name of the Razah (Zerachiyah HaLevi, Spain 1125-Provence 1215):

> "I have heard that there is a midrash that they died from Passover until *פרוסת העצרת*, which is fifteen days before Atzeret. As it is said '*עד פרוס הפסח פרוס החג*' which is fifteen days in Nisan and in Tishrei. And when you eliminate fifteen days from fourty-nine days, thirty-four days remain and they are in fact thirty-three full days. Moreover, one can shave on the thirty-fourth day in the morning due to the principle of '*מקצת היום ככולו*' [part of a day counts for a whole day]."

Thus according to Caro, during the entire day of the thirty-third (Lag baOmer) and the evening of the thirty-fourth, it is forbidden to cut one's hair.

Caro also mentions that some people practice the custom of cutting their hair on Rosh Hodesh Iyyar (in addition to cutting their hair after Lag baOmer), but he objects to this practice "since most of the communities do not observe this custom." He stresses that it is forbidden to cut one's hair, even on Rosh Hodesh, during the entire period of thirty-three days.

In the Shulchan Aruch (17), Caro transforms the opinion he expressed in "Beit Yosef" into halachah. He writes:

> "There are those who are accustomed not to cut their hair until Lag laOmer [sic], saying that it was then that they ceased dying. Moreover, one should not cut one's hair until the day of the thirty-forth in the morning...there are those who practice the custom of cutting the hair on Rosh Hodesh Iyyar, but this is a mistake."

In "Darchei Moshe," a commentary on the Tur, and in his

comments on the Shulchan Aruch, called הגהות, Moses Isserles (Poland: 1530-1572) attests that the custom of cutting one's hair on the day of Lag baOmer itself (and not waiting until the following day) is widespread in his community. He quotes the Maharil (Germany: 1365-1427) who, in contrast to Caro, did not condemn cutting one's hair from Passover through Rosh Hodesh Iyyar. Since the Maharil accepted different practices, Isserles does also, refusing to condemn this custom as long as one does not practice it at the same time as one practice's another custom (for example, to cut one's hair from Passover until Rosh Hodesh Iyyar and again from Lag baOmer until Atseret). He states: "In any one city, some of the people in the city would not follow one custom while some follow another custom due to the principle of לא יתגודדו [not establishing competing groups regarding Jewish observances]."

In "Bayit Hadash," a later commentary on the Tur, Joel Sirkis (Poland: late 16th-beginning 17th century) offers a different approach to our subject. Concerning the custom of cutting hair on Lag baOmer, Sirkis recapitulates the objection raised by Caro in "Beit Yosef" nevertheless, noting that in his own community of Poland it was permissible to cut one's hair on Lag baOmer itself. He derives the reason from an interpretation of a statement made by a tosafot:

> "They only died on the days when one says the prayer תחנה [Tachanun] and therefore, they did not die during the seven days of Passover, on the seven Shabbatot, on

the two days of Rosh Hodesh Iyyar, and on the one day of Rosh Hodesh Sivan. This totals seventeen days. But since it is impossible that there will not be a Shabbat within the seven days of Passover, therefore we must eliminate one day from the seventeen, which means there are only sixteen days on which they did not die. And conversely, thirty-three days remain on which they did die. Thus, we practice the custom of mourning thirty-two days and cut our hair on the thirty-third itself during the day, according to the principle of מקצת היום ככולו."

In sum, the sources indicate that there were two different traditions, as well as two divergent methods of counting upon which the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim based their custom of cutting or not cutting the hair on Lag baOmer. In any case, both traditions agree on thirty-three days of mourning. The dispute is over how the thirty-three days should be counted--i.e., the Sephardim count backwards fifteen days from Shavuot and thus, mourning ceases on the thirty-fourth in the daytime, whereas the Ashkenazim count the thirty-three days on which Rabbi Akiva's students died and stop mourning on the thirty-third in the daytime.

"Bayit Hadash" continues by noting that two Ashkenazi customs develop from the tradition of the tosafot. One practice arose not to cut hair from Passover until Lag baOmer, allowing haircuts on Lag baOmer onwards. The other practice permitted haircuts until Rosh Hodesh Iyyar, but not for the rest of the Sefirah period, excepting the day of Lag baOmer.

These are only the main opinions regarding how to observe this custom. We find many other attitudes and nuances in the various commentaries to the Tur and the Shulchan Aruch.

However, these details are not within the scope of this thesis. In sum, we may conclude from the sources mentioned above that two main practices, Sephardi and Ashkenazi, existed, differing only over whether haircuts were permitted on Lag baOmer. In addition, several other traditions are cited in the sources: forbidding haircuts after Rosh Hodesh Iyyar (mentioned by Isserles), forbidding haircuts during the entire period except Rosh Hodesh Iyyar (mentioned by Caro) and forbidding haircuts during the entire period (mentioned by Jacob ben Asher in the Tur). From the multitude of customs, it is clear that there was absolutely no standard practice, and in fact, the same diversity of traditions continues to exist today. (18)

2. The Custom of Not Getting Married

In geonic times, weddings (i.e., חופה וכניסה) were forbidden during the Sefirah season while betrothals (i.e., אירוסין וקדושין) were permitted. The Rishonim and Acharonim similarly distinguish between the two ceremonies. Yet, while the customs concerning bethrothal during the Sefirah period in geonic times are upheld in the time of the Rishonim and Acharonim, the customs concerning marriage change because the period of mourning during the Sefirah period is reduced from forty-nine to thirty-three days. Only the principle of not getting married during the time of

mourning persists.

The Tur recapitulates the practices describe by Isaac Ibn Giat in the name of the geonim (as expressed earlier in this chapter): "It is customary in all places not to get married between Passover and Atzeret so as not to increase שמחה since Rabbi Akiva's students died during this time." However, betrothal is permitted. One who gets married without asking an authority is not punished but if he asked, the authority should teach him not to do so. (19)

Despite the fact that the Tur does not mention the tradition that permits marriages after Lag baOmer, we saw that one did in fact exist from the time of the Meiri at least, and perhaps even from the time of the geonim (as the Meiri claims). In "Beit Yosef" and the Shulchan Aruch (20), Caro also permits marrying after Lag baOmer, basing his opinion on the custom of permitting haircuts after this same time. Isserles agrees with Caro but notes that among Ashkenazim it is permitted to marry on Lag baOmer itself all the way until Atseret.

From here on, we find that in every tradition permitting haircuts during a specific period and on specific days, it is likewise permitted to get married during that same time period and on those same days. This principle is expressed clearly in "Bayit Hadash" where it is written, "Every community according to its custom. On the day that it is permitted to get a haircut, it is likewise permitted to get married."

3. The Custom of Not Working After Sunset

Although this custom is attested to by Hai Gaon in the late tenth century, by the early fourteenth century, its practice is still not widespread. The fact the author of the Tur writes "מצאתי כתוב מנהג" instead of the usual phrases "נוהגין" or "יש מקומות שנהגו," indicates to the reader that observance of this custom was still rare (21). Additionally, the Tur limits the practice of not working after sunset to women alone, even though Hai Gaon's earlier responsum assumes that the custom is incumbent upon all. Caro too follows the limitation first mentioned in the Tur (22), while neither Isserles nor Sirkis comment upon the matter. Several generations later the "Be'er Heiteiv" (Poland: mid-18th century) reports in the name of David HaLevi (Poland: late 16th-middle 17th century) that one is permitted to do work immediately after the performance of the Omer-counting ritual, which takes itself place after sunset. Never widespread, this custom seems to have been more and more delimited over time.

C. PARALLEL CUSTOMS PRACTICED IN OTHER CULTURES

As we have seen above, Jewish sources overwhelmingly derive the mourning practices associated with the Sefirat haOmer period from the aggadic report concerning the death

of Rabbi Akiva's students during this time. Referring to the traditional view, folklorist Theodor Gaster maintains that the real basis of these customs lies elsewhere:

> "This, however, is simply a historical rationalization of a far more ancient and primitive usage. The true explanation is to be found in the universal custom of regarding the days or weeks preceding the harvest and the opening of the agricultural year as a time when the corporate life of the community is, so to speak, in eclipse, one lease of it now drawing to a close and the next being not yet assured. This state of suspended animation is expressed by fasts and austerities and by a curtailment of all normal activities." (23)

This theory presents reasons similar to those explored in the last chapter concerning the ominous nature of the season. The harvest season is a time of fear and anxiety concerning the health of the crops. Perhaps food stores from last year are running out even while future plenty is not yet assured. Indeed, some cultures imposed taboos during the period of harvest because it is such a critical time, subject to supernatural influences. For example, in one particular culture men must not give time and attention to anything but the care of the crops (24). Although this theory offers one of the most plausible explanations for the mourning customs practiced in this period, it is not entirely satisfying. On the one hand, if the tradition of mourning does date back to a very early time (such as the Bar Kochba Revolt in the second century), this explanation would make sense since many Jews were still farmers at that time and even the urban economy was dependent upon agricultural prosperity in those days.

Certainly, the prohibition against marriages during this period is eminently logical since every able-bodied person is needed to help in the fields and thus, there would simply be no time to celebrate. One the other hand, if these traditions originated later, when Jews had become much less connected to the land, it is less clear why they would countenance the observance of mourning practices since one might expect them to be less concerned with the state of the crops.

At this point, let us consider the parallel folklore from other cultures with regard to the two main Jewish customs practiced during this period; namely, avoidance of getting married and haircutting.

Concerning the prohibition against marriages, Lou Silberman (25), notes that the month of May and the first half of the month of June were considered by the Romans to be unlucky for marriage. (26) Scholars of antiquity disagree as to the basis for this custom. One cites Plutarch who indicates that during this period offerings were made to the dead and a festival in honor of the dead was observed. Another suggests that May was considered unpropitious for marriage due to "somewhat anxious expectation and preparation for the harvest to follow." (27) Thus, the Roman practice would seem to be motivated by either a fear of the dead or by fear for the crops. This belief in the inauspiciousness of May is also attested in several European countries; namely, Italy, Germany, France, and Scotland

(28).

Regarding the prohibition against haircuts, Silberman mentions another custom among the Romans that took place on the fifteenth of May, "On that day, the Flaminia Dialis appeared in mourning and did not cut her hair or nails and refrained from sexual relations with her husband. Likewise, between the first and fifteenth of June she was not permitted to cut or comb her hair or cut her nails." (29)

The reason for this practice according to Silberman, may have been twofold. First, many ancient peoples believed that parts of the body, such as hair or nails, could be used by unfriendly powers to perform magical rites against the person from whom these cuttings came (30). Secondly, the Romans also thought that the cutting or combing of hair caused storms (as did other ancient peoples) (31). Thus, this belief might explain the avoidance of cutting hair during the period of the harvest, the period when the crops were in a critical stage and rainfall could easily cause their destruction.

What Silberman and others fail to do is explain how it is that Roman customs influence Jewish practice in Babylonia, where the earliest sources for these customs are reported. Why is it that neither the Palestinian Talmud nor any of the midrashim from Eretz Yisrael even hint at mourning customs practice by Jews during this season?

II. The Liturgy for the Ritual of Sefirat haOmer

In the time when the Temple stood, people expressed their gratitude to God by sacrificing animals and offering various items on the Temple alter. The Omer was just one of these offerings to God. However, just as the sacrificing of animals was nullified by the destruction of the Temple so also was the bringing of the Omer. In its place, prayer, known as the "offering of the lips," gained increased significance.

The first mention of a ritual connected with the Omer in the rabbinic sources is found in M. Menachot 10:3 (as was explicated in the second chapter of this work). However, the ceremony described there was limited to the reaping of the Omer, while the practice of counting the Omer is not mentioned in the Mishnah at all.

After the destruction of the Second Temple and the widespread exile of the Jews from their homeland, one would expect that this mitzvah, like all the other mitzvot that are connected to the land of Israel ("מצות התלויות בארץ"), would have lost its significance and stopped being practiced. Instead, we find evidence in Menachot 65b and 66a of amoraic discussions concerning the issue of how to count the Omer during the Sefirah period. Although these discussions are quite short, they are very important since they are a record of the existence of counting in the Talmudic era, proof of the continuation of the counting of

the Omer even after the destruction of the Temple. As we shall soon see, these statements are significant not only because they provide a record that the ritual of counting continued, but also because they provide us with more information about how and when the ritual was performed and by whom.

In Menachot 65b it is written:

"תנו רבנן 'וספרתם לכם' שתהא ספירה לכל אחד ואחד"

"Each person should count for himself." What is surprising in this terse statement is that every other period of time in which counting must be done to determine a holiday, such as Rosh Hodesh for example, that time is determined by a beit din. Yet, here each individual must count and thus, naturally one might ask when and how this counting should be done.

In Menachot 66a we find the statement "'Let there be seven full weeks' [Lev. 23:15] and when do you find seven weeks complete? Only when you begin to count from the previous evening...The reaping and the counting must be done at night." Thus, we learn that the counting should be done only at night i.e., on the night of the sixteenth of Nisan not during the day. And how should the counting be performed?

In Menachot 66a we find a discussion concerning exactly this subject:

> "Abaye [Bab. Amora, 4th gen.] said, 'it is a mitzvah to count the days and a mitzvah to count the weeks.' The School of Rav Ashi [Bab. Amoraim, 6-7th gen.] used

to count the days as well as the weeks.

> Ameimar [Bab. Amora, 5th gen.] used to count the days but not the weeks, saying 'It is a commemoration of the Temple.' [זכר למקדש הוא]"

As reviewed in chapter one of this work, in the Bible, two statements are made about how to count the days up until the Festival of Shavuot. The first is in Lev. 23:15--"And you should count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day upon which you bring the Omer of presentation; let there be **seven full weeks.**" The second statement is found in the following verse, Lev. 23:16--"You should count until the day after the seventh Sabbath, [that is] **fifty days.**"

Abaye and the rabbis of R. Ashi's school would seem to preserve the biblical tradition of counting both days and weeks. However, since counting in the Bible was clearly dependent on "the day upon which you bring the Omer" and since the offering of the Omer was no longer brought after the Temple's destruction, one would expect that the ritual would have changed (if not completely disappeared!) Yet, from their Talmudic statements, it would seem that Abaye and the school of Rav Ashi choose to totally ignore the biblical basis for beginning the count (i.e., bringing the Omer of presentation) and continue to practice the Sefirah as if nothing had happened in the meantime.

Ameimar, on the other hand, recognizes the new situation that exists after the Temple's destruction. Since the Omer could not be brought as it once was, the counting (which was

dependent upon the bringing of the Omer) also did not have to be performed as it had been. Although Ameimar maintains the practice of counting, he believes that the counting should be performed not as it had been during Temple times-- i.e., out of absolute obligation-- rather, it should be performed as a זכר למקדש, a memory of those times. In his opinion, therefore, it is sufficient to count the days only and not include the weeks.

As we shall see, this disagreement between the amoraim in the talmudic era over how to count the Omer will continue in later generations. Although we may find Ameimar's conclusion to be a better reading of the Bible, historically the opinions of Abaye and Rav Ashi's school prevailed.

In the geonic sources we do not find any significant developments beyond the information provided in the Talmud concerning the Sefirat haOmer ritual; the geonim focus solely upon the halachic question of what to do if one forgot to say the blessing on the first night of counting, an issue that is outside the scope of this work. What we can conclude from this time is that a blessing was being said, at least on the first night of the counting ritual. However, there is no indication what the wording of the blessing was.

In contrast to the geonic period, additional layers were added to the Sefirat haOmer ritual in the time of the Rishonim.

In Mishnah Torah, Maimonides (Spain: 1125-1204) is the first to mention the actual wording of the Sefirah blessing:

"One must say a blessing on each night before counting ספירת העומר." (32) "ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו על

The Rambam also underscores the opinion of Abaye and Rav Ashi's school concerning the counting of days and weeks as mentioned in the Talmud, "It is a mitzvah to count the days with the weeks." (33)

Thus, by the era of Maimonides, it is clear that the halachic authorities follow the obligation to count days and weeks (34). However, there is still disagreement as to how exactly to count the weeks.

In the Tur (35), this disagreement is well-presented:

> "In the evening after prayer, one should begin to count the Omer, whose time period begins on the night of the sixteenth of Nisan, counting forty-nine days...One should count while standing and say a blessing beforehand and then count the days and the weeks. How?
> On the first day, one stands and blesses over the counting of the Omer--'**Today is one day**'--until one arrives at seven days and then you should say--'**Today is seven days which is one week.**' And then on the eighth day, you should say--'**Today is eight days which is one week and one day,**'-- until you arrive at fourteen days and say--'**Today is fourteen days which is two weeks**'--and so on." (36)

Indeed, this method of counting as presented by the Tur is in fact, the method which prevailed and is still used today

with the minor addition of a word. (See Appendix A--Xerox of Artscroll Sefirat haOmer liturgy.) Yet, the Tur mentions two other customs of counting. The first is cited in the name of Avi HaEzri [Eliezer HaLevi, Germany: 1140-1225] who wrote:

> "There are those who say that there is no need to count the days, only until one gets to a week, for example--'**Today is one day**'--until one arrives at seven days, and then one says--'**Today is seven days which is one week.**' However, on day eight one should say--'**Today is one week and one day**'--because there is no need to say 'Today is eight days' since they were already counted in the previous week. And thus from day nine until day fourteen, one should say--'**Today is fourteen days which is two weeks**'--and on day fifteen one should say--'**Today is two weeks and one day**' and so on."

The Tur then presents an anonymous third opinion:

> "There are those who say [יש אומרים] that one does not need to recall the weeks except at the end of the week. For example, on day seven one should say--'**Today is day seven which is one week**' but on day eight one should only say--'**Today is eight days**'--until one gets to fourteen and so on." (37)

The Tur shows us that at least three customs existed between the time of the geonic period until the time of the Tur (1275-1340).

Even so, the latter two customs are certainly minority opinions even a generation before the Tur was written. The third custom mentioned above as "יש אומרים" has been identified as the opinion of Zerachiyah HaLevi (Spain 1125-Provence 1186) who wrote "והוא מנהג היפה." (38) A century later, the Rosh reports that by his time the custom of counting "such and such weeks and such and such days" (the first minhap mentioned in the Tur) was practiced by all of

the communities of Israel (39). The only authority that the Rosh is aware of who disagreed with the widespread practice and suggested a different custom was Zerachiyah HaLevi. Similarly, the Ran (Nissim b. Reuben, Spain: 1290-1375) testifies that in most of the communities of his day people were saying:

"היום כך וכך לעומר שהן כך שבועות וכך ימים"

Thus, we can conclude from the testimony cited above that the formula upon which the current liturgy of counting is based was in widespread use by the late thirteenth century at the latest.

Nevertheless, minor issues of wording in the count remain a topic of discussion long after the liturgical method was established in the Tur. In "Beit Yosef" Caro quotes the opinion of the Rashba (Solomon Ibn Aderet, Spain: 1235-1310) concerning the minor issue of whether to insert the word "לעומר" into the counting formula. Rashba concludes in a responsum that while it is acceptable to count with or without the word "לעומר," it is preferable to say "כך וכך לעומר" in order to be more clear.

Nevertheless, while Caro mentions the Rashba's opinion in his commentary on the Tur, he chooses not to include "לעומר" in his method of counting in the Shulchan Aruch (40). Isserles, on the other hand, does include it in his gloss to the Shulchan Aruch and today, that is how it appears in the Ashkenazi liturgy. (Among Sephardim the word "לעומר" is

inserted in the middle of the blessing as in "היום תשעה ימים לעומר," and is not mentioned at the end, as in the Ashkenazi ritual. This is apparently true of all Sephardim, and probably was derived from the formula reported by the Ran as noted above.) (41)

There are several further discussions among the Acharonim concerning whether to say "שהיום יום" or just "היום יום" and whether to say "לעומר" or "בעומר." However, these minor issues are not within the scope of this work (42).

At this point, we may move on and try to determine how the rest of the Sefirat haOmer liturgy developed. According to our ritual today, following the blessing and the actual counting of the day, some prayerbooks insert the prayer:

"הרחמן יחזיר עבודת בית המקדש למקומה, במהרה בימינו, אמן."

In a work by Zerachiyah HaLevi (Spain 1125-Provence 1186), we find the first report of this prayer being mentioned in connection to the counting ritual. There HaLevi indicates that this prayer was said after the Sefirah blessing in order to remember our longing for the Temple and sustain our hope that it would be rebuilt in our day (43).

A. The Impact of Kabbalah on the Sefirah Service

For three hundred years, from the time of the Tur until the mid-sixteenth century, the Sefirah service remained essentially unchanged as far as one can gather from the sources. However, the rise of Lurianic Kabbalah in the sixteenth century transformed the very essence of the Sefirah ritual from a fairly simple ritual into a rite laden with mystical significance.

Isaac Luria, the founder of Lurianic Kabbalism, (known also as the Ari, Egypt 1534-Tsfat 1572) wrote very little about his doctrines concerning Jewish mysticism. However, one of his students, Hayyim Vital took notes on what his teacher said and subsequently systematized them into books, which he refused to publish. While he lay dangerously ill in 1587, his brother allowed copies of these books to be made after receiving a bribe, unbeknownst to Vital himself. These copies were circulated in Palestine and found their way into the hands of a kabbalist by the name of Israel Sarug. Gershom Sholem opines, "On the whole, the spread of Lurianic Kabbalism was almost entirely due to the activity of...Israel Sarug, who between 1592 and 1598 carried on a lively propaganda in the interests of the new school among the Kabbalists of Italy." (44)

Due to Sarug's "lively propaganda" and the appearance of another book detailing Luria's doctrine (45), the new prayers and customs of the kabbalists found their way to the public and became widespread (46). In his book Kabbalah, Scholem writes, "From the middle of the seventeenth century onward, kabbalistic motifs entered the everyday prayer book and inspired special liturgies intended for a variety of specific occasions and rituals, many of which were in essence kabbalistic creations." (47)

This historical development explains the vast difference between the liturgical customs related to Sefirat haOmer as described in the Shulchan Aruch and the ritual as we know it

today. Our current liturgy since that time, has been highly influenced by the kabbalists, who attributed mystical meaning to the ritual of counting:

> "[For mystics] seven is an extemely powerful number--primarily representing the days of creation by appearing in other contexts as well. Seven times seven is even more so. Beyond this, the word sefirah--counting--is also the word for the ten levels of divine emanations (sefirot)...Each day thus takes on the character not just of one sefirah but of the combined power of one sefirah within another (hesed-love; gevurah-power; tiferet-beauty; netzah-victory; hod-majesty; yesod-foundation; Malkut-Queen mother. Thus the 19th day is hod she-be-tiferet--majesty which is in beauty.)" (48)

There are two formulas of introduction to the Sefirat haOmer blessing that are present in the liturgy we recite today, and they are:

1) "*לשם יחוד קודשא בריך הוא*" and 2) "*הנני מוכן ומזומן*"

Sometimes both prayers are utilized in the liturgy and are combined into one integral unit (as in the Artscroll Siddur, which is attached in Appendix A). Other times only the latter prayer "*הנני מוכן*" is mentioned (as in the Birnbaum Siddur, which is attached in Appendix B). This latter prayer, while it is used by the mystics, does not necessarily express any mystical ideas. However, the former prayer, "*לשם יחוד קודשא בריך הוא*," clearly expresses mystical doctrines--i.e., the kabbalistic goal of unifying the divine male aspect called "*קודשא בריך הוא*," The Holy One Blessed be He, with the divine female aspect called "*שכינה*," the Presence. According to the kabbalists, this kind of

unification brings about the original harmony that existed in primordial times.

The addition of psalm 67 after the prayer "*הרחמן*" was apparently made due to the forty-nine words present in it, which obviously corresponded to the forty-nine days of the Sefirah. On a more esoteric level, the Zohar records a mystical tradition that there are forty-nine aspects of the Torah (49). Thus, in mystical terms, the forty-nine days of counting symbolize the forty-nine faces of Torah, revealed to us at the end of the counting period--on the day of revelation, the Festival of Shavuot.

The subsequent prayer, "*אנא בכח*," which is mainly found in Ashkenazi prayerbooks, contains forty-two words, whose initials form the secret forty-two letter Name of God. Moreover, the six initials of each of its seven verses form Divine Names within the kabbalistic tradition (50).

Finally, the last prayer, "*רבונו של עולם*," asks God to purify us from our "kelippot." According to Lurianic Kabbalah, the divine sparks are trapped in the "kelippot," which are part of the evil forces that exist everywhere in our world (51). The goal of the mystics is to reunite these divine sparks with God, which may be accomplished by performing mitzvot, such as the counting of the Omer.

CHAPTER FOUR
LAG baOMER: SEMI-HOLIDAY WITHIN THE SEFIRAT haOMER PERIOD

Lag baOmer, the thirty-third day of the counting of the omer, (ל"ג being the Hebrew letters whose value is thirty-three) corresponds to the eighteenth of Iyyar and is celebrated as a semi-holiday. This festival is shrouded in mystery; scholars are unsure of the reason for its celebration and the traditional sources disagree over how to observe it. No mention is made of this day at all in the Talmud. And liturgically, no special ritual is practiced on it (1). Thus, from the outset, there are many questions concerning the day and its celebration.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first contains an examination of the traditional sources in order to discover the first known reference to Lag baOmer after the rabbinic period. The second presents the two main approaches concerning how to calculate the date of Lag baOmer and the corresponding differences regarding its observence. The third section attempts to discover the origin of customs practiced on the day of Lag baOmer, such as the hillula of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (Rashbi), the lighting of bonfires, cutting or shaving the hair of young boys, marching with the Torah from Tsfat to Meron, the shooting of bows and arrows, and so on. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a presentation of theories as to why the day of Lag baOmer is celebrated at all and the

origin of the customs practiced on it. Related folk customs from other cultures will also be taken into account.

A. Initial References to Lag baOmer after the Rabbinic Period

The first mention of Lag baOmer in the sources is made by two Rishonim. Extant geonic literature makes no reference to it. However, Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri (1249-1306) reports a tradition he received from the Geonim that on Lag LaOmer (sic), the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's disciples stopped and for that reason, it is customary not to fast on this day (2).

Since this statement is cited as a tradition from the Geonim, it would appear to be our earliest source for the observance of a holiday on Lag baOmer.

In "Bayit Hadash" on the Tur, an anonymous tosafot is cited that highlights the importance of the number thirty-three within the Sefirah period (3). According to the tosafot, Rabbi Akiva's students did not die on the "מ"ט שוב"ם," the days on which one should not mourn. They only died on the rest of the days, when one recites the Tachanun prayer. Thus, if the days they did not die (sixteen) are subtracted from the days one counts the Omer (forty-nine), then thirty-three days out of the Sefirah period remain in which the students died.

While in actuality they were not consecutive days, for the sake of calculation, the thirty-three days are grouped together from the beginning of the Sefirah period onwards.

Therefore, the number thirty-three in Lag baOmer corresponds to the number of days the students died. Thus, Lag baOmer also serves as a turning point between mourning and joy, a turning point which is borne out halachically, since according to those authorities who concurred with the view of the tosafot, Lag baOmer is a day both of semi-mourning and semi-celebration.

Avraham HaYarchi (1155-1215) recounts a different tradition that he heard in the name of Zerachiyah HaLevi from Gerona (1125-1186), "It has been found written in an old book brought from Spain that they [Rabbi Akiva's students] died from Passover until 'פרוס העצרת.' And what is 'פורסא'? It means 'half' as it is taught in a Mishnah 'concerning the laws of Passover, thirty days before Passover.' Therefore, 'half' [in this case] means fifteen days before Atzeret, which is Lag baOmer." (4)

While HaYarchi's tradition mentions the words "Lag baOmer," the observance of Lag baOmer as a special day in itself is neither implied nor evidenced, as it was in the report from HaMeiri.

B. Two Approaches Concerning How to Calculate the Date of Lag baOmer

Two traditions evolved, based upon the three sources mentioned above, regarding how long the mourning rituals were to be observed and the importance accorded to the thirty third day. The first school of thought follows two

traditions--the one mentioned in the name of the Geonim (by HaMeiri), and the other cited in the name of the Tosafot. According to both reports, the thirty-third day of the Sefirah period is a significant day, and one should mark it with some type of observance.

The views presented in the geonic tradition as advanced by HaMeiri and in the tradition of the Tosafot were sustained a century later by Jacob Moelin (1365-1427), known as the Maharil. In the book he wrote concerning customs and synagogue ritual, Moelin adds that on the day of Lag baOmer, Jews should celebrate, cease observing the customs of mourning and not recite the Tachanun prayer. He specifically permits the cutting of hair on the day of Lag baOmer. (5)

In his commentary to the Tur, Moses Isserles (1530-1572) remarks that by his day, the custom of cutting one's hair on Lag baOmer was widespread. Moreover, his community observed the holiday--"מרבין בו משתה ושמחה קצת"--by drinking a lot and celebrating a little. (6)

The second school of thought followed the tradition of counting as expressed in the laconic report of HaYarchi. That is to say, when one subtracts fifteen days from forty-nine days, thirty-four days remain. On the basis of this calculation, Joseph Caro (1488-1575) concluded that the day of Lag baOmer itself was a day of mourning, albeit the last day of mourning in the Sefirah period. Thus, he specifically forbade the cutting of hair on Lag baOmer in

contrast to the apparently Ashkenazi practice mentioned by Isserles.

As is apparent, there are two very different ways of viewing Lag baOmer present in the sources. One perceives Lag baOmer as a day of celebration, and the other sees it as a day of mourning. While the Ashkenazi tradition is followed by most Sephardim today, the fact that there was once such a divergence of opinion concerning the essence of the day only underscores the mysterious origins of this holiday. Moreover, based upon the evidence presented in the sources, the tradition that the death of Akiva's disciples ceased on the thirty-third day seems to be fairly late and quite possibly invented for the purpose of limiting the time of mourning.

C. Customs Practiced on Lag baOmer

1) The Hillula of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai

Others took an entirely different approach to the holiday of Lag baOmer. For them, Lag baOmer marked the anniversary of the death of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, traditionally viewed as the author of the Zohar. The day he died is called "הילולא דרבי שמעון," the rejoicing or the wedding of Rabbi Shimon (7), and is marked by pilgrimages to his tomb in Meron. Yet, though the Zohar regards the day of his death as a day of rejoicing, **there is no reference in the Zohar to a date concerning when he died.**

Unfortunately, many modern scholars seem to accept

without question the traditional view that Rashbi died on Lag baOmer. As a result, they assume that the customs observed on Lag baOmer must have something to do with Bar Yochai himself, and thus, they often attempt to find explanations for the customs by citing incidents from his life, and especially his death.

Yehuda David Eisenstein presumes that the reason Rashbi's death is celebrated joyfully while Moses' death is observed as a day of mourning, must be due to the fact that Rashbi was happy on the day he died, calling it "יום שמחתי." (8)

Like Eisenstein, Yosef Broslovsky also derives his explanations for the customs of the hillula from incidents in Rashbi's life and death as reported in the Zohar (9). Regarding the custom of making bonfires at the sage's gravesite (known as "hadlaka") and throwing clothes into the fire, Broslovsky insists that the fire is a means to recreat "the light and the fire that filled the house of Rashbi [just after he died], and also the pillar of fire that appeared in front of his bier...the hillula and hadlaka [the lighting of fires] that take place in Meron are symbols of the day of Rashbi's death and his soul's ascension into heaven (10).

Lastly, Shlomo Zevin suggests that "the custom of rejoicing over the tomb of Rashbi on Lag baOmer is based upon Shabbat 33b, which relates how the Roman authorities decreed that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai should die by the sword, and through a miracle the decree was annulled.

Hence, a celebration is observed on the day on which he died through divine rather than human agency." (11)

The problem with theories of this kind is that there is no proof that Bar Yochai died on Lag baOmer and therefore, there may not be any original connection between the customs celebrated at the hillula and Bar Yochai himself. Moreover, no scholar has yet been able to find a prooftext from Rashbi's life concerning one of the most popular customs of the hillula celebration, that of halaka, i.e., cutting or shaving off a young boy's hair.

A further question must be posed as to the origin of the practiced rejoicing at Bar Yochai's grave, and its attendant customs. Regarding this matter, Broslovsky theorizes that it was the kabbalists in Eretz Yisrael who transformed the day of Rashbi's death into a day of joyful pilgrimage to the sage's grave (12). Similarly, D. M. Feldman maintains that celebrations at Meron excited enthusiasm particularly from the kabbalists (13), while Julius H. Greenstone attributes the tradition that Rashbi died on Lag baOmer solely to the kabbalists (14), ignoring reports that these celebrations occurred before the time of Issac Luria (the Ari).

Only one modern scholar, Abraham Ya'ari, seems to have done the thorough research of this issue that was necessary in order to determine how the date of Bar Yochai's death was fixed on Lag baOmer, when the hillula celebration originated, and why the customs practiced during the

celebration are associated with the sage at all. After a close reading of historical sources, Ya'ari manages to explain the origin of several of the hillula customs, namely, hadlaka and halaka. The celebration at Meron was a collection of practices first observed at the reputed tomb of the prophet Samuel in Ramah (Nebi Samwil), only later transferred to the Rashbi's tomb in Meron, when the Muslim government in Jerusalem forbade Jews to visit Nebi Samwil. Ya'ari's amazing findings, and all of their subsequent implications, will be explored below in detail (15).

During the twelfth century, a tall hill not far from Jerusalem came to be considered the burial site of the prophet Samuel. Already by the thirteenth century, it had become a fixed place of pilgrimage that eventually attracted pilgrims from as far away as Syria, Egypt, and Babylonia. The pilgrimage was observed on the twenty-eighth of Iyyar, which was said to have been the day Samuel died (16).

In the year 1489, Obadiah Bartinora wrote to his brother saying that the tomb of the prophet Samuel was still in Jewish hands, and that every year on the twenty-eighth of Iyyar, the day of Samuel's death, many Jews made a pilgrimage there and "lit large torches [or bonfires], aside from the eternal light that was lit continually." Another report based upon a letter written in 1537 mentioned that pilgrims to Samuel's grave brought wax candles, donations and things they had vowed, and celebrated there. Also there was a custom to bring a Torah scroll from Jerusalem and all

along the way people would sing and recite prayers with great rejoicing.

According to a third account from the latter half of the sixteenth century, the vows and contributions collected from pilgrims' visits were used to support the poor and the public institutions of Eretz Yisrael. In addition, the author of the account mentions the custom of shaving the head of young boys for the first time at Samuel's tomb and giving an amount of money, equivalent to the weight of the hair that was cut, towards the upkeep of the site and to light candles there. This latter custom was perhaps based upon Hannah's vow to give her son Samuel to God, as reported in the Bible, and the idea that the child's hair would be a token given in exchange for the child, similar to the ritual of "Pidyon haBen." Additionally, in the second book of Samuel 14:26, Absalom is said to have cut his hair at the end of each year and weighed it.

In sum, it is clear that Jews from Eretz Yisrael and surrounding countries were making pilgrimages to the prophet Samuel's gravesite on the twenty-eighth of Iyyar from at least as early as the thirteenth century. The celebrations would sometimes last until after Shavuot and were characterized by the lighting of large torches or bonfires, the shaving of young boys' heads (and contributing an amount of money corresponding to the weight of the hair), lighting candles, and bringing a Torah scroll from Jerusalem with accompanying songs and prayers of joy.

Sometime between the years 1565 and 1570, the fanatic Muslim authorities in Jerusalem took over the site and forbade the Jews to enter. This event was traumatic on many levels. In one stroke, the Jewish population lost a popular yearly celebration that had served as a source of rejoicing and encouragement for Jews from Eretz Yisrael and the Sephardic lands nearby.

Even worse, the main source of income for the poor of Jerusalem, the public institutions of Eretz Yisrael and especially for its yeshivot, was totally eliminated. In a letter written by the Jews of Eretz Yisrael to Jews in the Diaspora fifty years after the Muslim decree, the author notes that contributions by the pilgrims used to be more than sufficient to give charity to anyone who needed it and also to provide some food for the gentiles. Conversely, by his day, the yeshivot were in dire straits financially, so that the author feared that Torah would soon cease to be studied in Eretz Yisrael.

As a consequence of the Muslim decree, the need arose to find an alternate site for the celebration which had taken place on the twenty-eighth of Iyyar. It was essential that this site be located far from Jerusalem, where the fanaticism leading to the prohibition had originated. Consequently, Tsfat, a flowering city at the time and situated in the Northern Galilee, was deemed the most favorable location.

In addition, it was important to fix a time for this new

pilgrimage close to the twenty-eighth of Iyyar, the original day of celebration in Ramah, as well as to find a tomb of a "tsadik" who was well-known to the people. Taking into account all of these characteristics, the grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai in Meron seemed the most fitting site. The celebration was then rerouted to Lag baOmer, the eighteenth of Iyyar, which was already a day of joy according to tradition. As in Ramah, the celebration continued for ten days, i.e., until the twenty-eighth of Iyyar, the original day of celebration.

All of the customs originally celebrated in Ramah at the tomb of Samuel were transferred to the gravesite of Shimon Bar Yochai in Meron. If the lighting of torches and bonfires took place in Ramah, so it would happen in Meron; if young boys' heads were shaved in Ramah, so were they shaved in Meron (the only difference being that it made sense in Ramah due to the traditions connected to Samuel whereas with Bar Yochai there was no reason for it.) The custom of marching with the Torah scroll from Jerusalem to Ramah was transformed into the custom of marching with the Torah scroll from Tsfat to Meron. And finally, the day of the prophet's death was transformed into the day of the rabbi's death, despite the fact that the date of Samuel's death was based upon a lengthy tradition while the date of Bar Yochai's death was without foundation (17).

2) The Hillula and Kabbalistic Practice

Despite the assumptions of other modern scholars, the kabbalists of Tsfat neither approved of nor encouraged this artificial transference. They were used to making a pilgrimage to the grave of Bar Yochai to study the Zohar and offer their supplications to God. And as had been the practice in Ramah, some of them (including the Ari, Isaac Luria) shaved their sons' heads during those pilgrimages and commemorated the occasion with drinking and jubilation. However, after thoroughly examining the sources concerning pilgrimages by Luria and other kabbalists in Tsfat to the tomb of Bar Yochai, Ya'ari found no conclusive reference to a pilgrimage by kabbalists such as the Ari which took place on Lag baOmer itself (18). In fact, Luria forbade celebration and merriment on this day, preferring instead to make a pilgrimage to Rashbi's grave on the ten days before Shavuot and Rosh Hashanah. Furthermore, perhaps a century or two after the popular celebration was transfered to the day of Lag baOmer, the kabbalists, among others, continued to make pilgrimages to Meron ten days or a week before Shavuot, i.e., after Lag baOmer (19).

Zevin, as well as other modern scholars, cites two reports by Haim Vital (20), to the effect that Isaac Luria made a pilgrimage to Meron on Lag baOmer and thus, that "kabbalists" sanctioned this practice (21). Yet, in the account that Ya'ari finds more authoritative, Vital states that Luria went to Meron on Lag baOmer with other pilgrims

(who had already been observing this custom for many years) only once, right after he arrived in Tsfat from Egypt and that during his three-day stay, he shaved his son's head. In other words, Luria made his pilgrimage before he became a well-known scholar, and before he was aware of the strong objections to the custom by the sages of Tsfat. Moreover, the story that Luria shaved his son's head is doubtful since Vital himself informs us in the paragraph above the story, **"My teacher, ז"ל, did not cut his hair during the entire forty-nine days of the Sefirah period,** except on 'Erev Pesach' and 'Erev Shavuot,'**not even on Rosh Hodesh Iyyar and definitely not on Lag baOmer."** (22).

3) Objections to the Customs Practiced on Lag baOmer as Part of the Hillula Celebrations

The kabbalists were not alone in their objections to celebrating on the day of Bar Yochai's death. Objections have continued up until modern times. The Hatam Sofer doubted the correctness of instituting "a holiday on a day that is not the anniversary of a miracle and is not mentioned by the Talmud or the poskim anywhere in the literature, not even by an allusion or a hint." (23) An even stronger objection against this celebration is voiced by the author of the responsa collection Sho'el u-Meishiv (written 1869), who concludes, as Ya'ari does, that the kabbalists did not take part in it:

> "...how can it be that a 'Yom Tov' should be celebrated over the death of our great teacher Rashbi, zal...But what can I do? For due to our many sins they [the people] will not listen to the

> voice of their teachers in this matter...but it is obvious that in the days of the Ari...what they did at the tomb of Rashbi was none other than Torah study, prayers and supplications...And it is obvious that 'Beit Yosef' and his circle would not have allowed people to behave in [the manner in which the celebrations are currently performed]; it was only after their time that the custom spread, and afterwards it was thought to be an ancient custom..." (24)

Similarly, one of the great Sephardi scholars of the nineteenth century, Rabbi Joseph Hazan raises halachic objections to the custom of burning clothes at the hillula:

> "I have heard of a custom that in the holy city of Tsfat, may it be rebuilt and established, they ignite valuable items worth three and four hundred [coins] at the hillula of Rashbi, zal, by wrapping the items in oil [-soaked cloth] and lighting it. **And I do not find any halachic justification for this, for it seems to violate the Rabbinic prohibition against 'bal tashchit'** [needless destruction]." (25)

Thus, prior to the sixteenth century, no evidence exists for a <u>hillula</u> celebration honoring Shimon Bar Yochai on the date of Lag baOmer. Nor was it derived from a custom practiced by the kabbalists of Tsfat. Moreover, we have seen that throughout the generations, rabbis have vociferously objected to this practice.

Nevertheless, the need of the people for this celebration, and beyond that the need of the Yishuv for a central celebration that would draw pilgrims (and their money) from surrounding countries, prevailed over the objections of the sages and halachic authorities. Thus, the celebration of a <u>hillula</u> for Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai on Lag baOmer (and its related implications as discussed above) is a classic example of the power of the people in determining

Jewish practice as well as the power of "minhag" over "halachah."

4) The Custom of Shooting with Bows and Arrows on Lag baOmer

According to Otsar Dinim u-Minhagim, young children are traditionally given a free day from school on Lag baOmer, and it is customary for them to take walks in the forests and to shoot arrows there for fun (26). Children are encouraged to engage in mock combat either with bows and arrows or sometimes with swords (27). Eisenstein believes this custom symbolizes going to war against the Romans who destroyed the Second Temple and killed Akiva's students during the Bar Kochba Revolt (28). In a more fanciful vein, the Zohar cites a tradition that a bow of many colors will appear in the sky immediately before the coming of the Messiah. Therefore, the bow with which the children play on that day symbolizes the prayer of the Jews that the promised bow will one day appear (29).

Clearly, neither scholar offers a completely convincing reason for this practice, which may very well originate in parallel folk customs among other cultures.

Interestingly enough, playing with bows and arrows is not mentioned as one of the practices observed at the tomb of Samuel the prophet, nor is it found in the earlier texts describing the hillula of Bar Yochai. We may perhaps conclude from this omission that this is a late custom.

D. Theories Concerning the Origin of Lag baOmer and Related Folklore from Other Cultures

There are basically two theories taken from traditional sources and six additional theories offered by modern scholars as to why the day of Lag baOmer is celebrated at all and how the customs practiced on it originated: 1) this is the day that the disciples of Rabbi Akiva stopped dying from a plague; 2) the number "thirty-three" is the total number of days during the Sefirah period on which the disciples of Rabbi Akiva did not die; 3) this is the day that the manna began to fall in the wilderness; 4) this is the middle day in the first pentecontad; 5) this day is the equivalent of the European May Day; 6) the Omer period is a kind of Lent and Lag baOmer is a midpoint within it similar to "mi-careme," when prohibitions are relaxed (30); 7) this is a day of mythological significance in other cultures that either influenced Jewish practice or was borrowed and transformed by the Jews; 8) this day has agricultural or seasonal significance.

The first two theories have been analyzed extensively in previous sections of this work. Opinions three and four were discounted. Therefore, only the latter four views are worth examining here.

Lag baOmer as the Jewish Equivalent of the European May Day

Theodor Gaster, the main proponent of this theory, notes that the practice of shooting with bows and arrows is a common custom in Germany and England on May Day. Moreover, he maintains that the hillula of Shimon Bar Yochai, with its attendant customs of kindling bonfires, singing and dancing, is "the last lingering survival of a typical May Day ceremony. For the fact is that it is customary in many parts of the world to kindle bonfires at the end of April or the beginning of May as a means of forefending demons and witches at the moment when the cattle are first let out of the barn." (31).

Gaster makes a point of stating that the striking similarity of customs between May Day and Lag baOmer is not a function of borrowing on the part of the Jews. Rather, this is an example of "parallel phenomena."

Lag baOmer as an Interruption in the Lent-like Sefirah Period

In the view of Joseph Derenbourg, Lag baOmer is a day in the middle of the Sefirah season when the customs of mourning are suddenly relaxed, comparable to mi-careme which is observed midway during Lent (32). Since today most Jews observe customs of mourning for only a part of the Omer period, Lag baOmer functions more as a day of demarcation between lenten and non-lenten practices than as a one-day "relaxation."

A Day of Mythological Significance in Other Cultures that Influenced Jewish Practice or Was Borrowed and Transformed by the Jews

H. Grimme offers the theory that Lag baOmer is reminiscent of an ancient celebration in honor of the victory of the Babylonian god Marduk over the seven evil gods, an event which was observed after a thirty-two day mourning period (33). However, Jewish sources never mention such cultural borrowing, and we never even heard of the Jewish celebration until the Moslem period.

Juliun Morgenstern opines that the making and kindling of fires and lights could have originally been intended to commemorate the death and burial of the god of the annual crop and of his resurrection, in the form of the crop of the new year, being harvested at just this season (34). But Morgenstern himself admits that it is only a conjecture.

The Agricultural or Seasonal Significance of Lag baOmer

Gustav Dalman speculates that Lag baOmer may have originally been the celebration of the actual beginning of the summer, which was marked by the early rising of the constellation Pleiades between the thirteenth and the twenty-fifth of May (35).

Similarly, Lou Silberman believes that there is a strong indication of an agricultural motif to Lag baOmer, "it may well be that this day was set aside in the midst of the harvest season as a day of relaxation and preparation for

the final and perhaps crucial period which brought it to an end." (36).

CHAPTER FIVE
HOW WE CAN FIND MEANING IN THE SEFIRAT haOMER RITUAL DURING MODERN TIMES

After the destruction of the Second Temple, the agricultural ceremony of the Omer as a Temple offering was rendered impossible to perform. One would think that the ritual itself would have been discontinued as were the other mitzvot dependent upon the land and the sacrificial system of the Temple. Yet, that was not the case. This seeming anomaly may perhaps be explained by the fact that the Omer ritual as described in the Bible and the Mishnah was composed of two parts--physical and oral. While the physical reaping and bringing of the Omer was annulled after the Temple's destruction, the second part, the oral ritual of counting, could still be continued. Thus, we moderns are not the only ones to attempt to reinterpret the Sefirat haOmer ritual. Already, even in the shadow of the Temple's fall, rabbis were proposing new ways to look at this ancient ceremony.

Before we begin to examine modern interpretations of the Sefirah ritual, we should investigate how previous sources and authorities understood it.

I. Pre-Modern Sources and Interpretations

On the whole, the pre-modern reasons given for the

observance of counting the days of the Omer can be divided into two groups: those who connect the ritual to fear and tragedy in our history and those who attempt to understand it more positively.

Days of Sadness and Anxiety

Several commentators chose to view the Omer ritual as a remembrance of the Second Temple; it is, afterall, one of the few Temple-based mitzvot that is still practiced after the Temple's destruction. In the Talmud, Amemar expresses this reinterpretation quite succinctly by his statement: "זכר למקדש הוא." (Menachot 66a) Some time later, Zerachiyah HaLevi wrote:

"לספירת העומר אין בו זכר לשום הנאה אלא ללעגמת נפש לחרבן בית." (1)

Similarly, the Ran states that the reason we do not say "Shehechiyanu" before counting the Omer stems from the idea that the Omer provides no pleasure. The Omer reminds us of the destruction of the Temple, and the fact that we can no longer perform the mitzvah of "bringing the Omer." (2).

Another interpretation offered in the sources is found in Mateh Moshe (written 1591)where a more universal explanation is offered. This period is one of "world tension" over the fate of the crops and possible "world sadness" when these crops fail, producing famine and death:

"מפני שהעולם בצער מפסח ועד שבועות על התבואה ועל האילנות. לפיכך ציווה הקב"ה לספור ימים אלו כדי שנזכר צער העולם."

Finally, the most frequent explanation for the sadness associated with this period is due to the death of Rabbi Akiva's students, an interpretation that has been examined in detail in previous chapters of this work. As we saw, Rabbi Akiva's students may have fought against Rome in the Bar Kochba Revolt. Thus, mourning their deaths could have originated as for: a) all the rebels who died in the revolt, b) the failure to achieve national liberation, and c) the subsequent suffering and persecutions endured by all Jews.

Later persecution only served to strengthen the sense of sadness associated with this period. As D. M. Feldman wrote: "If the origins of the mourning during the Sefirah period remain obscure, more identifiable subsequent events add justification for its observance today. According to 13th-century authorities, the melancholy of the season was in remembrance of the victims of the Crusades in the Rhineland in 1096 and 1146...together with another series of massacres that took place in the springtime, i.e., those perpetrated in 1648-49 by the Cossacks and the Poles." (3)

"Turei Zahav" (written ca. 1646) reports that most of the destruction done to the German-Jewish communities was apparently carried out between Passover and Atzeret. (4) As a result of these massacres, many piyyutim and lamentations were composed by the survivors.

Days of Yearning and Hope

A second approach offers more hopeful and positive reasons to observe the days of Sefirat haOmer.

Abudraham (late 13th-14th century) cites this analogy: "It is like one who was locked up in prison and cried out to the king to be permitted to marry the king's daughter. So he would continue counting until that time came. Thus, did Israel after their exodus from Egypt."(5) Similarly, we find in Sefer HaChinuch the idea that "we were commanded to count in order to imprint in our souls the great yearning towards the honored and longed-for day just as a slave yearns for a bit of shade." (6).

The Ran explains why only the festival of Shavuot, depends on the counting of the days preceding it: when the Israelites received the good news about their liberation from Egypt, they were also told that in fifty days they would receive the Torah. This news was so thrilling that they started counting the days and as a result, counting became a obligatory practice for all subsequent generations. (7).

Maimonides likewise perceives the counting as an expression of yearning for the day of Shavuot, when Torah was revealed. In addition, he sees the counting as a means of linking the two holidays of Passover and Shavuot. In Guide to the Perplexed he states:

> "The Feast of Weeks is the anniversary of the Revelation on Mount Sinai. In order to increase the importance of this day, we count the days that pass since the preceding festival, just as one who expects

his most intimate friend on a certain day counts the days and even the hours. This is the reason why we count the Omer from the day of the Exodus until the day Giving of the Law. Indeed, the latter was the aim and object of the Exodus from Egypt." (8).

As one might expect, the Kabbalists added the idea of the Sefirah days as purification, necessary before receiving Torah. According to them, after Israel had been exposed to "טומאות מצרים," (the impurities or the evil forces in Egypt), God wanted to unite with the nation. But because Israel was impure, God related to her as if she were a niddah (a woman in the state of menstrual impurity), who is required by law to count seven clean days. Therefore, God commanded Israel to count seven weeks so that she would be fit for marriage (i.e, with God at the revelation on Mount Sinai). (9).

A related kabbalistic idea concerns the symbolism of "mitzrayim." The time period of the Omer moves us from the forty-nine "Gates of Defilement" (present in mitzrayim) through the "Gates of Understanding" (the highest of which was present on Sinai). (10).

Thus, the kabbalists identified the Sefirah as a season of self-scrutiny and self-improvement as well as preparation for the receiving of Torah. Each day of counting was a further ascension from the impurities of Egypt (and the evil forces inherent in the world) to the spiritual height of Mount Sinai. Each day brought further transformation from impurity to purity, from evil to good, from Pharoah to God.

Both Sadness and Joy

But the mystics were also ambivalent about the season. On the first night of the Omer, immediately after the counting, some mystics would gather around the table and begin to sing "חסל סידור פסח," the final piyyut of the Haggadah, which notes that all the rites of Passover are over. This was no typical piyyut; rather, it was a mixture of lament and song, of sorrow and joy--a poem of yearning, a song of separation about a king's son who must leave his father's table and go into exile. (11).

In sum, our sources point to two ways of viewing the Sefirah period. One approach emphasizes its mournful nature while the other highlights its hopeful side.

II. Modern Interpretations

The majority of modern writers tend to emphasize the more positive approach.

Isaac Klein proposes, "The counting of the Omer could serve as a vehicle for the expression of our yearning for the restoration of Zion and the rebuilding of the Holy Land...Today we translate this into a means of strengthening our resolve to reclaim the soil of the Holy Land and to work for the rebuilding of Zion as a homeland for the exiled and as a center of spiritual life for our people." (12).

He also offers the idea, expressed by Maimonides, that

the counting of the Omer is a bridge connecting Passover and Shavuot. Counting indicates "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." (13).

This attitude underscores the importance of studying and practicing Torah as the goal of the whole season.

In The Jewish Catalogue, the Sefirah period is viewed as "linking the exodus (rebirth of the people) with the revelation (encounter between the people and God)." The Sefirah season thus helps us focus on our emergence in history as a separate people with a special, transformational relationship with God at Mount Sinai. (14).

Finally, a highly original theory is proposed by two Reform rabbis, Elyse Frishman and Sandy Levine (now, Kinneret Shiryon) in a paper they created for a liturgy class in 1980. In short, they propose that the period of the Omer is a time to recollect the biblical journey through the wilderness that parallels the human process of growing from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. On Passover we recall our slavery and childhood; on Shavuot we relive the revelation of adulthood and the receipt from God of freedom with responsibility. (See Appendix B for a copy of their work.)

III. The Author's Suggestions for Making the Sefirah Period and the Counting Ritual Meaningful for Us as Reform Jews

The following suggestions have either been gleaned from modern commentaries (15) ,or are personal proposals by the author.

a) Give to tzedakah the exact number of that night's count (i.e., one dollar, two dollars...forty-nine dollars, etc.)

b) Appreciate nature. Plan a retreat in a rustic area; teach on the theme of environmentalism.

c) Study Pirkei Avot--The Ethics of the Fathers, a traditional custom during the season.

d) Make each day count; write a diary.

e)***Personal favorite: Declare the month of Iyyar to be "Countdown to Sinai" month (similar to Jewish Book Month, Black History Month, etc.) Make this the theme of every event/happening at the Temple. Everything should somehow connect with Torah and prepare us for Sinai. Schedule an intensive Torah study class; plan an all-night Torah session the night before Shavuot.

For as Michael Strassfeld describes so eloquently, "Each of us must prepare in her or his own way for Sinai, so that we can still hear the voice that calls to us at every moment with God's words." (16)

CONCLUSIONS

Chapter One--Biblical Period

According to H. Louis Ginsberg, the ancient Israelite calendar went through three distinct stages of change, each of which affected the nature of the Sefirah time-period. In the first stage, first fruits were offered at the beginning of the barley harvest. However at this point, there is no mention in the text of counting Omer. In the second stage, each farmer was obliged to count from the beginning of his reaping for a period of seven weeks and at that time, bring unspecified first-fruit offerings to the Temple. Although this is the first reference to a Sefirah period in the Bible, the counting lacks all standardization, since the reaping season in Israel can vary as much as one month from one area to another. It is from the third and final stage, taken from Leviticus, that our present Sefirah ritual derives its origin. Each farmer began the Sefirah period with a rite designed to desacrilize his crops for sale and consumption. The farmer observed this rite by bringing some of his freshly-hewn barley sheaves (Omer) to a priest "on the day after the Sabbath." And this same day also began the Sefirah period, in which the farmer counted fifty days from the "day after the Sabbath" until Shavuot. A question arose however: To which "Sabbath" was the biblical phrase referring?

How one answered this question became the basis for one of the most heated controversies of the Second Temple era. The Pharisees maintained that the "Sabbath" in question was the first "yom tov" day within the Passover week. Therefore, the Sefirah period began on the sixteenth of Nisan. In contrast, the Boethusians, a sub-group of the Sadducees, believed that the word "Sabbath" referred to the first Sabbath day after Passover, and thus, according to their view, the first day of counting would not fall on a fixed day from year to year. Several other interpretations are addressed in this chapter, some of which are practiced by Jewish sects to this day, while others never took hold.

Julian Morgenstern proposed that the observance of Lag baOmer dates back to biblical times. However, his theory has been widely discredited and his proposal must be dismissed.

Chapter Two--Rabbinic Period: Tannaitic and Amoraic

As expected, rabbinic literature emphasizes the Pharisaic attitude in the Omer controversy, i.e., counting from the sixteenth of Nisan. The Rabbis engage in a highly polemical debate with the Boethusians, going so far as to create a mass ceremony for reaping the first sheaves and permitting the reaping to take place even if the sixteenth fell on a Sabbath day. Louis Finkelstein suggested that the Omer controversy between the Pharisees and Sadducees

stemmed from a theological difference of opinion over the nature of Shavuot. The Pharisees regarded it as the day on which Torah was given, a day of utmost historical significance to the Pharisees. For them, a fixed date for Shavuot would substantiate its importance within the calendar year.

The Sadducees however rejected this view. They saw Shavuot as a simple agricultural holiday. Moreover, if counting began on a Sunday, Shavuot likewise would fall on a Sunday, a situation far more beneficial to the priests than the one that determined Shavuot according to the Pharisaic method.

In addition, sources from this era characterize the Sefirah season as a quasi-ominous time. Judgment of the wicked in Gehinnom is thought to occur between Passover and Shavuot. The crops too are judged at this season. An aggadah states that many of Rabbi Akiva's students died from a plague during it as well. Yet, while in later sources these deaths become the ostensible reason for the mourning customs observed in the Sefirah period, no such customs are recorded in the Talmud during this time-period.

Lastly, several amoraim address the issue of counting the Omer and conclude that it should be performed at night, by each and every person (male), beginning the night of the sixteenth of Nisan. In addition, there is a discussion concerning how to count. According to one opinion, both days and weeks should be counted whereas according to the

other, only days need to be counted. However, no specific formula or liturgy for counting is mentioned in the Talmud.

One modern commentator theorizes that the celebration of Lag baOmer may have been based upon an aggadah in which the manna is said to have fallen on the eighteenth of Iyyar. Unfortunately, this theory is founded upon a misreading of the text and thus, we may conclude as we did in the last chapter that Lag baOmer was most likely not observed as a special day during the tannaitic and amoraic period.

Chapter Three--Mourning Customs and Sefirah Liturgy after the Geonic Period and Beyond

According to halachah, there are three customs of mourning that should be observed during the Sefirah period: abstinence from weddings , from cutting the hair and from work after sunset. The geonim and rishonim ground their observance upon the death of Akiva's students due to plague, yet from the responsa we can see that many Jews were unaware of this reason. Similarly, many modern scholars reject this view, postulating instead that the students were killed by the Romans during the Bar Kochba Revolt and therefore, the mourning practices arose out of a desire to memorialize them as national martyrs.

The earliest custom, prohibiting weddings, is mentioned in a geonic responsum from the mid-ninth century. The practice of not working after sunset is first reported in the late tenth century, whereas the avoidance of getting

one's haircut is not discussed in the sources until the twelfth century.

Geonic responsa indicate that the first two prohibitions were in force during the entire season. However, one thirteenth century rabbi maintains that weddings were prohibited only until Lag baOmer, and attributes this view to a tradition from the Geonim. Two centuries later, halachic sources record a disagreement between Ashkenazim and Sephardim over whether Lag baOmer itself should be observed as a day of mourning or rejoicing. By that time, incontrast to the geonic period, most Jews were not practicing these customs for the entire period. Rather, they observed them only until Lag baOmer, or from Rosh Hodesh Iyyar onwards. Thus, even in very early times, a plurality of traditions existed concerning these customs and when they were to be practiced.

Liturgically, the geonim mention that one should say a blessing on the first night of the Sefirah season, yet no wording for the blessing is indicated in the sources until the mid-twelfth century. And while counting of the Omer is reported in biblical and rabbinic times, no specific formula for how to do so is mentioned until the late thirteenth century. From the thirteenth century until the mid-sixteenth century, the counting ritual constisted of: a blessing before counting, a formula for counting ("Today is the fifteenth day which is two weeks and one day of the Omer") and afterwards, a prayer asking God to rebuild the

Temple. For three centuries this ritual remained largely the same until the rise of Lurianic Kabbalah, whose followers introduced several new kabbalistic prayers to the liturgy.

Chapter Four--Lag baOmer

The first mention of Lag baOmer as a special day within the Sefirah season is found in the thirteenth century but since the report is attributed to the Geonim, it may have existed earlier. Sephardic authorities viewed it as the last day in the mourning period, while Ashkenazim celebrated the thirty-third as a day of mourning at night and a day of rejoicing by day. In the second half of the sixteenth century however this difference largely disappeared upon the advent of a new custom for Lag baOmer, namely the hillula of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai.

Observed mainly be Sephardim and Hassidim today, the hillula, a pilgrimage to the site of Rabbi Shimon's tomb in Meron, is celebrated by lighting huge bonfires, cutting the hair of young boys, marching with the Torah from Tsfat, and so on. Many scholars assumed that this was a kabbalistic custom. However, it has been demonstrated that the opposite is the case; kabbalists actually objected to it.

The hillula celebration/pilgrimage and all of its attendant customs originally had nothing to do with Bar Yochai or his gravesite. They were first practiced at the

site of the prophet Samuel's tomb outside of Jerusalem. Sometime between 1565 and 1570, however, Samuel's tomb was closed to the Jews by fanatic Muslims from Jerusalem and pilgrims ceased coming to Eretz Yisrael. Since the Yishuv relied heavily upon the money donated to it by pilgrims, the need arose to find a new site for the pilgrimage, a site far from Jerusalem. The grave of Shimon Bar Yochai in the northern Galilee was chosen as the most appropriate site. The pilgrimage to Samuel's tomb was simply transferred in full to Bar Yochai's; the celebration was renamed "hillula" and it was rescheduled to Lag baOmer. Needless to say, Jews began soon afterwards to make pilgrimages to this new site.

Many of the customs practiced on Lag baOmer, such as lighting bonfires and shooting with bows and arrows, are ancient customs in other cultures as well. Thus, while the observance of these customs on the day of Lag baOmer may occur relatively late in Jewish history, the customs themselves may have originated at a very early time.

Chapter Five--The Significance of Sefirat hOmer in Our Time

Traditional sources have viewed the Sefirah ritual as a reminder of our people's tragic past or as a ceremony of hope and excitement over what the future would bring. Modern writers interpret the counting as a means: to express our hope for the rebuilding of Israel, to connect Passover with Shavuot, to emphasize the importance of Torah

study and practice, to highlight our relationship with God, and to remind us of our people's growth in the wilderness from childhood to adolescence to adulthood.

Suggestions are offered in this chapter concerning how to find meaning in this ritual and how to observe it today. The author hopes every reader will take these suggestions to heart and incorporate some sort of observance of the ancient counting ceremony into his or her practice during this season.

FOOTNOTES

Chapter One--Biblical Period

1. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, eds., A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), p. 771.
2. H. Louis Ginsberg, The Israelian Heritage of Judaism, Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, vol. 24, (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1982), p.73.
3. HaMilon HaIvri HaMerucaz, 1988 ed., s.v. "Omer," by Avraham Even-Shoshan, p. 528.
4. This matter will be discussed in more detail below.
5. Numbers 28:26 mentions weeks and calls Shavuot "Day of the First-Fruits."
6. I use the term "author" for the sake of simplicity, fully realizing that books in the Bible are compilations from many sources and were probably redacted by many editors.
7. Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), p. 258.
8. Statements made in private conversation with the author by Dr. David Sperling, Professor of Bible at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York campus, and by Dr. Baruch Levine, Professor of Bible at New York University.
9. Ginsberg, Israelian Heritage, pp. 42-54.
10. This is Ginsberg's unique translation of the words "בחדש האביב".
11. According to Ginsberg's theory, before the Deuteronomic stage, when centralized worship was instituted, pilgrimages were made to local sanctuaries, not to the Temple in Jerusalem.
12. Ginsberg, Israelian Heritage, p. 48.
13. Ibid., pp. 54-61.
14. Ibid., p. 57.
15. Ibid., pp. 67-83.
16. Ibid., p. 79.
17. Baruch Levine, The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 157.
18. Ginsberg, Israelian Heritage, p. 73.
19. Jeffrey H. Tigay, "Notes on the Development of the Jewish Week," Eretz-Israel 14, (1978): 111-112.
20. See also Concordancia Hadasha L'Torah, Nevi'im u-Ketuvim, 1980 ed., s.v. "שבת," by Avraham Even-Shoshan where he cites these two verses only as meaning שבוע ימים.
21. Levine, JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus, p.158.
22. Sifra Emor 23:11, 15--"יום טוב ממחרת השבת=ממחרת". See also Menachot 65b.
23. J. Van Goudoever, Biblical Calendars (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1959), p. 18.

24. Ibid., p. 19.
25. Ibid., p. 19, where Van Goudoever cites Philo, Spec. Laws, ii. 162, 176, and Josephus, Antiquities, iii. 250-252; War, ii. 42ff.
26. Levine, JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus, p. 262, emphasis mine.
27. Louis Finkelstein, The Pharisees: The Sociological Background of their Faith, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1938), pp. 643-648.
28. Ibid., pp. 645-46, emphasis mine.
29. Encyclopedia Judaica, s.v. "Boethusians," by editorial staff, vol. 2, p. 1169.
30. Menuchot 65a
31. See H. Louis Ginsberg, "The Grain Harvest Laws of Leviticus 23:9-22 and Numbers 28:26-31," PAAJR 46-47 Jubilee Volume (1980):141-154. Also Levine, JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus, p.159, and Van Goudoever, Biblical Calendars, p.19.
32. Van Goudoever, Biblical Calendars, p.19.
33. Menachot 65b.
34. Pesikta de Rav Kahana, Piska 8, Buber ed., 69b.
35. Van Goudoever, Biblical Calendars, pp. 20-21.
36. Ibid., p. 22. Later tradition returned to this idea. The Karaites (ca. 9th century c.e.) also counted the fifty days of the Sefirah period beginning on the Sunday after Passover. See pp. 20-23 for more detail.
37. Ibid., p.25. See the same page for an account that the Falashas also practised this tradition of beginning the Sefirah period on the day after the last day of the festival week.
38. Baruch Levine, "The Temple Scroll: Aspects of its Historical Provenance and Literary Character," BASOR 232, (Fall 1978):8.
39. Encyclopedia Mikra'it, 1982 ed., s.v. "שבת--מתחרת השבתתת," vol. 8, p.518. See also a discussion of the Karaite view in Van Goudoever p. 26 (citing Nemoy, "Al-Qirqisani Account of the Jewish Sects," HUCA VII (1930), 390, 395 as well as footnote 336 of Hildegard and Julius Lewy, "The Origin of the Week and the Oldest West Asiatic Calendar," HUCA 17 (1942-42): 81-82.
40. Hildegard and Julius Lewy, "The Origin of the Week and the Oldest West Asiatic Calendar," HUCA 17 (1942-42): 49, 77.
41. Ibid., p. 49.
42. Ibid., pp. 50-1.
43. Ibid., pp. 78-9.
44. Ibid., pp. 51-2.
45. Ibid., p. 71.
46. Ibid., p. 77.
47. Ibid., p. 82.
48. Van Goudoever, Biblical Calendars, p.28.
49. Ibid., p.88.
50. W.F. Albright, "The Gezer Calendar," BASOR 92 (1943): pp. 16-26.

51. Julian Morgenstern, "Lag Ba'Omer--Its Origins and Import," HUCA 39, (1968):85-86.
52. Ibid., p. 89.
53. Ibid.

Chapter Two--Rabbinic Period: Tannaic and Amoraic

1. Saul Lieberman, Tosefta Ki-Fshutah, (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1973), p.720.
2. See also two statements in the Mishnah. M. Hagigah 2:4 alludes to the Sadducees "who say, 'Atseret falls on the day after the Sabbath.'" P.T. Rosh Hashanah 2:1 states that the Sadducees used to say that the Festival of Weeks follows the Sabbath.
3. Encyclopedia Judaica, s.v. "Boethusians," by Editorial Staff, vol. 2, p.1169.
4. Louis Finkelstein, The Pharisees, p.116.
5. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 643-644.
6. Ibid., vol. 1, p.117.
7. M. Menachot 10:3 and similarly, in T. Menachot 10:23.
8. See also T. Rosh Hashanah 1:12 in Lieberman, Tosefta Ki-Fshuta, p. 308.
9. See also Pesikta Rabbati, piska 18, Friedman ed., 92a and Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, piska 8, Buber ed., 70b.
10. Lou Silberman, "The Sefirah Season: A Study in Folklore," HUCA 22, (1949): 229.
11. Morgenstern, "Lag Ba'Omer," p.83. See also Shlomo Zevin, The Festivals in Halacha: An Analysis of the Development of the Festival Laws, trans. Shlomo Fox-Ashrei, vol. 3 (New York: Menorah Publications, Ltd., 1982), p. 217. Zevin cites this interpretation in the name of the Hatam Sofer, who attempts to explain why the traditional sources do not mention this event as a basis for celebration on Lag baOmer, "Since however the events preceding it [complaints against Moses] do not reflect favorably on our ancestors, we make no direct reference to it."
12. Ibid.

Chapter Three--Mourning Customs and Litury, Post-Rabbinic

1. For sources concerning specific mourning customs see Solomon Ganzfried, Kitzur Shulhan Arukh, (Jerusalem: Hotsa'at Ateret, 1985). For prohibitions against weddings see chapter קכ"ג:א (213:1). For haircutting prohibitions see chapter קי"א:כ (211:12). For abstention from work see chapter ח"ק (208).
2. Yom Tov Levinsky, Sefer HaMoadim, vol. 6, (Tel Aviv: Dvir Publishing Co., 1955), p. 337, based upon his reading of P.T. Hagigah, perek 3.
3. B. M. Levine, ed., Otsar HaGeonim, vol. 7 (Jerusalem: תרע"ו), p.140, note 324.
4. Adin Steinsaltz, Masechet Yevamot from the Babylonian Talmud, (Jerusalem: The Israel Institute for Talmudic Publications, 1988), p. 62b.

5. Gedaliah Alon, The Jews in their Land in the Talmudic Age, Gershon Levi, trans., vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), pp. 631-2.
6. Eliezer Levi, Yesodot ha-Tefillah, (1952), p. 232 as cited in Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971 ed., s.v. "Omer," by D.M. Feldman, vol.12, p. 1388.
7. All of the following reports are taken from Levine, Otsar HaGeonim, Vol. 7, pp.140-141.
8. All further dates for the geonim are taken from Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971 ed., s.v. "Gaon," vol. 7, pp. 319-320.
9. Levine, Otsar HaGeonim, note 327.
10. All dates for commentators considered to be "Rishonim" are taken from the book Rishonim:Biographical Sketches of the Prominent Early Rabbinic Sages and Leaders from the Tenth-Fifteenth Centuries, Hersh Goldwurm, ed., Artscroll History Series, (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1982).
11. Levine, Otsar HaGeonim, note 326.
12. Ibid., note 325.
13. Because this tradition becomes the preferred one in later codices of law, one would think that later commentators would quote HaMeiri as precedent. However, according to Rishonim, p. 175, much of his work was lost, only to be recovered and published in the eighteenth century.
14. Levine, Otsar haGeonim, note 328.
15. The Tur, Orach Hayyim, Halachot Pesach, 493.
16. According to a citation by Joseph Caro in "Beit Yosef" on the Tur 493.
17. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Hayyim, Hilchot Pesach, 493:2-3.
18. [For a list of the divergent customs in our day, see What is the Halacha? Encyclopedia of Halacha, Book I. by Rabbi Abraham Scheinberg Shulsinger Bros., Inc. NY NY 1974 p.83]
19. Tur 493.
20. Tur 493, Shulchan Aruch 493:1.
21. Tur 493.
22. Shulchan Aruch, 493:4.
23. Theodor H. Gaster, Festivals of the Jewish Year (New York: William Sloan and Associates Publishers, 1953), p. 52; see also Thespis by the same author, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1961), pp. 28-29.
24. Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, James Hastings, ed., s.v. "May, Midsummer," vol. 8, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), p.501.
25. Lou Silberman, "The Sefirah Season: A Study in Folklore," HUCA 22, (1949):221-237.
26. See also Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, s.v. "Marriage (Roman)," vol. 8, p. 465.
27. Silberman, "The Sefirah Season," pp.225-226.
28. See ibid., footnote 13; Gaster, Festivals, pp. 52-3,

and his suggestions for further reading on p.302.

29. Silberman, "Sefirah Season," p. 227.
30. Ibid.,; see also The New Golden Bough Abridged by Sir James Frazer, ed. by Theodor H. Gaster (New York:New American Library, Inc., 1959), p.228, where he states "The notion that a man may be bewitched by means of the clippings of his hair, the parings of his nails, or any other severed portion of his person is almost world-wide."
31. Frazer, The New Golden Bough, p.228.
32. Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Temidin u-Mosifin, chapter 7, mishnah 25.
33. Ibid., mishnah 22.
34. Even before Maimonides, the Rif (Isaac al-Fasi, Algeria 1013-Spain 1103) in his commentary at the end of Pesachim also follows the opinion of Abaye and Rav Ashi's school to count days and weeks.
35. Tur, Orach Hayyim, Hilchot Pesach, 489.
36. The punctuation and arrangement of the following citations from the Tur are my own.
37. It is not clear from the text of the Tur whether these two latter customs are both brought in the Avi HaEzri by Tosafist Eliezer HaLevi or whether the first custom is his and the second is a custom that the Tur himself is reporting. It is also unclear whether the custom written by Eliezer in Avi HaEzri is his own or simply one he is reporting.
38. Cited in "Bayit Hadash."
39. Cited in "Beit Yosef."
40. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Hayyim, Hilchot Pesach, 489:1.
41. Herbert C. Dobrinsky, A Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs, (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1986), p.259.
42. For further discussion of "שהיום/היום" see the following commentaries in the Shulchan Aruch--Magen Avraham, Be'er Heiteiv, Hok Ya'akov. For a further discussion of "לעומר/בעומר" see these same commentaries (also in the Shulchan Aruch) with the addition of Sha'aray Teshuva.
43. In HaLevi's commentary on al-Fasi called HaMaor, cited in Levinsky, Sefer HaMoadim, vol. 6, p. 336.
44. Gershom Sholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), pp. 256-257.
45. Seder ha-Yom, compiled in 1599 by Moses ibn Machir of Tsfat.
46. Gershom Sholem, Kabbalah, (New York: Dorset Press, 1974), p. 77.
47. Ibid., p. 193.
48. Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, and Sharon Strassfeld, eds., The Jewish Catalogue (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1974), p. 146.
49. Reuben Margaliot, ed., The Zohar, Exodus, Parashat Tetsaveh, (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1952), p. 183.
50. The Complete Artscroll Siddur, Nossan Sherman,

trans., Nusach Ashkenaz (New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1987), p. 315.
51. Sholem, Kabbalah, p.138.

Chapter Four--Lag baOmer

1. The Tachanun prayer is omitted from all three services as well as from minchah of the previous day.
2. Levine, Otsar HaGeonim, p.140, note 325.
3. Tur, 493.
4. Levine, Otsar HaGeonim, p. 141, note 328.
5. Shlomo Yosef Zevin, The Festivals in Halacha, Shlomo Fox Ashrei, trans., vol. 3 (New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1982), p.219; also see Darchei Moshe and Bayit Hadash on the Tur, 493, where these customs are cited in the name of the Maharil.
6. Darchei Moshe on the Tur 493.
7. Zohar, Idra Zuta,p. 296b.
8. Judah David Eisenstein, Otsar Dinim u-Minhagim, s.v. "Lag BaOmer," p.187; Zevin, Festivals, p. 221.
9. Avraham Ya'ari, "Toldot HaHillula BaMeron," Tarbitz 31 (1965):79-80.
10. Ibid., p. 80.
11. Zevin, Festivals, p.224.
12. Ya'ari, "Toldot HaHillula," p. 80.
13. Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971 ed., s.v."Omer," by D.M. Feldman, vol. 12, p.1388.
14. The Jewish Encyclopedia, s.v. "Omer," by Julius H. Greenstone, vol. 9., p. 400.
15. The following information is taken from Ya'ari's previously cited article in Tarbitz, pp. 92-99.
16. According to Ya'ari, many piyyutim and prayers uttered during this pilgrimage at Samuel's grave were recovered from the Cairo genizah.
17. For wonderful descriptions of the hillula in English, see Julian Morgenstern, "Lag BaOmer--Its Origin and Import, HUCA 39 (1968):82-83; and Zevin, Festivals, p. 227, where he cites Asher Zelig Margolies work, Hillula DeRashbi (Jerusalem, 5701-1941).
18. See Ya'ari's examination in pages 85-88 of the sole mention of a pilgrimage by the Ari to Meron on Lag baOmer. In this section, he analyzes the four different printed versions of the story and concludes that no source actually identifies Lag baOmer with the day of Bar Yochai's death.
19. Ya'ari, "Toldot HaHillula," p.83.
20. Quoted in Pri Etz Hayyim and Sha'ar HaKavannot; also cited in Ya'ari's article on pages 85-86.
21. Zevin, Festivals, p. 221; and Silberman, "The Sefirah Season," p. 234.
22. Ya'ari, "Toldot HaHillula," p. 90.
23. Cited in Zevin, Festivals, p.222.
24. Translated in Zevin, Ibid., pp.222-223.
25. Translated in Zevin, p. 223.

26. Eisenstein, Otsar Dinim, p.188.
27. Jewish Encyclopedia, s.v. "Omer," p.400.
28. Eisenstein, Otsar Dinim, p. 188.
29. Jewish Encyclopedia, s.v. "Omer," p. 400.
30. See Peter Fink, ed., New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship, s.v. "Lent," p. 683. A two-day break was common. The first day was Lazarus Saturday and the second, Sunday, was known as mi-careme.
31. Gaster, Festivals of the Jewish Year, p.58.
32. Encyclopedia Judaica, s.v. "Omer," p. 1389 where the citation is Derenbourg, REJ, 29 (1894, 149).
33. Silberman, "Sefirah Season," p. 236 where he cites H. Grimme, Das israelitische Pfingstfeste und der Plejadenkult, (Paderborn, 1907).
34. Morgenstern, "Lag BaOmer", p. 90.
35. Silberman, "Sefirah Season," p. 236 as cited from Dalman, Arbeit und Sitte in Palestina, I.2, 294 and 460-1.
36. Silberman, "Sefirah Season," p. 236.

Chapter Five--Sefirat haOmer & its Meaning in for Our Day

1. Levinsky, Sefer HaMoadim, vol. 6, p.327.
2. Isaac David, Seder Avodat Yisrael, "Seder Sefirat haOmer", (Jerusalem: Schoken Books, 1937), p.362.
3. Encyclopedia Judaica, s.v. "Omer", p.1389.
4. Levinsky, Sefer HaMoadim, p. 337.
5. Ibid., p. 327.
6. Ibid., p. 328.
7. Eisenstein, Otsar Dinim, s.v."Sefirat haOmer," p.298.
8. Moses Maimonides, The Guided of the Perplexed, M. Friedlander, trans., (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1881) p. 211, from Part Three, Chapter Forty-Three.
9. Levinsky, Sefer HaMoadim, p.328.
10. Arthur Waskow, Seasons of Our Joy, (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), pp. 168-9; also Eisenstein, Otsar Dinim, p. 298.
11. Levinsky, Sefer HaMoadim, p.332.
12. Isaac Klein, A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1979), p. 135.
13. Ibid.
14. Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, Sharon Strassfeld, eds., The Jewish Catalogue, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1974), p.146.
14. The Jewish Catalogue, Seasons of Our Joy, Unpublished Paper by Frishman et.al. on the Omer period.
15. Michael Strassfeld, The Jewish Holidays, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), p. 55.

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(Cong.— אָמֵן. יְהֵא שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעָלַם וּלְעָלְמֵי עָלְמַיָּא.)
יְהֵא שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעָלַם וּלְעָלְמֵי עָלְמַיָּא.
יִתְבָּרַךְ וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח וְיִתְפָּאַר וְיִתְרוֹמַם וְיִתְנַשֵּׂא וְיִתְהַדַּר וְיִתְעַלֶּה
וְיִתְהַלַּל שְׁמֵהּ דְּקֻדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא (Cong.— בְּרִיךְ הוּא) — °לְע�ֵלָּא מִן כָּל
°לְעֵלָּא וּלְעֵלָּא מִכָּל (From Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur substitute—) בִּרְכָתָא
וְשִׁירָתָא תֻּשְׁבְּחָתָא וְנֶחֱמָתָא, דַּאֲמִירָן בְּעָלְמָא. וְאִמְרוּ: אָמֵן. (Cong.—
אָמֵן.)

יְהֵא שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מִן שְׁמַיָּא, וְחַיִּים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְאִמְרוּ:
אָמֵן. (Cong.— אָמֵן.)

עֹשֶׂה שָׁלוֹם בִּמְרוֹמָיו, הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שָׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ, וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל.
וְאִמְרוּ: אָמֵן. (Cong.— אָמֵן.)

From Rosh Chodesh Elul through Shemini Atzeres, Psalm 27, לְדָוִד is recited; comm. p. 170.

לְדָוִד, יְהוָה אוֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי, מִמִּי אִירָא, יְהוָה מָעוֹז חַיַּי, מִמִּי אֶפְחָד.
בְּקָרֹב עָלַי מְרֵעִים לֶאֱכֹל אֶת בְּשָׂרִי, צָרַי וְאוֹיְבַי לִי, הֵמָּה
כָּשְׁלוּ וְנָפָלוּ. אִם תַּחֲנֶה עָלַי מַחֲנֶה, לֹא יִירָא לִבִּי, אִם תָּקוּם עָלַי
מִלְחָמָה, בְּזֹאת אֲנִי בוֹטֵחַ. אַחַת שָׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת יְהוָה, אוֹתָהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ,
שִׁבְתִּי בְּבֵית יְהוָה כָּל יְמֵי חַיַּי, לַחֲזוֹת בְּנֹעַם יְהוָה, וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהֵיכָלוֹ. כִּי
יִצְפְּנֵנִי בְסֻכֹּה בְּיוֹם רָעָה, יַסְתִּירֵנִי בְּסֵתֶר אָהֳלוֹ, בְּצוּר יְרוֹמְמֵנִי. וְעַתָּה
יָרוּם רֹאשִׁי עַל אֹיְבַי סְבִיבוֹתַי, וְאֶזְבְּחָה בְאָהֳלוֹ זִבְחֵי תְרוּעָה, אָשִׁירָה
וַאֲזַמְּרָה לַיהוָה. שְׁמַע יְהוָה קוֹלִי אֶקְרָא, וְחָנֵּנִי וַעֲנֵנִי. לְךָ אָמַר לִבִּי
בַּקְּשׁוּ פָנָי, אֶת פָּנֶיךָ יְהוָה אֲבַקֵּשׁ. אַל תַּסְתֵּר פָּנֶיךָ מִמֶּנִּי, אַל תַּט בְּאַף
עַבְדֶּךָ, עֶזְרָתִי הָיִיתָ, אַל תִּטְּשֵׁנִי וְאַל תַּעַזְבֵנִי, אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׁעִי. כִּי אָבִי וְאִמִּי
עֲזָבוּנִי, וַיהוָה יַאַסְפֵנִי. הוֹרֵנִי יְהוָה דַּרְכֶּךָ, וּנְחֵנִי בְּאֹרַח מִישׁוֹר, לְמַעַן
שׁוֹרְרָי. אַל תִּתְּנֵנִי בְּנֶפֶשׁ צָרָי, כִּי קָמוּ בִי עֵדֵי שֶׁקֶר, וְיָפֵחַ חָמָס. ✧ לוּלֵא
הֶאֱמַנְתִּי לִרְאוֹת בְּטוּב יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ חַיִּים. קַוֵּה אֶל יְהוָה, חֲזַק וְיַאֲמֵץ
לִבֶּךָ, וְקַוֵּה אֶל יְהוָה.

In the presence of a *minyan*, mourners recite קדיש יתום (p. 280).
In a house of mourning, Psalm 49, לַמְנַצֵּחַ. *For the conductor* (p. 174), is recited after *Maariv*.

ספירת העומר

The Omer is counted from the second night of Pesach until the night before Shavuos.
See commentary for pertinent laws.

In some congregations the following Kabbalistic prayer precedes the Counting of the Omer.

לְשֵׁם יִחוּד קוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא וּשְׁכִינְתֵּיהּ, בִּדְחִילוּ וּרְחִימוּ לְיַחֵד שֵׁם יו״ד
ה״א בְּוָא״ו ה״א בְּיִחוּדָא שְׁלִים, בְּשֵׁם כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל. הִנֵּה מוּכָן וּמְזוּמָן
לְקַיֵּם מִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה שֶׁל סְפִירַת הָעוֹמֶר, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב בַּתּוֹרָה: וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם
מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת, מִיּוֹם הֲבִיאֲכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה, שֶׁבַע שַׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימֹת
תִּהְיֶינָה. עַד מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִת תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם, וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה
חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה. וִיהִי נֹעַם אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ עָלֵינוּ, וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ כּוֹנְנָה עָלֵינוּ.
וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ כּוֹנְנֵהוּ.

(Cong.— *Amen. May His great Name be blessed forever and ever.*)
May His great Name be blessed forever and ever.
Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, mighty, upraised, and lauded be the Name of the Holy One, Blessed is He (Cong.— *Blessed is He*) — (From Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur add: *exceedingly*) *beyond any blessing and song, praise and consolation that are uttered in the world. Now respond: Amen.* (Cong.— *Amen.*)
May there be abundant peace from Heaven, and life, upon us and upon all Israel. Now respond: Amen. (Cong.— *Amen.*)

He Who makes peace in His heights, may He make peace upon us, and upon all Israel. Now respond: Amen. (Cong.— *Amen.*)

From Rosh Chodesh Elul through Shemini Atzeres, Psalm 27, 'Of David', is recited; comm. p. 170.

לְדָוִד *Of David; HASHEM is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? HASHEM is my life's strength, whom shall I dread? When evildoers approach me to devour my flesh, my tormentors and my foes against me — it is they who stumble and fall. Though an army would besiege me, my heart would not fear; though war would arise against me, in this I trust. One thing I asked of HASHEM, that shall I seek: That I dwell in the House of HASHEM all the days of my life; to behold the sweetness of HASHEM and to contemplate in His Sanctuary. Indeed, He will hide me in His Shelter on the day of evil; He will conceal me in the concealment of His Tent, He will lift me upon a rock. Now my head is raised above my enemies around me, and I will slaughter offerings in His Tent accompanied by joyous song; I will sing and make music to HASHEM. HASHEM, hear my voice when I call, be gracious toward me and answer me. In Your behalf, my heart has said, 'Seek My Presence'; Your Presence, HASHEM, do I seek. Conceal not Your Presence from me, repel not Your servant in anger. You have been my Helper, abandon me not, forsake me not, O God of my salvation. Though my father and mother have forsaken me, HASHEM will gather me in. Teach me Your way, HASHEM, and lead me on the path of integrity, because of my watchful foes. Deliver me not to the wishes of my tormentors, for there have arisen against me false witnesses who breathe violence. Chazzan— Had I not trusted that I would see the goodness of HASHEM in the land of life! Hope to HASHEM, strengthen yourself and He will give you courage; and hope to HASHEM.*

In the presence of a *minyan*, mourners recite the Mourner's *Kaddish* (p. 280).

In a house of mourning, Psalm 49, לַמְנַצֵּחַ. *For the conductor* (p. 174), is recited after *Maariv*.

COUNTING THE OMER

The Omer is counted from the second night of Pesach until the night before Shavuos.
See commentary for pertinent laws.

In some congregations the following Kabbalistic prayer precedes the Counting of the Omer.

לְשֵׁם *For the sake of the unification of the Holy One, Blessed is He, and His Presence, in fear and love to unify the Name Yud-Kei with Vav-Kei in perfect unity, in the name of all Israel. Behold I am prepared and ready to perform the commandment of counting the Omer, as is written in the Torah: 'You are to count from the morrow of the rest day, from the day you brought the Omer-offering that is waved — they are to be seven complete weeks — until the morrow of the seventh week you are to count fifty days, and then offer a new meal-offering to HASHEM.'[1] May the pleasantness of my Lord, our God, be upon us — may He establish our handiwork for us; our handiwork, may He establish.*

(1) *Leviticus* 23:15.

ספירת העומר / Counting the Omer
The Torah commands that from the second day of Pesach — the day the Omer offering of new barley is brought in the Temple — forty-nine days are to be counted; and the festival of Shavuos celebrated on the fiftieth day. This period is called *Sefiras HaOmer*, the Counting of the Omer. The *Sefirah* count also recalls an earlier event. During the seven weeks following the Exodus, our ancestors prepared themselves for receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. This responsibility to prepare oneself to receive the

Chazzan, followed by congregation, recites the blessing and counts.
One praying without a minyan should, nevertheless, recite the entire Omer service.

בָּרוּךְ *Blessed are You, HASHEM, our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us regarding the counting of the Omer.*

INSERT THE APPROPRIATE DAY'S COUNT. SEE CHART, P. 287.

הָרַחֲמָן *The Compassionate One! May He return for us the service of the Temple to its place, speedily in our days. Amen, selah!*

Psalm 67 (Commentary on p. 595.)

לַמְנַצֵּחַ *For the Conductor, upon Neginos, a psalm, a song. May God favor us and bless us, may He illuminate His countenance with us, Selah. To make known Your way on earth, among all the nations Your salvation. The peoples will acknowledge You, O God, the peoples will acknowledge You, all of them. Nations will be glad and sing for joy, because You will judge the peoples fairly and guide the nations on earth, Selah. The peoples will acknowledge You, O God, the peoples will acknowledge You, all of them. The earth has yielded its produce, may God, our own God, bless us. May God bless us and may all the ends of the earth fear Him.*

For commentary to the following paragraph, see p. 315.

אָנָּא *We beg You! With the strength of Your right hand's greatness, untie the bundled sins. Accept the prayer of Your nation; strengthen us, purify us, O Awesome One. Please, O Strong One — those who foster Your Oneness, guard them like the apple of an eye. Bless them, purify them, show them pity, may Your righteousness always recompense them. Powerful Holy One, with Your abundant goodness guide Your congregation. One and only Exalted One, turn to Your nation, which proclaims Your holiness. Accept our entreaty and hear our cry, O Knower of mysteries.*

Blessed is the Name of His glorious Kingdom for all eternity.

רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם *Master of the universe, You commanded us through Moses, Your servant, to count the Omer Count in order to cleanse us from our encrustations of evil and from our contaminations, as You have written in Your Torah: You are to count from the morrow of the rest day, from the day you brought the Omer-offering that is waved — they are to be seven complete weeks. Until the morrow of the seventh week you are to count fifty days,[1] so that the souls of Your people Israel be cleansed of their contamination. Therefore, may it be Your will, HASHEM, our God and the God of our forefathers, that in the merit of the Omer Count that I have counted today, may there be corrected whatever blemish I have caused in the sefirah (insert the appropriate sefirah; see chart p. 286). May I be cleansed and sanctified with the holiness of Above, and through this may abundant bounty flow in all the worlds. And may it correct our lives, spirits, and souls from all sediment and blemish; may it cleanse us and sanctify us with Your exalted holiness. Amen, Selah!*

In some congregations, if a mourner is present, the Mourner's Kaddish (p. 280) is recited, followed by *Aleinu*. In others, *Aleinu* is recited immediately.

A Summary of Laws of Sefirah

The Omer is counted, standing, after nightfall. Before reciting the blessing, one should be careful *not* to say 'Today is the ____th day.' If he did so, for example, in response to someone who asked which day it is, he may not recite the blessing, since he has already counted that day. Where there are days and weeks, this does not apply unless he also mentioned the week. In both cases, he may recite the blessing on succeeding nights.

If one forgets to count at night, he counts during the day *without* a blessing, but may recite the blessing on succeeding nights. But if one forgot to count all day, he counts without a blessing on succeeding nights.

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

INSERT THE APPROPRIATE DAY'S COUNT. SEE CHART P. 286.

הָרַחֲמָן הוּא יַחֲזִיר לָנוּ עֲבוֹדַת בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ לִמְקוֹמָהּ, בִּמְהֵרָה בְיָמֵינוּ. אָמֵן סֶלָה.

(commentary on p. 595) תהלים סז

לַמְנַצֵּחַ בִּנְגִינֹת מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר. אֱלֹהִים יְחָנֵּנוּ וִיבָרְכֵנוּ, יָאֵר פָּנָיו אִתָּנוּ סֶלָה. לָדַעַת בָּאָרֶץ דַּרְכֶּךָ, בְּכָל גּוֹיִם יְשׁוּעָתֶךָ. יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים אֱלֹהִים, יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים כֻּלָּם. יִשְׂמְחוּ וִירַנְּנוּ לְאֻמִּים, כִּי תִשְׁפֹּט עַמִּים מִישׁוֹר, וּלְאֻמִּים בָּאָרֶץ תַּנְחֵם סֶלָה. יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים, אֱלֹהִים, יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים כֻּלָּם. אֶרֶץ נָתְנָה יְבוּלָהּ, יְבָרְכֵנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵינוּ. יְבָרְכֵנוּ אֱלֹהִים, וְיִירְאוּ אוֹתוֹ כָּל אַפְסֵי אָרֶץ.

For commentary to the following paragraph, see p. 315.

אָנָּא בְּכֹחַ גְּדֻלַּת יְמִינְךָ תַּתִּיר צְרוּרָה. — אב״ג יח״ץ
קַבֵּל רִנַּת עַמְּךָ שַׂגְּבֵנוּ טַהֲרֵנוּ נוֹרָא. — קר״ע שט״ן
נָא גִבּוֹר דּוֹרְשֵׁי יִחוּדֶךָ כְּבָבַת שָׁמְרֵם. — נג״ד יכ״ש
בָּרְכֵם טַהֲרֵם רַחֲמֵם צִדְקָתְךָ תָּמִיד גְּמְלֵם. — בט״ר צת״ג
חָסִין קָדוֹשׁ בְּרוֹב טוּבְךָ נַהֵל עֲדָתֶךָ. — חק״ב טנ״ע
יָחִיד גֵּאֶה לְעַמְּךָ פְּנֵה זוֹכְרֵי קְדֻשָּׁתֶךָ. — יג״ל פו״ק
שַׁוְּעָתֵנוּ קַבֵּל וּשְׁמַע צַעֲקָתֵנוּ יוֹדֵעַ תַּעֲלֻמוֹת. — שק״ו צי״ח

בָּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.

רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, אַתָּה צִוִּיתָנוּ עַל יְדֵי מֹשֶׁה עַבְדֶּךָ לִסְפּוֹר סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר, כְּדֵי לְטַהֲרֵנוּ מִקְּלִפּוֹתֵינוּ וּמִטֻּמְאוֹתֵינוּ, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתַבְתָּ בְּתוֹרָתֶךָ: וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הֲבִיאֲכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה, שֶׁבַע שַׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה. עַד מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם.[1] כְּדֵי שֶׁיִּטָּהֲרוּ נַפְשׁוֹת עַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִזֻּהֲמָתָם. וּבְכֵן יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ יהוה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וֵאלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, שֶׁבְּזֹכוּת סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר שֶׁסָּפַרְתִּי הַיּוֹם, יִתְקַן מַה שֶּׁפָּגַמְתִּי בִּסְפִירָה (Insert the appropriate *sefirah*; see chart p. 286.) וְאֶטָּהֵר וְאֶתְקַדַּשׁ בִּקְדֻשָּׁה שֶׁל מַעְלָה, וְעַל יְדֵי זֶה יִשְׁפַּע שֶׁפַע רַב בְּכָל הָעוֹלָמוֹת. וּלְתַקֵּן אֶת נַפְשׁוֹתֵינוּ, וְרוּחוֹתֵינוּ, וְנִשְׁמוֹתֵינוּ, מִכָּל סִיג וּפְגָם, וּלְטַהֲרֵינוּ וּלְקַדְּשֵׁנוּ בִּקְדֻשָּׁתְךָ הָעֶלְיוֹנָה. אָמֵן סֶלָה.

In some congregations, if a mourner is present קדיש יתום (p. 280) is recited, followed by עלינו. In others, עלינו is recited immediately.

(1) *Leviticus* 23:15-16.

Torah is present every year, as we relive the Exodus from bondage and materialism, and strive to be worthy of the gift of Torah. In ancient times, the *Sefirah* period was a time of rejoicing, but it is now observed as a time of semi-mourning because of several reasons: the absence of the Temple; the death of R' Akiva's 24,000 students during thirty-three days of the *Sefirah*; and a string of bloody massacres of Jewish communities during the Crusades.

DAY	COUNT
1	*Today is one day of the Omer.*
2	*Today is two days of the Omer.*
3	*Today is three days of the Omer.*
4	*Today is four days of the Omer.*
5	*Today is five days of the Omer.*
6	*Today is six days of the Omer.*
7	*Today is seven days, which are one week, of the Omer.*
8	*Today is eight days, which are one week and one day, of the Omer.*
9	*Today is nine days, which are one week and two days, of the Omer.*
10	*Today is ten days, which are one week and three days, of the Omer.*
11	*Today is eleven days, which are one week and four days, of the Omer.*
12	*Today is twelve days, which are one week and five days, of the Omer.*
13	*Today is thirteen days, which are one week and six days, of the Omer.*
14	*Today is fourteen days, which are two weeks, of the Omer.*
15	*Today is fifteen days, which are two weeks and one day of the Omer.*
16	*Today is sixteen days, which are two weeks and two days, of the Omer.*
17	*Today is seventeen days, which are two weeks and three days, of the Omer.*
18	*Today is eighteen days, which are two weeks and four days, of the Omer.*
19	*Today is nineteen days, which are two weeks and five days, of the Omer.*
20	*Today is twenty days, which are two weeks and six days, of the Omer.*
21	*Today is twenty-one days, which are three weeks, of the Omer.*
22	*Today is twenty-two days, which are three weeks and one day, of the Omer.*
23	*Today is twenty-three days, which are three weeks and two days, of the Omer.*
24	*Today is twenty-four days, which are three weeks and three days, of the Omer.*
25	*Today is twenty-five days, which are three weeks and four days, of the Omer.*
26	*Today is twenty-six days, which are three weeks and five days, of the Omer.*
27	*Today is twenty-seven days, which are three weeks and six days, of the Omer.*
28	*Today is twenty-eight days, which are four weeks, of the Omer.*
29	*Today is twenty-nine days, which are four weeks and one day, of the Omer.*
30	*Today is thirty days, which are four weeks and two days, of the Omer.*
31	*Today is thirty-one days, which are four weeks and three days, of the Omer.*
32	*Today is thirty-two days, which are four weeks and four days, of the Omer.*
33	*Today is thirty-three days, which are four weeks and five days, of the Omer.*
34	*Today is thirty-four days, which are four weeks and six days, of the Omer.*
35	*Today is thirty-five days, which are five weeks of the Omer.*
36	*Today is thirty-six days, which are five weeks and one day, of the Omer.*
37	*Today is thirty-seven days, which are five weeks and two days, of the Omer.*
38	*Today is thirty-eight days, which are five weeks and three days, of the Omer.*
39	*Today is thirty-nine days, which are five weeks and four days, of the Omer.*
40	*Today is forty days, which are five weeks and five days, of the Omer.*
41	*Today is forty-one days, which are five weeks and six days, of the Omer.*
42	*Today is forty-two days, which are six weeks, of the Omer.*
43	*Today is forty-three days, which are six weeks and one day, of the Omer.*
44	*Today is forty-four days, which are six weeks and two days, of the Omer.*
45	*Today is forty-five days, which are six weeks and three days, of the Omer.*
46	*Today is forty-six days, which are six weeks and four days, of the Omer.*
47	*Today is forty-seven days, which are six weeks and five days, of the Omer.*
48	*Today is forty-eight days, which are six weeks and six days, of the Omer.*
49	*Today is forty-nine days, which are seven weeks, of the Omer.*

In many congregations the word today is substituted for היום.

DAY	COUNT	SEFIRAH
1	הַיּוֹם יוֹם אֶחָד לָעֹמֶר	חֶסֶד שֶׁבְּחֶסֶד
2	הַיּוֹם שְׁנֵי יָמִים לָעֹמֶר	גְּבוּרָה שֶׁבְּחֶסֶד
3	הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר	תִּפְאֶרֶת שֶׁבְּחֶסֶד
4	הַיּוֹם אַרְבָּעָה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר	נֶצַח שֶׁבְּחֶסֶד
5	הַיּוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר	הוֹד שֶׁבְּחֶסֶד
6	הַיּוֹם שִׁשָּׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר	יְסוֹד שֶׁבְּחֶסֶד
7	הַיּוֹם שִׁבְעָה יָמִים, שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד. לָעֹמֶר	מַלְכוּת שֶׁבְּחֶסֶד
8	הַיּוֹם שְׁמוֹנָה יָמִים, שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד וְיוֹם אֶחָד. לָעֹמֶר	חֶסֶד שֶׁבִּגְבוּרָה
9	הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁעָה יָמִים, שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד וּשְׁנֵי יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	גְּבוּרָה שֶׁבִּגְבוּרָה
10	הַיּוֹם עֲשָׂרָה יָמִים, שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד וּשְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	תִּפְאֶרֶת שֶׁבִּגְבוּרָה
11	הַיּוֹם אַחַד עָשָׂר יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד וְאַרְבָּעָה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	נֶצַח שֶׁבִּגְבוּרָה
12	הַיּוֹם שְׁנֵים עָשָׂר יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד וַחֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	הוֹד שֶׁבִּגְבוּרָה
13	הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשָׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד וְשִׁשָּׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	יְסוֹד שֶׁבִּגְבוּרָה
14	הַיּוֹם אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת. לָעֹמֶר	מַלְכוּת שֶׁבִּגְבוּרָה
15	הַיּוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת וְיוֹם אֶחָד. לָעֹמֶר	חֶסֶד שֶׁבְּתִפְאֶרֶת
16	הַיּוֹם שִׁשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁנֵי יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	גְּבוּרָה שֶׁבְּתִפְאֶרֶת
17	הַיּוֹם שִׁבְעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	תִּפְאֶרֶת שֶׁבְּתִפְאֶרֶת
18	הַיּוֹם שְׁמוֹנָה עָשָׂר יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת וְאַרְבָּעָה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	נֶצַח שֶׁבְּתִפְאֶרֶת
19	הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת וַחֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	הוֹד שֶׁבְּתִפְאֶרֶת
20	הַיּוֹם עֶשְׂרִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי שָׁבוּעוֹת וְשִׁשָּׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	יְסוֹד שֶׁבְּתִפְאֶרֶת
21	הַיּוֹם אֶחָד וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת. לָעֹמֶר	מַלְכוּת שֶׁבְּתִפְאֶרֶת
22	הַיּוֹם שְׁנַיִם וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְיוֹם אֶחָד. לָעֹמֶר	חֶסֶד שֶׁבְּנֶצַח
23	הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשָׁה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁנֵי יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	גְּבוּרָה שֶׁבְּנֶצַח
24	הַיּוֹם אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	תִּפְאֶרֶת שֶׁבְּנֶצַח
25	הַיּוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְאַרְבָּעָה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	נֶצַח שֶׁבְּנֶצַח
26	הַיּוֹם שִׁשָּׁה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וַחֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	הוֹד שֶׁבְּנֶצַח
27	הַיּוֹם שִׁבְעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְשִׁשָּׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	יְסוֹד שֶׁבְּנֶצַח
28	הַיּוֹם שְׁמוֹנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם אַרְבָּעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת. לָעֹמֶר	מַלְכוּת שֶׁבְּנֶצַח
29	הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם אַרְבָּעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְיוֹם אֶחָד. לָעֹמֶר	חֶסֶד שֶׁבְּהוֹד
30	הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם אַרְבָּעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁנֵי יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	גְּבוּרָה שֶׁבְּהוֹד
31	הַיּוֹם אֶחָד וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם אַרְבָּעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	תִּפְאֶרֶת שֶׁבְּהוֹד
32	הַיּוֹם שְׁנַיִם וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם אַרְבָּעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְאַרְבָּעָה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	נֶצַח שֶׁבְּהוֹד
33	הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשָׁה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם אַרְבָּעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת וַחֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	הוֹד שֶׁבְּהוֹד
34	הַיּוֹם אַרְבָּעָה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם אַרְבָּעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְשִׁשָּׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	יְסוֹד שֶׁבְּהוֹד
35	הַיּוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם חֲמִשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת. לָעֹמֶר	מַלְכוּת שֶׁבְּהוֹד
36	הַיּוֹם שִׁשָּׁה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם חֲמִשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְיוֹם אֶחָד. לָעֹמֶר	חֶסֶד שֶׁבְּיְסוֹד
37	הַיּוֹם שִׁבְעָה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם חֲמִשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁנֵי יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	גְּבוּרָה שֶׁבְּיְסוֹד
38	הַיּוֹם שְׁמוֹנָה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם חֲמִשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	תִּפְאֶרֶת שֶׁבְּיְסוֹד
39	הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁעָה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם חֲמִשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְאַרְבָּעָה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	נֶצַח שֶׁבְּיְסוֹד
40	הַיּוֹם אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם חֲמִשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וַחֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	הוֹד שֶׁבְּיְסוֹד
41	הַיּוֹם אֶחָד וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם חֲמִשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְשִׁשָּׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	יְסוֹד שֶׁבְּיְסוֹד
42	הַיּוֹם שְׁנַיִם וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שִׁשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת. לָעֹמֶר	מַלְכוּת שֶׁבְּיְסוֹד
43	הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשָׁה וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שִׁשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְיוֹם אֶחָד. לָעֹמֶר	חֶסֶד שֶׁבְּמַלְכוּת
44	הַיּוֹם אַרְבָּעָה וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שִׁשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁנֵי יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	גְּבוּרָה שֶׁבְּמַלְכוּת
45	הַיּוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שִׁשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	תִּפְאֶרֶת שֶׁבְּמַלְכוּת
46	הַיּוֹם שִׁשָּׁה וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שִׁשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְאַרְבָּעָה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	נֶצַח שֶׁבְּמַלְכוּת
47	הַיּוֹם שִׁבְעָה וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שִׁשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וַחֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	הוֹד שֶׁבְּמַלְכוּת
48	הַיּוֹם שְׁמוֹנָה וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שִׁשָּׁה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְשִׁשָּׁה יָמִים. לָעֹמֶר	יְסוֹד שֶׁבְּמַלְכוּת
49	הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁעָה וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, שֶׁהֵם שִׁבְעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת. לָעֹמֶר	מַלְכוּת שֶׁבְּמַלְכוּת

ADDENDUM B

II. Our Theory — Elyse Fishman, Sandy Levine (Kinneret Shiryon)

A. The theory
   1. Omer
   2. Wilderness and Adolescence
   3. Counting (Sefirat haOmer)

B. Haftarot Cycle
   1. Descriptions
   2. Selected verses

C. The new blessing

D. Weekly Rituals

E. Shabbat Rituals

F. Other Activities (youth group)

A. The Theory:

When our ancestors left Egypt, they left a slavery. In what sense were they slaves? They had no freedom -- no freedom to question, no freedom to act, no freedom to choose. Their lives were dictated by the whims of Pharoah and his officers. In a sense, the Israelites were children, capable only of responding to the commands of their surrogate parent, Pharoah. If they obeyed, they were rewarded; if they disobeyed, they were punished. At the time of Moses, Pharoah was a harsh parent, and his children suffered.

Most parents are not harsh, and most children do not auffer. The "slavery" of childhood is not an evil one; it is a necessary and positive stage in life. Yet, all children grow. The Israelites grew and wanted to leave Pharoah.Even so, there were some who wanted to remain under Pharoah's protection and guidance, who needed him. This made it more difficult for Pharoah to hear the cries of his children who had grown. He was not a model father, and no tragedy or disaster could convince him to give his children their freedom. Finally, the children were released; and although Pharoah pursued them, the Israelites gained their freedom.

How were they free? They left their childhood behind. They grew beyond the passive behavior of childhood, beyond the simple imposed discipline of reward and punishment directed by a parent. They began to assert their identity; they began to think for themselves. Moses led them to food and water -- but they were free!

...Except that their freedom was partial. They could bicker among themselves, say whatever they pleased -- but the Israelites were not ready to act for themselves. The Israelites had overnite become teenagers, adolescents searching for self-expression, for personal awareness, for original thoughts and deeds -- adolescents who were dependent upon the parental love and guidance of Moses and Miriam. The Israelites left their childhood in Egypt and entered the wilderness of adolescence. They had gained the freedom to think and were free from responsibility; they were not ready for the responsibilities inherent in the freedom to act.

And then came the turning point in the life of the Israelites. Moses went up the mountain to speak to God, and left them in the hands of a babysitter, Aaron. They took advantage of him. This was the moment of their rebellion. With the exception of minor arguments with Moses, the Israelites had never

really challenged Moses' or God's authority. At last, they were about to perform with action: to express their personal autonomy. They built the golden calf.

Moses returned from the Sinai talks, and discovered that his children had disobeyed one of his most important rules. They had acted irresponsibily and childishly; Moses punished them by breaking the tablets, which were to have been their new privilieges.

Yet, the people bore the punishment. Their rebellion was not a rebellion against rules or obligations; it was a rebellion of self-expression, a chance to say: this is me, even if I'm wrong, I'm demanding the right to express myself. And I'm willing to accept the consequences.

Each of us, as adolescents, probably committed at least one act which infuriated our parents to the point where we were sure we would never regain their trust -- or our freedom. If we recall, our parents acted first with anger, and then slowly with an acceptance of our rebellion. They understood our rebellion to be an important stage in our growth toward adulthood. In each of our lives, we committed the rebellious act -- and then took responsibility for it. We acknowledged our actions and bore their consequences. At that moment, we began to leave our adolescence behind. We thought for ourselves, acted for ourselves, and were responsible for ourselves. We accepted the responsibility of the freedom to act.

The Israelites grew past the golden calf incident. They left behind their adolescence and were given the commandments of God. Physically, they moved from one campsite to Mount Horeb; psychologically, they ascended from freedom of thought to freedom of action. The Israelites became a chosen people because they chose to be responsible, to guard God's laws, to act as one community. And the Israelites needed their childhood and their adolescence in order to grow into adulthood.

Passover recounts the Exodus; we recall our slavery and childhood. On Shavuoth we relive the revelation of adulthood, the receipt from God of responsibility, love and freedom. How do we remind ourselves of our time in the wilderness, of our adolescence? How do we, reform Jews, transform the period of the <u>omer</u> into a time of recollection and growth?

1. The <u>omer</u>: we might interpret the <u>omer</u> as a "piling up", a "heaping" of experiences. During the year, seeds were planted; the <u>omer</u> is the harvesting of our experiences. The <u>omer</u> is our adolescence.

2. The Biblical journey through the wilderness parallels the human growth through adolescence. Just as we must relive the Exodus -- our childhood -- so we need to recall our wilderness period, in order that we may never return, but may always be prepared for Shavuoth, for revelation.

3. The counting of the <u>omer</u> may be viewed in four ways. First, we must sanctify our days. As we understand life to be holy, we grow as full humans, in partnership with God. Second, we must make our days count (sic); our time must be as meaningful as possible. These two interpretations are meant to help us reflect on the quality of our lives, in much the same way that an adolescent questions the nature of his/her life.

Most of us could hardly wait to leave our adolescence behind. The <u>omer</u> is a

riod of anticipation. The mystics anticipated the wedding between Israel and
d on Shavuoth; the Israelites anticipated the harvest of Shavuoth; we anticipate
r future as adults in partnership with God. Therefore, the third interpretation
f the counting of the omer is a sense of urgency and anticipation: we can hardly
it for the day to arrive!

. Counting of the omer is sefirat ha-omer (ספירת העומר). In kabbalah,
his term has special significance. The sefirot are the emanations of God, reaching
nto a partnership with the human. For the mystic, the counting of the omer is as
portant as the recitation of the Shmoneh Esrai. During the omer the mystic
repares to receive God's gift of Torah; God will descend through the sefirot
d reveal Himself to the mystic, through Torah.

The reform Jew may view the omer as a period of reflection: it is a time
r growth: as a member of the family, as a member of the congregation, as a
mber of your community, as a member of Klal Yisrael. We hope that the following
activities and rituals will enable each of us to grow as a person and as a
w during the omer period.