



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Omer 5781:

Introduction to the Omer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

The period of the “Counting of the Omer” extends from the eve of the second day of Passover, up to the holiday of Shavuot, the “Feast of Weeks”. In total, there are fifty days, but the intermediate days – between the first day of Passover and Shavuot – are forty-nine (see Deut. 16:9-12 and Lev. 23:15-18). The number forty-nine is significant, as indicated in these biblical passages, as it is the square of seven; it is made up of seven days of the week over seven weeks.

The Torah links Passover and Shavuot, as well as the time between them, to the seasons of the year and their implication for crops growing then. The Sages, much later, linked the Exodus from Egypt to the Giving of Torah to the beginning and end of this period of time. Especially in our diaspora, when many (most) Jews no longer were farmers, the agricultural significance diminished before the “historical”.

In the mind of the Sages, the night of the Passover – the eve of the Exodus – was one of miracles and wonders. It was the night of the Tenth Plague, a night of watching, of anticipation, of danger, and of hope. That plague, in contrast with all the others, was brought about through God’s direct action: “For that night I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I YHVH” (Ex. 12:12). That it was God alone who enacted this plague is given a finer point in the Passover Haggadah: “I will go through the land of Egypt: I, and not an angel; I, and not a *seraph*; I, and not an emissary; I am the One, alone, and no other”.

The people in Egypt, even sequestered in their houses, had a direct experience of God’s presence that night. Again, the Haggadah teaches that the “great wonders” of Deut. 26:8 were “a revelation of Shekhinah/God’s Presence”. What an amazing experience it must have been! But, how confusing, as well. The people were slow to believe Moses, and were not very trusting to the end. Yet, despite their doubts, and despite how deeply mired in the ways of Egypt the people were, God offered them a glimpse, a direct perception of Divinity.

And, by the time they reached the Sea, it was all gone: “Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?’” (Ex. 14:12). It was not really their fault. They were hardly prepared to trust God – or Moses – and needed time and preparation to do so willingly, and properly.

This is the work that they did in the seven weeks journey from Egypt to Sinai. Each of the days was necessary for them to climb from the depths of doubt and uncertainty about what they had witnessed in Egypt, so that they would be able to stand before God to receive Torah. This period of preparation, of intense spiritual work, led our mystics to give each day a particular valence, a way in to experiencing God in our lives, and expressing our desire to live in godly ways.

These mystics sensed that in God’s desire to become manifest in the world, and for the world to be sustainable, various qualities needed to be expressed. In a general sense, they identified seven particular qualities – what are called the seven lower sephirot, or *middot*. In Hebrew they are called: *Chesed*, *Gevurah*, *Tiferet*, *Netzach*, *Hod*, *Yesod* and *Malkhut*; we might call them loving connection, delimiting wise boundaries, balanced self, energetic response/persistence, gratitude, righteousness, and mindful speech). When we investigate how God is present in the world – and in the US – in these ways, we are more able to enact those divine qualities in our daily behavior. Doing so also shapes our consciousness, so that we perceive God even more powerfully in our lives.

The mystics understood, as well, that these *middot* are not completely separate from one another. All are present in one another. They make this clear through the seven weeks of the Omer by associating each week with one *middah*, and each day of the week with each one of the *middot*. You can think of it as a grid, like this:



	<i>Chesed</i>	<i>Gevurah</i>	<i>Tiferet</i>	<i>Netzach</i>	<i>Hod</i>	<i>Yesod</i>	<i>Malkhut</i>
1. <i>Chesed</i>							
2. <i>Gevurah</i>							
3. <i>Tiferet</i>							
4. <i>Netzach</i>							
5. <i>Hod</i>							
6. <i>Yesod</i>							
7. <i>Malkhut</i>							

Each row is one week; the second night of Passover begins the week of *Chesed*. Each day, in turn connects *Chesed* to one of the other seven *middot*: *Chesed* and *Chesed*; *Chesed* and *Gevurah*; *Chesed* and *Tiferet*, etc. Each day, then, we can consider how God manifests in our lives, in our connections with others, in our behavior and our thoughts, and in the world with these admixtures of qualities. The *middah* of each week is the predominant quality, the other modifying it slightly. You might think of it this way: the dominant quality is where we direct our intention, and the sub-quality is how we enact it in different situations. So, during the first week, our intention is to cultivate loving connection: each day during that week, we enact that love in different ways: through deep love, wise boundaries, inner balance, etc. In this manner, even though all of the *middot* will be associated with each other, the particular “flavor” of combination will be different from day to day, and from week to week.



In our practice together during this Omer period, we will offer a weekly introduction to each predominant *middah*, and invite you to practice with it. Consider how you understand it yourself; how you experience it in your body, your emotions, your thoughts, and your soul. Reflect on how it shows up in different ways, and how the recombination each day offers a new insight, and a new opportunity for practice.

The Counting of the Omer begins on Sunday night, March 28 with our focus on the first *middah* of *Chesed*, loving connection, this time modified by the *middah* of *Chesed*! So, you can begin practicing with the question: What is the quality of love that I love the most? How does this love manifest in me, in my interactions, in the world? How might I connect even more deeply with the love already present in my heart, mind, body and soul? How might my desire to connect with others be the most effective expression of love, the most loving expression of love?

