

Dear Chavraya,

A few weeks ago, when the growing season seemed much further away than it does now, a number of us met in the shtibl with farmer Jim of Allendale Farm. From the nearby fields of Allendale, will come the produce for the Nehar Shalom Community Supported Agriculture group. In the course of sharing with us information about the farm and about his life as a farmer, Jim's excitement reminded us of the gift of spiritual amazement that accompanies the more tangible gifts of earth and sun and rain. Revealing the un-jaded nature of his own soul, he spoke of the wonder that he feels every year when the first green shoots appear in the freshly plowed earth only days after planting.

Our agrarian ancestors in the land of Israel knew that same excitement and awe. On the evening of the second day of Pesach, the first fruits of the first grain harvest would be cut with great ceremony and brought to the Temple as an offering. Immediately, the counting of days began until the next harvest. For seven weeks, every day was counted until the new crop was ready for harvest. From the appearance of the first green shoots, anticipation would build, each day's growth noticed and celebrated. This is the Biblical basis for *S'firat Ha'omer/Counting of the Omer*. *Omer* means *sheaf*, referring to the first sheaf of grain. To the agricultural basis for counting seven weeks of days, the rabbis superimposed another dimension, counting the days from Pesach to Shavuus, from Egypt to Sinai, from liberation to receiving the Torah, sowing seeds of meaning by giving purpose to our freedom.

The purpose of counting each day is to make each day count. So the psalmist sings in Psalm 90: *Teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom*. On a beautiful spring day, when the first green shoots appear, it is easy to count and to be aware of meaning. On a cloudy day it can be more difficult, when seeds may be washed away on life's torrent. Whether of sun or cloud, each day counts in the strand of our days. Sometimes we have to search harder for a day's meaning, or at least for a reason to count it. Meaning emerges, sometimes in the small details, sometimes in the big picture. Sometimes in sound and sometimes in silence, we find our way to the innermost place of meaning.

As from the Torah we learn to count days, so the ancient scribes who wrote the Torah's words counted each of those words, and every letter of those words, and every verse filled by those words. The word for scribe, *sofer*, is formed of the same root, *sapar*, as the word to count, and of the word to tell. In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Sh'mini*, we come to the very middle of the Torah, in words and in letters. Taken together, the last word of the first half of the Torah and the first word of the second half of the Torah form the phrase, *darosh darash/he (Moses) diligently searched*. The true middle of the Torah is the silent space between these words of searching. Sometimes we have to search more carefully for meaning that eludes. In counting the days toward the harvest of earth and of life, we come to a place of quietude in which to pause just long enough to see the green shoots of hope and to be amazed.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor