

Dear Chavraya,

It is easy to lose track of the days during this time. On more than one occasion recently, someone at the other end of the phone, with some distance in their voice, as though trying to recall an elusive word or name, has quietly said, "what day is today?" Our eyes are blurry from the screen, our bodies weary from a certain intensity, many of us feeling a general fatigue from the more sedentary ways of working and being, missing even the ordinary rhythms of day to day travel for meetings, appointments, shopping. Days do flow together, one seeming to merge into the next without the usual demarcations in time that are so much part of our lives. Shabbos stands out as the day around which all others turn, the week coming home to its source, carrying us on its flow, days emerging again with wine, sweet spices, candle-light and song, one week closer to the day that is all Shabbos.

We are living in indeterminate time, and that becomes its own teaching, its own opportunity to learn lessons for living in all time. Though we tend to delude ourselves, perhaps of necessity, all time is indeterminate. For all of our dreaming and planning, we don't know what will be, not for tomorrow and not for the days and years to come. We don't know when the world shall finally emerge from historic time and the plagues of conflict, strife, and violence. There is a Yiddish saying often said with a sigh, a saying that I hear in my Bobi's voice, one that I generally find off putting, reflecting a theology that is not mine, *men tracht un got lacht/people plan and God laughs*. As with so much else, I am hearing even that differently through the lens of these days, hearing the sigh as God's, the Holy One wiping away a tear for the delusions that preclude our seeing the deeper meaning of time and the preciousness of each day.

I have been thinking about what it means to make our way through indeterminate time, not knowing when the danger from the virus will lift, when we shall return to life as we have known it, or if we shall, or with what adjustments. Even as we lose track of days, I came to think of what it means to count days in indeterminate time. Thinking specifically about this time, I wrote in a note to myself, "finding meaning / counting days in (an) indeterminate time. After reflecting on how a small word influences overarching meaning, I put the little word "an" in parentheses, and then I removed it all together. I realized that the indirect article suggested that we are only now living in indeterminate time. In truth, this period of time is helping us to realize that all time is indeterminate.

It is the lesson of counting the *Omer*, whose *mitzvah* is found in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Emor* (Lev. 21:1-24:23). In the midst of the Torah's primary enumeration of the festivals of the Jewish year, we are told to count every day *from the day after that Shabbat/u'sfartem lachem mi'macharat ha'shabbat*. It is about the counting of the *omer*, counting every day from the second day of Pesach until Shavuuous, which comes on the fiftieth day after seven complete weeks of counting. An *omer* is a measure of grain, referring in the Torah here to the first fruits of the first grain harvest at Pesach to be brought as an offering, as the first fruits are to be brought on each of the three harvest festivals, Pesach, Shavuuous, and Sukkos. The ambiguity is tantalizing. When is that Shabbat, the day after

which we are to begin counting? If we had only the Torah to go by, how would we know to begin counting, as we do, on the second night of Pesach?

This is the stuff of a major debate in Mishnaic times prior to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 of this era. It was not an academic debate, not an opportunity to showcase religious casuistry. It marked a major conflict of ideas and values between two religious and in effect political parties, the rabbis/Pharisees and the priests/Sadducees. Hanging in the balance was nothing less than our ability to survive as a people in the absence of Temple and Land, and, in surviving, the very nature of our being and calling as a people. The Pharisees were the rabbis, inheritors of the prophetic tradition, teachers who sought meaning between the lines and words of the written Torah, who in response to the written word developed the tradition of Oral Torah, the people-empowering dialectic of inquiry, debate, and renewal. The Sadducees were strict constructionists, conservative in outlook and practice. As such, they rejected the Oral Torah and rabbinic innovation. In fairness, they undoubtedly loved the Torah no less than the Pharisees, seeking to conserve and protect it. Representing the wealthier classes, they were the priests, whose role and status depended on the Temple cult.

As for when to begin counting the days from Pesach to Shavuot, it was very clear for the Sadducees. Adhering to the plain meaning of the written word, Shabbat had to refer to the weekly Shabbat, specifically the Shabbat that comes during Pesach, the day after being Sunday. On the fiftieth day, Shavuot, therefore, would always be on a Sunday. The rabbis were concerned with more than determining a date on the calendar, emphasizing the meaning and impact of the calendar on life. As textual activists, identifying a holiday of ambiguous date and lacking apparent theme, and a seminal event without a holiday to celebrate it, they sought to connect Shavuot with the giving of Torah. Of historic consequence, through a careful reading of the time it took for the people of Israel to arrive at Sinai, they showed that by counting from the second day of Pesach, Shavuot would fall on the sixth of the month of Sivan. Shabbat, therefore, had to refer to the first day of Pesach. By linking Sinai to Shavuot, the rabbis insured the portability of Torah and the unfolding of revelation through time and space. Beyond the bringing of first fruits to the temple, we would not be dependent on one place for our survival as a people, finding meaning and purpose and a way of serving God through learning and prayer in the absence of the Temple. Pointing the way to Sinai wherever our journey would take us, the rabbis did something more. They showed us the very way of getting there, through boldly engaging and interpreting Torah.

The period of the Omer as presented in the Torah is a reflection of indeterminate time. The starting point of our counting is unclear and the destination toward which we are counting is equally unclear. The rabbis sought to give meaning to our counting, guiding us on the path to Sinai and Torah. In the customs that have developed to frame our counting, values and qualities are given to each week and to each day, giving us pause in which to reflect and look within ourselves. As a guide to counting beyond the days of the Omer, recognizing the indeterminate nature of all time, the Psalmist sings in Psalm 90, *Teach us to*

number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom/limnot y'meinu ken hoda, v'navi l'av chochmah. In counting the days of the Omer, we learn to count each day to make each count. It is the Jewish way to give greater emphasis to the journey than the destination. Each day becomes a step in time toward the fulfillment of all time, the unfolding of days and weeks to and from Shabbos until we come to the *day that is all Shabbos/yom she'kulo Shabbos.*

Reminding us of time's turning, there is a beautiful phrase in *Parashat Emor*, that speaks to the shaping of time from week to week, that it not be felt as indeterminate, referring to the bread offerings for each Shabbos, *b'yom ha'shabbat b'yom ha'shabbat/from Shabbos day to Shabbos day*, and so the days and the weeks turn with purpose, the destination no less real for our not knowing of when we shall arrive.

Though bleary at times in spirit and sight, the days seeming to merge one to another, may we draw from this time that seems indeterminate the wisdom that comes in learning to number our days, to see the meaning and the possibility in each one. So we give shape to time as the sculptor to wood and stone, enriching our own lives and helping to bring the world one day closer, one week closer, one Shabbos closer to the day that is all Shabbos.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor