“And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the day of rest, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the waving; seven weeks shall there be complete; even unto the morrow after the seventh week shall ye number fifty days; and ye shall present a new meal-offering unto the LORD.” (Leviticus 23.15-16)

On the second night of Passover in the Diaspora, during the second seder, we begin the counting of the Omer. 49 days that lead us into the festival of the giving of the Torah: Shavuot. In the days of the Temple in Jerusalem, these were the days in which the offering of barley was elevated, hence allowing people to profit and enjoy from that year’s barley harvest. Today, after the Arvit service, we count each day, one by one. Such a strange custom, to count each day individually and nothing else! What meaning does this custom have today?

On Pesach, we celebrate around a table filled with flavors, colors, and hints to the possibility of finding us, the freedom to study and live our Judaism with pride. We celebrate the strength and courage of our grandparents and great-grandparents, who in every generation left their houses of bondage to seek lands of peace and freedom. Stories, songs, dishes, reflect the lives of these wandering Jews that bequeathed us the search for wisdom and a free soul.

Yet, this is not enough. The heritage, the story and the tradition are not sufficient; one must acquire it, appropriate it, reconstruct it, resignify it and make it one’s own. What is needed is a creation anew, a new row of bricks in the construction of our shared meanings.

Pesach is the starting point. It is not enough with being free, but it is necessary to know why we are free. This is Shavuot. Acquiring a commitment with values and virtues according to which we want to live and deepen our lives. One of the customs during the counting of the Omer is to study each week one of the chapters of Pirke Avot – “The Sayings of the Fathers” – since it is an anthology of values and virtues that help us to be human and live in community and build a more just, kind and generous society.

7 whole weeks
There is an additional message hidden in this counting, and it is that as we count each of the days, the days of the lives of every one are counted. Each day that begins holds a message to be discovered and learned, it contains the chance for growth, for collaboration, for a deep hug or even a deeper word. It contains the possibility of loving, learning, deepening, and what was not done, will probably not get done. To count the days, one by one, reminds us of the unique, special and irreplaceable nature of each of the days of our lives. These seven whole weeks are an extract of all the days of our lives. What really matters is to live mindfully of the worth of every moment.

Legends and stories that made history
Many stories and legends did not really happen in the way that popular memory and texts remember them, but rather from a historical kernel of truth there were rewritten to shock, educate and instruct those who heard it or read it. The memory of our people remembers that Rabbi Akiva, who could not read, fell in love with the daughter of a very powerful man, and, in order to marry her, at the age of forty he started to study and became a great teacher. He had many students who started to die during the counting of the Omer due to a strange epidemic. Our Sages taught: “They died because they did not respect one another.” (Bavli Yevamot 64) One can picture the academic jealousies, the cruel competition, the lack of generosity, individualism, and inflated egos. What could be worse for a teacher or a parent than this? To realize that one did not successfully instill in one’s students or children the proper values, which are more important than any other lesson? It is for this reason that during the counting of the Omer, we observe some mourning customs: weddings are not allowed, haircuts and shaving are foregone, and one abstains from joyful activities. Nevertheless, one of the disciples of Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, declared as a standard among his students: “Anan chavivutah talia” – “we depend on our friendship”. Thus, the student was able to repair and complete what his master could not do: to sow a sincere friendship among colleagues and peers.

We keep the mourning customs because, even hundreds of years later, we are still unable to get along, to keep us company and to share; we are incapable of being coherent in what we ask of others and what we, ourselves, do. Before he died, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, asked his students that the day of his passing would be remembered with joy, with bonfires, torches and dancing, because there is still hope to achieve this elusive unity. Rabbi Shimon left this world, on the thirty third day of the counting of the Omer, LaG baOmer. This is why on this day we suspend the mourning customs, and seek inspiration around bonfires, family barbecues, to sow in our hearts the seeds of the necessary virtues to grow and deepen our qualities as human beings.

LaG Baomer
This coming Wednesday night we will count the thirty third day in our counting. May we gather round the fire, alone or surrounded by family, with family and friends, to look at one another through the many colors of the flames, or maybe just a candle, or the embers of a yummy barbecue, or a bonfire that has remained in our memory (arousing love, friendship, the dreams from summer camp of years gone by. To see each other, and maybe by this point our eyes are wet... So much the better, with tears of joy one can see clearer. And after this deep gaze to commit ourselvess to living deeper, more sensible, more generous and less violent lives. Then to commit to them and to be able to say that it is better to live depending on our friendship, our love, and our shared work. May we work for better times, full of light.

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