

*The month leading up to the conference overlaps with the period in which Jews traditionally count the Omer. This 20-30 minute text explains what the Omer is and links the counting of the Omer to reflection and preparation. Bringing these texts to the professional staff or education committees at your synagogue can help your congregational team reflect on the direction your congregation's education program(s) have taken in recent years.*

## Counting the Omer

Anthropologists have noted that good ritual is one that offers a very specific container, yet leaves a lot of room for varied interpretation. An excellent example is the ritual of counting the *Omer* (which, in the Bible, is either a sheaf or a measure of grain).

### **The ritual of counting the Omer (Leviticus 23:10 & 16) is a good example:**

When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first sheaf of your harvest to the priest. ... You must count until the day after the seventh week — fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Lord.

### **After the Temple was destroyed, the counting of the Omer came to be seen as a way of ...**

#### Connecting the freedom of the exodus to the responsibility of receiving the Torah:

The seven weeks of counting the Omer spans the 49 days between the second day of Passover and the beginning of Shavuot. Thus, *S'firat HaOmer* links the Exodus from Egypt with the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

Rabbi Daniel Syme, ReformJudaism.org

#### Cultivating gratitude:

Affluence has the most pernicious effect on a person's character, causing one to be haughty and arrogant... This can be avoided if a person acknowledges the Divine source of wealth. With the onset of the barley harvest, before beholding the abundant produce in the storehouses and on the field, man must recognize that his strength is illusory, for 'all is vanity' (Ecclesiastes 3:19). Thus God has commanded us to offer up the earliest product of the harvest presenting the priest one *omer* as a token of gratitude.

Rabbi Moshe Alshikh (16<sup>th</sup> Century Safed)

### Developing spiritually

In the hands of Kabbalists and Hasidim [of the early modern era], Counting the Omer becomes a psychological journey, an act of self-transformation, a tool of individual redemption. The Kabbalists teach us that through the contemplation of the moral values of the God's attributes during the Omer, we achieve personal and moral growth. As we approach Shavuot, we reach toward our best selves.

Rabbi Jane Rachel Litman

As we prepare for the June 11 conference, "Ascending the Mountain of Innovation," I would like us to challenge ourselves to think about the changes we have already made in educating our children with these different interpretations in mind.

**How has our journey been like the journey from the Exodus to Sinai?**

**What challenges do we face as we attempt to reach for our congregation's "best self" in the process of transforming religious education? What accomplishments do you want to celebrate?**