

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective  
An Illustration of *Kiddush Levanah*  
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*Seder Birkat Hamazon* (Mannheim, 1736)

Scribe: Simhah Pihem

ms. 8230

The middle of this week's parashah (Lev. 23) details the cycle of the Jewish holidays. Each holiday is listed according to its month and its day. The months of the Hebrew calendar are strictly lunar, from new moon to new moon. *Kiddush Levanah*, a selection of prayers in honor of the new moon, is traditionally recited at the end of the first or second shabbat of each month.

The charming watercolor illustration of *Kiddush Levanah* above accompanies the text for this short service. It was included in an 18th century handwritten and hand-painted *Seder Birkat Hamazon* (or "bentsher," as we often refer to these prayer booklets today); this decorated volume was created for a woman named Bella from Frankfurt. The inclusion of this monthly prayer in this short compendium along with the daily prayers of the Grace after Meals and the Shema recited at bedtime speaks to a symbolic significance of the moon: it waxes and wanes mirroring the fate of the Jewish nation throughout history.

Through *Kiddush Levanah*, as with reciting this chapter of parashat Emor, we reaffirm our commitment to sanctifying time and celebrating the Jewish holidays that are determined by the lunar calendar.

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TORAH FROM JTS



Emor 5780

אמר תש"ף



## Opportunities in Jewish Time

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I had to think twice about what day it was today. In fact, since we've been sheltering at home, there have been many days when I have had to think twice. Like most families with children, I have our daily schedule posted prominently in our kitchen to add some much-needed structure to this time, but still, the days seem to stretch on. When Friday rolls around, though, there is a welcome interruption to our normal rhythm as we begin our Shabbat preparations. Despite the benefits of our carefully orchestrated routine, and there are many, Shabbat offers us a 25-hour window to think, do, and be differently than the rest of the week.

In many ways, this is one of the key messages of Parashat Emor.

Emor falls in the midst of the Holiness Code, the section in Vayikra that describes the ways in which B'nei Yisrael are to sanctify themselves and live holy lives. Among its many discussions, Emor details the contours of the Jewish calendar. "Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: These are My fixed times, the fixed times of the LORD, which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions" (Lev. 23:2). What follows is a list of key dates in the Jewish year: Shabbat every week and festivals throughout the months.

It is only now, in these uncertain times with countless anxieties and unknowns, that I have come to fully appreciate this structure that Judaism imposes. The rhythms and rituals of Emor pull us away from the "normalcy" of our everyday and mandate that we, consciously and constructively, create holiness in time. It is deceptively easy to get consumed by the

happenings, both significant and trivial, of our individual lives. Emor, however, reminds us that we are part of something greater—an unfolding story, an historical past, and a religious tradition that extends to our current moment and far into the future. As we are all pushing a collective pause button, these messages certainly have new resonance: *How will we be in this moment? How will we infuse these times with the holiness described in Sefer Vayikra? How will the lessons learned promote a more just and promising future?*

Also discussed in our parashah is the counting the Omer (of which we are currently in the midst), the daily marking of the seven weeks between the holidays of Pesah and Shavuot. The Torah outlines,

“Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first sheaf [Heb: *omer*] of your harvest to the priest. . . . And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—the day after the sabbath—you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete.” (Lev. 23:10, 15)

This year, the ritual of counting and charting a journey from oppression to freedom feels particularly appropriate, and the Jewish practice, here too, has powerful tools and traditions upon which we can draw. The Omer is a strange time: In the rabbinic period, it is described as a time of tremendous grief when scores of Rabbi Akiva’s students died (BT Yevamot 62b). In turn, the Omer period is observed by enacting a number of semi-mourning practices: no haircuts, no shaving, no musical performances, and no weddings. Still, despite these observances, Shavuot is on the horizon. There is a hopefulness to our counting. How, though, do we do this? How do we manage to safely and meaningfully travel between Pesah and Shavuot? How do we navigate the difficulties of the journey and arrive at our destination not only intact but better? Changed?

In her recent *New York Times* op-ed, Emily Esfahani Smith offers Viktor Frankl’s theory of “tragic optimism” as a possible path forward. Tragic optimism is the “ability to maintain hope and find meaning in life despite its inescapable pain, loss and suffering.” Individuals who embrace this

“experience despair and stress, and acknowledge the horror of what’s happening. But even in the darkest of places, they see glimmers of light, and this ultimately sustains them.” She continues to explain that “even more than helping them cope, adopting the spirit of tragic optimism enables people to actually grow through adversity.” This is no easy task, and some of us are wired to do this better than others. Still, the Omer offers an opportunity to embrace this stance and cultivate this disposition: In the midst of it all, can we hold onto the hope that Shavuot is coming? In addition to the suffering, can this time also serve as a “time of redemptive meaning and hope?”

Preceding our parashah is further support for this understanding of Jewish time. In Sefer Shemot, Parashat Bo, the very first mitzvah is given to B’nei Yisrael: the mitzvah of Rosh Hodesh (Exod. 12:1-2). Setting Rosh Hodesh and the Jewish calendar becomes the first mitzvah of a free people. This required that they be in tune to the natural rhythms of the world around them, notice shifts in nature, and in the waxing and waning of the moon. With that mitzvah, they embraced both the world in which they lived and elevated it to a sacred purpose. Similarly, in the unprecedented moment through which we are living, how can the structure and spirit of our calendar allow us to find hope, comfort, and meaning?

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