

beautiful narrative form in the Book of Ruth, read on the upcoming holiday of Shavuot. But Ruth is the exception; she is rescued from her destitute state by Boaz, the owner of the field where she gleans, who marries her. What of all those who remained gleaners—whose survival depended on the daily toil of gathering other people’s leftovers?

Jean-François Millet cast an unexpected light on these disadvantaged members of society in this painting. A work of social critique, *The Gleaners* depicts three poor women, bent over, gathering meager scraps of wheat, against the backdrop of an abundant harvest. The isolated needy are foregrounded and painted in great detail, in contrast to the impressionistic and distant background of community and plenty—forcing the privileged viewer to notice them. Millet painted *The Gleaners* on a large canvas (33” x 44”)—a size normally reserved for grand subjects such as religion—exacerbating the discomfort of his upper-class audience. The painting sold for far less than Millet’s asking price. It wasn’t until years after Millet’s death that the artistry and social criticism of *The Gleaners* was finally truly appreciated.

The Torah pushes the financially secure to be aware of those on the margins—to feel a responsibility to provide a portion for them. Millet takes it a step further, raising the question of whether their allotment is sufficient to lead a life of dignity. Who are our gleaners? Who is making sure that the privileged of our time truly see them? Is our society brave enough to ask itself whether leftover scraps are really enough?



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TORAH FROM JTS



Shavuot 5781

שבועות תשפ"א



Counting the Moments

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Among the many ways that the pandemic has impacted us this past year has been our relationship to the passage of time. On the one hand, time felt like a blur, with one day bleeding into another. Save for Shabbat, each day looked like the day before and the day after. We wore the same clothes and interacted face-to-face with the same few people in our pods. We sharply curtailed, cancelled, or postponed the life-cycle celebrations, sporting events, live performances, and travel that would normally punctuate our year. Our lives constricted dramatically, as did our hopes and dreams, and even if we were fortunate enough not to suffer illness, death, or job loss, many of us experienced a sense of monotony or diminishment.

On the other hand, in some ways, our relationship to time’s passage was heightened. We experienced minute changes in spring’s unfolding previously missed; memories of the last day in our office space remain etched in our minds; and we wistfully recall the last time we indulged in previously mundane activities like haircuts and in-person clothes shopping. We were painfully aware of just how many months and days had passed since we last saw close relatives and friends who live a distance from us, and when we last hugged our grandchildren and/or our parents. The Mishnah (Kiddushin 1:7) takes a strong stand on the issue, by distinguishing between “mitzvot dependent on the Land” (e.g. *Shemittah*, the once-in-seven-years agricultural rest; certain priestly gifts) and “mitzvot not dependent on the Land (e.g. Shabbat, tefillin). Shavuot is a holiday that is defined by marking time. Its very name, the “Festival of Weeks,” highlights its temporal relationship to Pesah, as we count the Omer each day until we reach the fiftieth day and celebrate Shavuot. This

period, called ספירה, literally means “counting,” and shares the same grammatical root as the word for “story,” ספור, reminding us of the many meanings Jews have ascribed to this time.

For example, some interpreted the Omer as tracking the transformation of the Israelites from slaves to free people who could willingly receive Torah. When Jews counted the Omer each year, they were enacting their growing preparedness to receive the Torah anew each Shavuot. Sefirah is also a sad period in which we recall painful episodes in the Jewish past ascribed to this time, beginning with the Talmudic recounting of the death of 12,000 pairs of Rabbi Akiva’s disciples because they did not respect each other (BT Yevamot 62b).

Although Jews today observe Shavuot beginning on the 6th of Sivan, there is no mention of a specific date in the Torah. On the contrary, the Torah commands us to count fifty days from Pesach and then observe Shavuot (Lev. 23:15–16, Deut. 16:9–10), but it does not specify when to begin the count. According to the Talmud, this was a point of controversy between the Rabbis and the Boethusians (a group associated with the Sadducees), and the Rabbinic interpretation has prevailed: We count from the second night of Pesah, not the day after the Shabbat following the start of Pesah, i.e. Sunday. To prove the rectitude of their view, several Rabbis parse the biblical text to quell any doubts (BT Menahot 65a–66a).

Before the Jewish calendar was fixed, the date of Shavuot also varied based on the testimony of witnesses: Shavuot could fall on the 5th, 6th, or 7th of Sivan. In rabbinic literature, the variability of Shavuot stemmed from varying opinions concerning the actual day on which the Torah was given to the Israelites in the desert. In the Talmud Bavli (Shabbat 86b), Rabbi Yose says that the Torah was given on the 7th of Sivan, while the other Rabbis disagree, stating that it was given on the 6th of Sivan. A third opinion, found in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Shabbat 9:3), contends that the Torah was given on the 6th day of the week, i.e., on a Friday.

From the perspective of the Torah, the Rabbis, and the old system of a variable calendar, the celebration of Shavuot was embedded in temporal ambiguity. Jews could strive for the moment when they would commemorate receiving the Torah, feeling once again that they

themselves were accepting it, but they could not be sure when this peak (Sinai) moment would occur.

In the year 2021/5781, numerous online calendars and reminders guarantee that we always know exactly when Shavuot falls. Yet, in this pandemic year, we can viscerally identify with the uncertainty of the calendar that Jews contended with centuries ago, because the pandemic has completely upended our relationship to the passage of time. As a result, we experience the power of counting the Omer this year with renewed appreciation. Though we’re still counting pandemic time, we’re also starting to count differently—with excitement, with hope: the date two weeks after vaccination when we achieve full immunity; the number of meals we enjoy with friends; the moment when we hug our loved ones tightly; the number of people we see in person.

Unlike Omer counting, we know that the pandemic will not end on a specific date. And yet, after a year of “languishing” with few special moments to plan for, the process of counting toward the approaching end, of embracing every milestone and marker of normalcy, lifts our spirits and propels us toward restoring treasured activities and relationships.

As we continue to count, may we do so deliberately and meaningfully in anticipation of a brighter, safer future in the months ahead.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Leftover Scraps

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The Torah exhorts us: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest...you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger” (Lev. 19:9-10). This mitzvah plays out in