



How Do You Measure a Year?

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*“Five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes.
How do you measure, measure a year?”*

The question asked in the chorus of “Seasons of Love,” made ever more poignant by the tragic death of its composer-lyricist, Jonathan D. Larson, just months before *Rent* opened on Broadway in 1996, has been rattling lately in my mind. After all, we are doing an awful lot of counting this week: we count the final days of the Omer, and, as our parashah begins, take the census of the Israelite community. What does all of this counting have to do with the ways in which we measure what really matters?

First, the counting of the Omer, which culminates in Shavuot next week: it is deceptively simple. All you have to do is count every night, increasing the count by one each day, and at the end you’ll have reached Shavuot—a seemingly mundane mitzvah, the blessing over which is nothing more than praising God for the command to count. And yet it is for many one of the most difficult mitzvot to keep. Who among us remembers to count it without fail every night? Somehow not a year goes by without a slip-up. It turns out that counting days is not so easy after all.

One of the many differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Second Temple-era rivals, had to do with this counting. The Pharisees observed Shavuot on the 50th day after the first day of Passover (as we, their halakhic heirs, do as well). The Sadducees, on the other hand, celebrated Shavuot on the seventh Sunday after Passover. Their disagreement had nothing to do with how many days to count—that much was made clear in Leviticus 23:16, which instructs us to count seven weeks,

the day after which would be day 50, Shavuot. According to Louis Finkelstein (z”l), JTS chancellor from 1940 to 1972, the disagreement had to do with when the counting began (*The Pharisees: The Sociological Background of Their Faith*, volume 1, 115, as cited in Birnbaum, *The Shavuot Anthology*, 135).

“And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—the day after the sabbath—you shall count off seven weeks,” instructs Leviticus (23:15). It is a seemingly clear instruction. But what does “the sabbath” here really mean? Does it refer to the first day of Passover or to the first Shabbat after that holiday? When, in other words, are you supposed to start counting? The abstract intellectual argument over linguistics became one of the more practical differences separating the two communities as they lived out their interpretations. Counting—knowing when to start, and how long to keep it going—matters a great deal.

This brings us to the second kind of counting we are doing this week. What is the point of God’s instructing Moses to take a census at the outset of the Israelites’ wanderings? Having been given the laws at Sinai in Exodus, with further instructions in Leviticus, the Israelites cannot move forward on their journey until a count of the people takes place. For many learners, these census lists make up the least interesting passages of the *humash*. Long and linguistically repetitive, the list of men according to their tribes totals in this count the historically improbable number of 603,550 (Num. 1:46). As the *Etz Hayim humash* commentary on the verse suggests, the number is impossibly large, “presupposing a population of more than 2 million supporting itself for 40 years in the Sinai Peninsula.” The commentary goes on to suggest a

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few ways scholars justify the count—maybe they were counting by military unit, or perhaps the numbers reflect the later census by King David in the book of Samuel. The question of the accuracy of the numbers invokes the same observation we had about the Omer: something so mundane and seemingly so simple as counting people gathered in an isolated camp in the desert is yet so hard to get right. In this case, the problem seems more about exaggeration than accuracy, but it nonetheless brings to mind the dreaded public speech in which the speaker acknowledges a list of people deserving of honorable mention. How easy it is to overlook someone, or to forget in the moment one or two names. Listing people—like counting days—is more difficult than it seems.

Between the Omer and the census, we are counting this week our two most precious commodities: time and people. That both are impossible to count is a token of their importance: they are the foundation stones of our lives. It is a psychic-spiritual struggle to bring them into proper focus, to keep them in their rightful place at the center of our attention.

Fifty days will have soon passed since we celebrated our freedom around the seder table. Where did those days go, and what did we do that really mattered during these seven weeks? We head into our next holiday reading a parashah that pauses to count people before recommencing the narrative story of their lives. With whom have we spent these days? As Larson asked, how do we measure a year?

Albert Einstein famously quipped, “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything worth counting counts.” With all of the numbers and counting pervading our week, let us not lose sight of the message they bring: that what counts the most is spending time with one another, and that we measure our years by counting day in and day out the moments we spend with others wandering with us, blazing paths together through the wilderness of life.