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BH

THINKING AHEAD OF THE CURVE: PLANNING NOW FOR COUNTING THE OMER AND CELEBRATING SHAVUOT

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I know that we haven't even hit Purim yet and that Shavuot isn't until May 26. But we'll start counting the Omer on April 7 and I have some ideas for making the counting more meaningful.

Let's look at this from a strategic planning point of view. We usually study Pirkei Avot in the weeks between Passover and Shavuot. But what if we changed that this year? What if we studied tractate Bikkurim which tells us all about counting the Omer and the festivities of Shavuot? That way, we'd be learning about the Omer while counting it. And you could finish up studying the tractate during your all-night Shavuot study session and add the happiness of a siyyum (the party held when one finishes a tractate of Talmud) to the happiness of the holiday. It's a very short tractate, only 3 chapters long, so you really could do it.

You'll find out all sorts of interesting things about the holiday, too.

Just as Sukkot involves the layperson with the mitzvot of dwelling in the sukkah and waving the lulav, and as Passover involves everyone with the seder, so Shavuot had opportunities for laypeople to participate. They would not only bring the first fruits, they would bring them with great ceremony and beauty:

It is a mitzvah to bring the first fruits in seven different vessels. But one who brought them in only one vessel, has fulfilled the obligation. How does one do this? He puts the barley at the bottom and then something different over it (e.g., greenery of some sort), then wheat and then something different. Then olives and something different, olives etc., dates etc., pomegranates, figs and grapes. And he surrounds them with grape clusters on the outside. (T. Bikkurim 2:8, Y. Bikkurim 3:5, 26a1)

It would only be those who lived nearby or who were extraordinarily rich who could bring seven separate vessels of these fruits to the Temple. Most people brought their first fruits in one basket. For those who could not afford to bring seven baskets, one containing the seven species seems to have been the norm. Each person would fill a basket full of the seven species that the Torah mentions grow in Israel (Deuteronomy 8:8): wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates and they'd decorate the basket by hanging pigeons off the sides of the basket, as an offering. This isn't just a theoretical construct. Below, a "pane" of a synagogue floor at Sepphoris, shows the basket, the species, the pigeons and the cymbals below them.



If we were to adapt this ritual for our observance of Shavuot how might we make it a meaningful practice?

· We could bring symbols or pictures of seven new things that we had done in the past year that could be our contemporary "first fruits".

We could designate seven charities to which worshippers could give as part of their Shavuot observance and link them to the seven species of fruits associated with Israel (Deuteronomy 8:8). For example:

Barley = Food pantry or Mazon

Wheat = Ma'ot chitim fund

Olives = scholarship fund (enlightenment)

Figs = Jewish camp and Birthright scholarships. (As a fig carries many seeds within it, these programs carry the seeds of our future with them.)

Dates = Jewish Federation or Hadassah

Pomegranates = Habitat for Humanity (Pomegranates have the sturdiest structure of these species.)

Grapes = Oneg Shabbat or music fund

(This idea is not as farfetched as some might think. In fact, it has ancient roots. As pilgrims passed through the Second Temple precincts on their way to bring their sacrifices, they contributed to one of 13 funds in support of the Temple.)

· You could have a Shavuot "seder" with the seven species.

· You could invite "Guests" to your celebration, for example, great figures of modern Zionism such as Theodore Herzl, Golda Meir, Chaim Weizman and Henrietta Szold.

Discussion Questions:

1. First, will you consider implementing any of these ideas? Which would be the easiest ones to put into action?
2. Shavuot is celebrated very creatively in Israel, especially on Kibbutzim. They put on pageants and plays. Do you currently do anything like that?
3. Have you ever participated in a siyyum? Please describe it.

As always, I look forward to hearing your insights!

[NOTE: Maqom is now a discussion group, [Maqom613](http://groups.google.com/group/maqom613), at Google groups. To leave a comment on the above passage, go to <http://groups.google.com/group/maqom613> and join the group. Also, you will need a gmail account to log in, so if you don't have one, then first go <https://mail.google.com/> to set up your email account.]