



Likkutei Sichos

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Endings Count

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1.

THE MITZVAH TO COUNT THE OMER

In this *parshah*, we are given the mitzvah of *sefiras ha'omer*:¹ “You shall count for yourselves — from the day after the rest day, from the day when you bring the *omer*... until the day after the seventh week you shall count, fifty days.” This mitzvah (according to many commentators and *poskim*)² serves as a preparation for the festival of Shavuot, the day on which we received the Torah.³ In the words of *Sefer HaChinuch*:⁴

We are commanded to count the {days} from the day after the festival of Pesach until the day the Torah was given to show⁵ our great yearning for that distinguished day, for which our heart longs “as a servant eagerly longs for the {evening} shade,”⁶ and constantly counts {and calculates} when the longed-for time will come when he will be freed. For counting shows about a person that all his hope of deliverance and all his desire is to reach that time.

This theme of *sefiras ha'omer* is also evident in halachah,⁷ as many commentators⁸ cite it as one reason that a *shehecheyanu*⁹ blessing is not recited over this mitzvah.

At any rate, the mitzvah of *sefiras ha'omer* was a mitzvah — although its consummate fulfillment was observed — during the time of the *Beis HaMikdash*.

¹ *Vayikra* 23:15-16.

² {Halachic decisors.}

³ See *Guide for the Perplexed*, vol. 3, ch. 43; *Chinuch*, “mitzvah 306”; *Midrash* (“*haggadah*”) brought in *Itur* (end of “*Hilchos Matzah U'Maror*”), quoted in *Rashba*’s responsa (vol. 3, sec. 284); *Ran*, end of *Pesachim*; et al.

⁴ *Mitzvah* 306. {*Sefer HaChinuch* is a rabbinic work that systematically discusses the 613 commandments of the Torah. It was published anonymously in 13th-century Spain.}

⁵ {In the original Hebrew, “*l’haros b’nafsheinu*”; lit., “to show with our very souls.”}

⁶ To rest from his work. (*Iyov* 7:2; *Metzudas David* on this verse.) The word “shade” is possibly also hinting to the *sukkos* {Clouds of Glory} (to provide **shade**) that Hashem gave to the Jewish people to take shelter during their exodus from Egypt.

⁷ Jewish law.

⁸ Second reason given in *Levush*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 489, end of par. 1. The first reason given in *Levush*: “Because the count functions as a requirement of the festival (*Shavuot*), we rely on the *shehecheyanu* blessing of the festival.” The *Tzror Hamor* on *Vayikra* 23:25 gives the same answer and adds: “as explained regarding {building of} the *sukkah* and the burning of the *chametz*.” *Akeida* on “*Emor*” (“*Shaar*” 67, ch. 4) explains that counting the passage of time reflects the sorrow experienced by a person in the absence of something and his longing and anticipation for its arrival. Since the counting is associated with discomfort, it does not warrant this {joyous} blessing of *shehecheyanu*. Instead, the blessing is recited when the anticipated event (*Shavuot*) arrives.

⁹ {A blessing usually made on a new fruit or a mitzvah that has not been performed for an extended period: “Blessed are You... Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this occasion.”}

Likewise, it is a mitzvah nowadays (although there are differing opinions whether this a biblical mitzvah or a rabbinic edict in remembrance of the *Beis HaMikdash*).¹⁰ We recite a blessing over this mitzvah, moreover, every day. In fact, through the mitzvah of *sefiras ha'omer*, which is obligatory for every single Jew — “*You shall count for yourselves* — every person¹¹ is obligated to count” — we reach the fiftieth day of the *omer*, the festival of Shavuos.¹²

2.

THE ORDER OF THE *SIDDUR*

According to what was said above regarding the parameters of the *omer* counting, we can explain the reason that the Alter Rebbe placed the counting of the *omer* at the end of the *Siddur*.

As known, the Alter Rebbe was extremely precise in the order of all of his matters, especially in “The Order of Prayer,” whose subject matter concerns “The **Order** of Prayers for the Entire Year.” It follows that it was **arranged** with the epitome of precision. The precise order is further underscored when it is compared with the order of the Arizal’s *Siddur*,¹³ on whose version the Alter Rebbe’s *Siddur* is based. In the various imprints of the Arizal’s *Siddur* (that I have examined), the *siddur* concludes (not with the liturgy for the *omer* counting, but rather) with the (spiritual meditations for the) liturgy of Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah.

Simply understood, the Alter Rebbe changed the order in his *Siddur* from the order in the Arizal’s *Siddur* because the Alter Rebbe’s *Siddur*, as known, was intended for use by every individual, whereas the Arizal’s *Siddur* was intended

¹⁰ See Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 489, par. 2, and the sources mentioned there.

¹¹ *Menachos* 65b.

¹² See the Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” beg. of sec. 494 (from responsa of *Rivash*, sec. 96). See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 3, p. 995 ff; vol. 8, p. 56 fn. 42.

¹³ *Siddur Rabbi Shabbsi MeRashkov*, which was printed before the printing of the Alter Rebbe’s *Siddur* in 5563 (in addition to the fact that there was a manuscript of this *Siddur* several years earlier); similarly in *Siddur HaArizal Kol Yaakov*.

for use by exceptional individuals. For this reason, too, the Alter Rebbe did not include all the “prayer meditations” found in the Arizal’s *Siddur*.¹⁴

Consequently, the order in the Alter Rebbe’s *Siddur* follows the rule that “what occurs more frequently precedes what occurs less so.”¹⁵ Regarding those mitzvos that occur only once annually, their related prayers follow the chronological sequence of the calendar: Chanukah, Purim, *korban pesach*, the *Haggadah*, and (finally) *sefiras ha’omer*.

However, the Alter Rebbe composed his *Siddur* in line with the opinions of the halachic decisors, while simultaneously fine-tuning the liturgy according to the “meditations” of the Arizal.¹⁶ (He **omitted**, however, the mystical secrets and meditations so that the *Siddur* would be equally suitable for everyone, including those who would be incapable of contemplating those mystical meditations.) Therefore, it is understood that the order of the *Siddur* not only follows a straightforward approach to the *Siddur*’s contents, but the order is suited also to the **subject-matter** as treated in the relevant sources in the revealed and inner dimensions of Torah.

In light of this, we can explain why *sefiras ha’omer* is placed at the conclusion of the *Siddur*. The mitzvah of *sefiras ha’omer* underscores more emphatically the primary theme and point of prayer, both in the revealed and the mystical dimensions, as we will explain.

Furthermore, this unique theme of *sefiras ha’omer* is expressed both in the *cheftza*¹⁷ of prayer and *sefiras ha’omer*, and in the *gavra*,¹⁸ as elaborated below.

¹⁴ See Introduction to *Shaar Hakolel; Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 4, p. 1149.

¹⁵ *Pesachim* 7a. {It is part of a discussion concerning the order in which various blessings should be recited during a festive meal, and the Gemara suggests that blessings for foods that are eaten more frequently take precedence over those made over food eaten less often.}

¹⁶ The Approbation of Maharil from Yanavitch (the Alter Rebbe’s brother) on the Alter Rebbe’s *Siddur* — printed in *Siddur Im Dach, Kehos* (323b), and in *Siddur Torah Or*; et al.

¹⁷ {Lit. “object” or “item,” a term that refers to the objective element of an idea.}

¹⁸ {Lit. “person,” a term that refers to the subjective element of an idea.}

3.

THE MITZVAH TO COUNT THE *OMER*

The mitzvah of prayer is defined by the Rambam:¹⁹

It is a positive mitzvah to pray every day, as the verse says: “You shall serve Hashem, your L-rd.”²⁰ Tradition teaches us that this service is prayer, as it says: “And serve Him with all your heart.”²¹ Our Sages commented: “What is service of the heart? Prayer.”

Elsewhere, the Rambam describes this mitzvah as follows: “To serve Hashem every day through prayer.”²²

One reason, according to the revealed dimension of Torah, that prayer is considered an “*avodah*” (“service of the heart”) can be derived from Rambam’s wording:²³

This commandment obligates everyone to offer supplication and prayer every day and utter praises of the Holy One. Then, a person should petition for all his needs with requests and supplications. Finally, he should praise and thank Hashem for the goodness that He has bestowed.

The explanation: Generally, mitzvos are divided into two categories: (a) mitzvos obligating certain actions — whether this refers to a physical action like wearing *tzitzis*, donning *tefillin*, etc., or a verbal action (a “minor action”)²⁴ like reading the *Megillah*, telling the story of the Exodus, or the like; the primary observance of these mitzvos is through speech and reading; (b) mitzvos obligating us to feel certain emotions — such as, to love Hashem, to fear Hashem, etc. The primary focus of these mitzvos is placed on a person’s intentions and feelings in his mind and heart.

The mitzvah of prayer is unique in this respect. Although prayer must be articulated,²⁵ the “action” of prayer is that “a person must **supplicate** and **pray**

¹⁹ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Tefillah*,” ch.1, par. 1.

²⁰ {*Shemos* 23:25.}

²¹ {*Devarim* 11:13.}

²² In the heading of the above-mentioned *Hilchos Tefillah*.

²³ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Tefillah*,” ch.1, par. 2.

²⁴ *Sanhedrin* 65a.

²⁵ See *Magen Avraham*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 101, subsection 2.

daily”: “Supplication” involves the emotional *avodah* of the heart and — not a physical or verbal act.

For some biblical mitzvos, the law is that they “require intent to fulfill one’s obligation through the act of this mitzvah,” and should the intent be lacking, “a person does not fulfill his biblical obligation.”²⁶ Nevertheless, this only pertains to the **intent** facet of the mitzvah, but it is not part of the actual mitzvah itself.²⁷

Prayer, however, is different.²⁸ The *cheftza* of prayer itself is to “supplicate and pray” — intent of the heart. (As Rambam explains after the previous ruling, “then petition for all his needs **with requests and supplications.**”) To do this, prayer must be **preceded** by a person abiding by the instruction to “remove all foreign thoughts and view himself as if he is standing before the Divine Presence.”²⁹ (Afterwards, during the prayer, he must “request and **supplicate.**”) Without all the foregoing, not only has the person, the *gavra*, failed to fulfill his obligation, but moreover, there is no *cheftza* of prayer. His **spoken words** {by themselves} do **not** constitute **prayer**.

The above aspect of prayer, that only knowledge and intent create the *cheftza* of prayer and without these elements, the words are not considered prayer, is clearly evident in the mitzvah of *sefiras ha’omer*. The Alter Rebbe rules:³⁰

It is permissible to count the *omer* in any language a person understands. However, if he does not understand the language that he used to count, then even if he has counted in Hebrew,³¹ his obligation is not fulfilled. Since he does not understand the number counted, **it is categorically not considered counting.**”

²⁶ Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, sec. 60, par. 5.

²⁷ See Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 475, par. 28.

²⁸ *Tanya*, ch. 38 states: “Prayer, or any other blessing, without intent, is like a body without a soul.” We can posit that the *Tanya* refers to the “specific” intentions in prayer that resemble the intentions of the other blessings and mitzvos, and not to the general intention (that is explained in the text). In particular, it does not refer to the intention without which prayer is nullified (see *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Tefillah*,” ch. 4, par. 15). See Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, sec. 185, par. 2.

²⁹ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Tefillah*,” ch. 4, par. 16.

³⁰ Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, sec. 489, par. 10.

³¹ {Lit., “the Holy Tongue.”}

In other words, the point of the mitzvah *sefiras ha'omer* is not to perform a verbal act (of counting days, although the count must be done verbally).³² Rather, the point of the mitzvah is for the person to **know** {the daily count}. Without a person's (conscious) knowledge and intent (not only has he failed to fulfill his obligation to count, but), there is no *cheftza* of counting— “**this is not considered counting at all.**”³³

4.

PRAYER CHANGES A PERSON

Since “prayer” is created by a person's intent (and *avodah*), it is understood that of foremost importance is the change that happens in the person through his prayer and its preparations. In this regard, there is also a common denominator between prayer and *sefiras ha'omer* (not only regarding the *cheftza* of both):

Prayer refers primarily to *Shemoneh Esrei*. This involves a Jew standing in front of Hashem and “viewing himself as if he is facing the Divine Presence,” as “a servant who stands before his master.”³⁴ When a Jew prays and petitions Hashem, he becomes a personification of someone who prays.

By a person removing all foreign thoughts, and praying to and petitioning Hashem, the person is changed and elevated. He is now on an entirely new plane.³⁵ A change and something new has been introduced into the worshiper.

This concept is also reflected in the petition every Jew recites following *sefiras ha'omer* every night: “You have commanded us... to count the *omer* in order to **purify** ourselves from our negativity and impurity, as it is written in Your Torah... so that the **souls** of Your people Israel will be **cleansed** of their filth.”

³² Alter Rebbe's *Shulchan Aruch*, sec. 489, par. 1.

³³ See Responsa of *Dvar Avraham*, vol. 1, sec. 34.

³⁴ *Shabbos* 10a.

³⁵ See *Likkutei Torah*, “*Chukas*,” 66a; et al.

5.

THE PREPARATION IS ITS OWN MITZVAH

The above-mentioned commonality all derives from the effect and the *avodah* of a person in prayer and *sefiras ha'omer*. There is, however, an additional element that differentiates prayer from most other mitzvos — namely, the purpose of prayer and its goal:

For most mitzvos, the deed is the primary facet. (The deed is perfected when accompanied by the appropriate intent {the mitzvah's other component}.) This constitutes the completion of the person's part of the mitzvah.

The mitzvah of prayer is different: On the one hand, the very essence of prayer is that “a person should **supplicate** and **pray**.” He should “petition for all his **needs** with **requests** and **supplications**” so that Hashem should grant his requests. This is not a separate facet of prayer, but rather, it comprises the essence, the *cheftza*, of the mitzvah: To ask Hashem to **grant** his personal requests.

On the other hand, his **fulfillment** of the mitzvah is **totally** unrelated to whether his request is granted. The prayers and supplication themselves suffice to fulfill this mitzvah in its entirety.³⁶

The same applies to *sefiras ha'omer*: The mitzvah of counting the *omer* prepares us for the festival of Shavuos and the Giving of the Torah, as mentioned in Section 1. [This point is emphasized by the *Zohar's*³⁷ explanation that the counting of the seven weeks is analogous to the {woman's} counting of seven clean days. By this count, the Jewish people purify themselves in order to enter the *chuppah* at the Giving of the Torah on the festival of Shavuos.]

Simultaneously, the counting becomes a distinct mitzvah (with a distinct blessing [and divine emanation]). Meaning, the longing and preparation itself

³⁶ See *Beis Elokim*, “*Shaar HaTefillah*,” ch. 2.

³⁷ *Zohar*, vol. 3, 97a ff.

becomes a distinct and essential part of the process. Namely, the Jewish people are cleansed of their spiritual filth. This emphasizes the importance of the person's *avodah* by itself.

6.

SEFIRAS HA'OMER IS AT THE END OF THE SIDTUR

In light of the above, we can explain the difference between the *Siddur* of the Arizal and the *Siddur* of the Alter Rebbe (although the *Siddur* of the Alter Rebbe is aligned exactly with the Arizal's). This difference is emphasized right at the beginning of these *Siddurim*:

The Arizal's *Siddur*³⁸ begins, "The general rectification and elevation of the spiritual worlds," whereas the Alter Rebbe's *Siddur* begins, "As known, arising at midnight is a great virtue... Therefore, a person should try to arise at midnight, any night he can, and include himself among the 'servants of Hashem....'"

The explanation:

According to the inner dimension of things as presented in the Arizal's *Siddur* — a *siddur* designed for exceptional individuals who contemplate the mystical meditations and {divine} unifications, as we explained above — prayer does not only encompass the *avodah* and spiritual ascent of the **person**. Rather, it also (and mainly) encompasses the purpose and goal of prayer — the rectification and elevation of the spiritual **worlds**. This is also the source of the Divine emanations drawn down to this world in spiritual and physical matters: healing the sick, blessing the years, etc.

Therefore, *sefiras ha'omer*, which emphasizes a person's own *avodah*, is not placed at the end of the *Siddur* (as a conclusion and **end-goal**). Instead, it is placed earlier. Afterwards, the *siddur* lays out the prayers and intentions for the Three Festivals, etc., Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, etc., up until Sukkos and

³⁸ *Siddur Rabbi Shabsi MeRashkov*.

Simchas Torah. These prayers ensure the integrity of the Divine emanations as they flow into this world.

In contrast, the Alter Rebbe's *Siddur* was composed for the average person (and so the mystical secrets and meditations were **not** openly included). Accordingly, the order was laid out in a way that prayer emphasizes a person's *avodah*, as explained above at length. (In short, both the *cheftza* of prayer and the spiritual ascent of the person [*gavra*] are contingent upon the person's *avodah*).

For this reason, the Alter Rebbe prefaces and delineates, at the very beginning of his *Siddur*, the virtue of rising at midnight. By a person doing so, he includes himself among the “**servants** of Hashem.” Consequently, the end of the *Siddur* does **not** comprise **prayers** connected to the holiness of the **festivals**. Instead, the liturgy for *sefiras ha'omer* appears, as it is a mitzvah entirely within the scope of a person's actions and *avodah* (concerning all the above-mentioned matters).

7.

THE POWER OF THE INDIVIDUAL

A person may think that the personal *avodah* of an individual Jew (and especially an *avodah* that consists merely of “counting days”) can't really affect the world (by refining it). *Sefiras ha'omer* emphasizes the visible effects of this *avodah* more so than with other types of *avodah*:

Generally, determining the days on which the festivals will fall is up to the Jewish people — “who sanctify the festivals in their times.”³⁹ However, this determination is made specifically through the agency of the *Beis Din*. The sanctification of the new moon through ***Beis Din*** (a **congregation**), and the prayers of all Jews throughout the festivals, are a result of, and **supplement**,

³⁹ *Berachos* 49a.

the sanctity of the festivals. Similarly, Shabbos, which is “already sanctified”⁴⁰ {on its own}, receives an extra measure of sanctity by the Jewish people reciting *kiddush* and Shabbos prayers.

Sefiras ha’omer shows that, through the count of every **individual** Jew (and not *Beis Din*), the festival of Shavuos is fixed. Its date is not dependent on when Rosh Chodesh falls (“Shavuos can fall on the fifth, sixth, or seventh {of Sivan}”).⁴¹ Rather, the festival of Shavuos is always fixed on day fifty of the *omer*, as discussed above.

In fact, because of this, in many respects (for example, regarding the second day of Yom Tov in the Diaspora), Shavuos is stricter than other festivals because its date is not determined as a result of a doubt {as to when Rosh Chodesh was sanctified}, as are the other festivals. Rather, its date enjoys the force of certainty.⁴²

8.

PRAYER IS GREATER THEN OTHER MITZVOS

All the above underscores the general advantage of the person’s *avodah* in prayer:

Prayer is not just about eliciting into this world what exists already, in its root and source, in the supernal worlds. Instead, prayer aims to actualize the wish, “**May it be Your will.**” Prayer can make, as it were, a new Divine will that has no preexistent root or source {in the supernal worlds}. This new emanation is drawn down to this world and changes creations “from the way they were previously: The ill become healed; rain falls from the heavens to the earth; and the ground produces vegetation.”⁴³ This dynamic does not happen through the

⁴⁰ *Beitzah* 17a.

⁴¹ *Rosh Hashanah* 6b.

⁴² See *Chasam Sofer’s* responsa, “*Orach Chaim*,” end of sec. 145; see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 4, p. 1030.

⁴³ *Tanya*, “*Kuntres Acharon*,” 155a.

general *avodah* of Torah and mitzvah observance. For example, nothing changes in the parchment of *tefillin* “by placing *tefillin* on the head, etc.,” as *Tanya* explains.⁴⁴

9.

THE POWER OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Based on the Alter Rebbe’s explanation about the deeper significance of prayer, we can better appreciate correlation between prayer and *sefiras ha’omer* (in light of the above):

In *Likkutei Torah*,⁴⁵ the Alter Rebbe explains that prayer is not counted among the 613 mitzvos because prayer embodies the purpose of Torah and mitzvos as a whole. “It is the foundation that supports all 613 mitzvos, like the spinal cord.”

The primary point of prayer is for the Infinite Light,⁴⁶ which is beyond the continuum of Creation⁴⁷ — {since we address our prayers} “to Him and not to His attributes {*sefiros*}”⁴⁸ — to be drawn down into the continuum of Creation. The eighteen blessings of *Shemoneh Esrei* are like “conduits” that translate this emanation into “healing the sick” and “blessing the year.”

This concept is especially emphasized by *sefiras ha’omer*. Immediately following the count itself, every individual recites, “Master of the universe... and thereby, may abundant bounty be bestowed upon **all the worlds.**” This is analogous to eliciting the general emanation of the Infinite Light into all the worlds through prayer. Subsequently, we continue (using the conjunction “and”)... “and may it rectify **our** *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshamah*⁴⁹ from every baseness and defect.” This phrase alludes to the “**abundant bounty**” being

⁴⁴ *Tanya*, “*Kuntres Acharon*,” 155a.

⁴⁵ *Likkutei Torah*, “*Balak*,” 70d ff.

⁴⁶ {In the original, “*Or Ein Sof*.”}

⁴⁷ {In the original, “*Seder HaHishtalshelus*.”}

⁴⁸ *Sifrei* quoted and elucidated in *Pardes*, “*shaar*” 32, ch. 2.

⁴⁹ {Three levels of the soul.}

channeled into **details**, into conduits, to effect change in created things. This all reflects what was explained above regarding the subject of prayer.

Everyone is encouraged to learn more about the laws of *sefiras ha'omer*, to discuss its underlying ideas; and to perfect the observance of the mitzvah as best we can. For nowadays, its observance serves as a remembrance for the **Beis HaMikdash**; including studying the laws of *sefiras ha'omer* on both the revealed and hidden planes of Torah.

Through all the above, may we hasten the realization of the prayer recited immediately after *sefiras ha'omer*: “{May the Merciful One} restore unto us the service of the *Beis HaMikdash* to its place (and we will fulfill the mitzvah as it was decreed),⁵⁰ speedily in our days. *Amen, Selah.*”

— From talks delivered on 24 Teves, Shabbos *parshas Va'era* and Shabbos *parshas Mishpatim*, (5742) 1982

⁵⁰ *Megillah* 20b, *Tosafos*, s.v. “*Kol Halailah*”; Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 489, par. 11.