

Feature article by Rabbi David Walk

THE COUNT

① vunderful day! Ha, ha, ha! ② terrific days! Ha, ha, ha! ③ tremendous days! Ha, ha, ha! ④ fabulous days! Ha, ha, ha! ⑤ fantastic days! Ha, ha, ha! ⑥ sensational days! Ha, ha, ha! ⑦ stupendous days! Which make ❶ vunderbar veek? Huh, I thought I vas counting days. Vat happened? Yeah, vat, I mean what happened? This is a good question even for those of us who don't come from Transylvania. Every year this comes up and most of the time we just ignore it. We really think that we're counting to 49 days because that's how we reference these days. Everybody thinks, for example, we're 23 days into the Omer; nobody says yesterday's count was three weeks and two days into the Omer. So, of course, the question is why do we count both the days and the weeks?

Before some well-intentioned reader suggests that we do it just to be safe. Perhaps, the rabbis weren't sure if we're supposed to count days or weeks, so we do them both. Many mitzvot are sort of like wearing a belt and suspenders, because of doubts or concerns we cover all the possibilities. However, when you look at the verses about this obligation, they seem to demand that we count both: From the day after the 'rest day', from the day you bring the omer as a wave offering, you shall count for yourselves seven weeks; they must be complete. You

shall count until the day after the seventh week, the fiftieth day, on which you shall bring a new meal offering to the Lord (Vayikra 23:15-16). It's clear from these instructions that both days and weeks must be counted, even though in D'varim (16:9) it emphasizes counting weeks, we learn the obligation from Vayikra.

So, why is it imperative that we count days and weeks? The Netivot Shalom (Reb Shalom Noach Barzovski, the Rebbe of Slonim, 1911-2000) discusses this issue in his article about counting 'complete (temimot or perfect) weeks'. The Rebbe bases his comments on an idea in the Mesilat Yesharim, who describes tahara (purity) and kedusha (sanctity). He explains that tahara is removing negative traits, both actual tumah (impurity) and klipot (the neutral traits which interfere with spiritual growth, 'shells'). So, one concern during the period between Pesach and receiving the Torah on Shavuot is removing the anti-spirituality acquired during centuries of bondage in Egypt. The Midrash talks about the Jews having sunk to the 49th level of tumah during their stay in idolatrous Egypt. That number, of course, isn't a coincidence. In theory we slough off one level of spiritual dross each day of the count.

That's the job of the 'days' of the count. However, there's another process going on. We are also gaining kedusha. This is the role of the seven perfect or innocent weeks. The Rebbe emphasizes that we should really be focusing on the Shabbatot during the sefira period. The Shabbatot between Pesach and

Shavuot must be temimot to be ready for the acceptance of the Torah at the foot of Mt. Sinai. It's during these Shabbatot that we grasp the concept of kedusha which truly prepares us for the epiphany at Sinai.

That's the position of the Slonimer Rebbe. The 49 days are for removing the tumah and the weeks or Shabbatot are for gaining the kedusha required for receiving the Torah. The Rebbe says that when the verse instructed us **u'sfartem lachem... sheva shabbatot temimot** (count for yourselves seven perfect weeks) it means count them out like sapirim, sapphires.

Great! And there's support for the Rebbe's position that individual days are for working through negative character traits. All the Twelve Step Programs (drinking, overeating, gambling, etc.) agree with that analysis. At their meetings, they often read Just For Today cards. These cards emphasize the importance in combatting the enemy of just winning the war one day at a time. Allow me two examples: Just for today I will try to live through this day only and not tackle my whole life problem at once. Just for today I will be happy. This is a strategy for fighting our demons in which modern techniques and Biblical custom seem to be in perfect synch.

The Rebbe's idea about the seven Shabbatot between Pesach and Shavuot also has great merit. But I'd like to introduce a slightly different take on the seven weeks issue. Many years ago, I went to a shiur by Rav Soloveitchik at the Maimonides School in Brookline, MA. A college student asked a question

about the Shabbat between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur and referred to it as 'Shabbat Teshuva'. This brought some snickers (not the candy bar) from some rabbis sitting in the front of the cafeteria, where the lectures took place. Everybody knows that famous Shabbat is called 'Shabbat Shuva', based on the Haftora read that week. But the Rav, God bless him, defended the young man. 'No, it really should be called 'Shabbat Teshuva', and there is also a Sunday Teshuva, a Monday Teshuva, etc.' The Rav introduced an amazing teaching moment.

The Rav explained that a well-lived life is based on a weekly schedule. We live our lives by organizing where we go on Monday, what we study on Tuesday, who we visit on Wednesday, etc. That's why calendars and organizers are based on the seven-day week. When our lives are functioning well, we don't live day by day, we live week by week. The Rav went on to explain that the seven days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur should be the best week of the year, filled with mitzvot and lacking waste, to show God and ourselves that we can do it. The seven weeks between Pesach and Shavuot should demonstrate our worthiness to receive the Torah.

Yes, we do count both days and weeks. One to eliminate the negative; the other to accentuate the positive. And both to be ready on Shavuot morning.