



Holiday: Counting the Omer

Counting My Genders: A Neo-Kabbalistic View of the Omer

by Rabbi Jane Rachel Litman on Thursday April 24, 2008

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Leviticus 23:15-16, Counting the Omer

“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.”

Torah teaches (Lev. 23:15) that it is a mitzvah to count each day of the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot. In agricultural terms, this is the period of the ripening of the wheat harvest. In mythic terms, it is the time of the journey between the Exodus from *Mitzrayim* – the liberation from slavery and constriction – and Sinai, the revelation of Torah. The weeks are anticipatory, both of the harvest of the field and the harvest of the soul.

The Kabbalists, Jewish mystics, gave new meanings to the daily counting of the Omer. According to Kabbalah, the universe was created through 10 *sefirot*, emanations from God, sacred attributes that connect the physical and transcendent spheres of existence. The three “upper emanations” are somewhat beyond full human comprehension. The lower seven *sefirot*, however, are particularly manifest during the seven weeks of the Omer, so Kabbalists make it a spiritual practice to meditate on these Godly attributes during the Omer.

Please bear with me here as I explain this rather complex system: according to the Kabbalists, each of the seven weeks of the Omer is associated with a specific *sefirah* or Godly attribute. The seven lower *sefirot*/attributes are as follows: *chesed*/lovingkindness; *gevurah*/courage or judgement; *tiferet*/harmony; *netzach*/triumph or achievement; *hod*/glory; *yesod*/foundation; *malchut*/sovereignty. Each of the seven days of each week is also associated with a specific *sefirah*. So each day of the forty-nine days of the Omer is associated with both its weekly *sefirah*/attribute and its daily *sefirah*/attribute. That is, day one of the Omer, which this year was Friday, April 14th, was a day on which Kabbalists contemplated the nature and implications of pure lovingkindness, since *chesed*/lovingkindness was both the weekly and daily attribute. This shabbat, May 20th, is the thirty-seventh day of the Omer. The weekly sacred *sefirah* is *yesod*/foundation and the daily attribute is *gevurah*/courage. Many Kabbalistics associate *yesod* with either the deep sense of self or with basic interpersonal attachment or bonding. Thus, this shabbat Kabbalists will reflect on the aspects of self and bonding that require courage, judgment and self-discipline. You too can become an Omer meditator. There are a number of



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wonderful books, articles, and calendars (some of which can be found on the Web) that deal with the spiritual Kabbalistic meditation during the Omer period.

Now here comes the interesting part: in addition to its spiritual aspect, each *sefirah* has a complicated gender and sexuality identity! The *sefirot* are connected to each other on a grid, or upside down “tree,” with its roots in heaven. The right side of the tree is male (whatever that means). *chesed*/lovingkindness and *netzach*/achievement sit on this side of the tree. The left side of the tree is female. *gevurah*/courage and *hod*/glory sit on this side of the tree. So in terms of the *sefirot*, lovingkindness is male and courage is female, an interesting counter-perspective to our society’s assumptions. The middle of the tree, *tiferet*/harmony, *yesod*/foundation, and *malchut*/sovereignty, are balanced between male and female tendencies. These *sefirot* are tweeners. BUT... it also depends on the relationship of the *sefirot* within the tree. In relation to *chesed*/lovingkindness, *netzach*/achievement transitions into being female, since *chesed* is situated directly above *netzach* on the tree. AND... each *sefirah* also holds an individual “gender” (mostly male) that is unrelated to its position on the tree or to any other *sefirah*.

Much of the most obvious sexual imagery in Kabbalah reflects the union of male and female. But the relationships of the *sefirot* are not quite so simple or heterosexual. As we learned, during the Omer, each day is associated with the spiritual values of the specific *sefirot* and their relationship to each other, such as this shabbat’s relationship between *yesod*/foundation and *gevurah*/courage. Each day also brings a new and different *sefirah* gender/sexuality constellation! So, for example, this shabbat, the *sefirot* couple is *yesod* and *gevurah*. *Yesod* is a tweener and *gevurah* is a female. On Sunday the *sefirot* are *yesod* and *tiferet*. *Tiferet* is a tweener and coupled to *tiferet*, *yesod* changes gender from being a tweener and becomes a female, thus suggesting new complexities for both *sefirot*. In many ways, the *sefirot* are more gender creative and fluid than a Gay Pride parade! Through the Omer the daily changing gender/sexual relationships of the *sefirot* give a pretty broad range of contemplative possibilities.

Kabbalists teach us that through the contemplation of the moral values of the *sefirot* during the Omer, we achieve personal and moral growth. As we approach Shavuot, we become more human and reach toward our best selves. Queer neo-Kabbalistics teach us that through the contemplation of the gender/erotic possibilities of the *sefirot* during the Omer, we achieve a different but equally important personal and moral growth. We become more human, more open-minded, more accepting of ourselves and others, and thus reach toward our best selves.

The Omer has a beginning – leaving *Mitzrayim*, our places of narrowness and constriction. It has a destination – coming to Sinai, our sense of God and God’s purpose for us. There’s a lot to think about along the way.



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