

Counting the Omer – 2015

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, May 2, 2015

I'm not sure if our bat mitzvah girls today, Maddie and Hannah did this, but I know a lot of bar and bat mitzvah kids who do: They can tell you weeks, even months in advance exactly how many days it is until their bar or bat mitzvah days. They even have daily counters on their computers or their phones that count down the days until they come and stand on this bimah for their big day. And it is exciting. I can understand why you'd count the days! In fact, we Jews all do the very same thing this time of year: We count the days from Passover when we got out of Egypt, until we got the 10 Commandments at Mt. Sinai, 50 days later. It's called the Counting of the Omer. An Omer was a special offering of barley brought in the times of the Temple each day between these two big holidays. So each night at services we announce what day of the Omer it is. (I have a counter in my house, too. I even have an app on my phone to remind me to count the Omer every night!)

But there is one big difference between the Omer Count and the count our kids do in anticipation of their Big Day. The kids do a count DOWN, but the Omer is counted UP. The first day is counted on the Second Night of Passover and the 49th is counted right before Shavuot. Leave it to the Jews to count UP. We do everything a little differently! But why?

Well, it is a reminder that the reason for leaving Egypt at Passover was not simply to be free people. The reason we were saved from slavery was so Gd could get us to Sinai to receive Torah. But if that was the goal then why didn't Gd just give us the Torah the day we left Egypt? And the answer is that because after 210 years of slavery, the Jewish People just weren't ready for it. It was too much too soon. It's kind of like a scene from one of my favorite movies, "Trading Places." You remember the movie? Two rich guys bet that they can't take a poor street person and make him into a Wall Street trader over night. Eddie Murphy has gone from beggar to wealth in a few hours, and the first thing he does upon entering his own luxury apartment is to steal things! His physical body had been transported to wealth, but emotionally his soul was left behind. Same with our ancestors: You can take the Jew out of Egypt, but you can't take Egypt out of the Jew.

So that's why we count up to Shavuot - it's like each day we climb a little higher on the ladder - Jacob's Ladder. Each day we pull ourselves a little higher; we develop a little more, we grow as a person. To be a Jew means to be always growing, at every stage of life, to never be standing still on the ladder, especially when it comes to growing on the inside, to growing our Jewish souls.

You know, it's a funny thing - when it comes to children, we take for granted that growth and development is part of childhood. You don't expect a 10-year-old to act the same way he did at age five. But somehow as adults, we lose that impulse to continue growing. But why should a 30-year-old act as he did at age 25? As adults, we could be using those five years in very powerful ways. The formula for staying young is to continue growing. Losing that capacity at any age is tragic. Any time we're not growing and changing, we're not living. We're just existing.

We are part of an intellectual, learning-based religion and as we age we gain greater capacity for wisdom. That's why it is so important for a child to continue to learn after bar and bat mitzvah.

Because a 16 year old just has a greater capacity for wisdom than a 13 year old. They have seen more of the world and have a broader base. And that's why I am so proud of our Gesher graduates. We honor today, 6 students who have gone past bar and bat mitzvah, past Confirmation in 10th grade and through 12th grade without leaving the path of Jewish learning. And the odds tell us that they are among the least likely to do so in the future as well. Statistically, these are our most likely leaders of the next generation of Jew.

In a sense, a bar or bat mitzvah is like Crossing the Red Sea- a dramatic, and much anticipated moment. But we don't get the Torah at that point, right after crossing the Red Sea. It's the follow up that counts. One impactful moment makes a difference, but it is the day in and day out changes that really make a difference. And what is true for our kids is true for their parents and grandparents as well. We don't "give" our children a Jewish education. If I have a watch and I give it to you, it's not mine anymore. No, we BEQUEATH a Jewish education TO our kids, so that they will someday have what we have. The bequest is something that comes in the future, something to look forward to. We want our kids not to have what we had when we were 13. We want our kids to have what we have NOW.

And I can't tell you what that will be. I can't tell you what you bequeath to the next generation. That part is totally up to you. There is no one right way to do this. And the way our kids will live a life of Jewish meaning may be quite different than our own. Interestingly, nowhere in the entire Torah is the exact date of Shavuot - the Holiday of Receiving the Torah mentioned. It merely takes place at the end of 50 days - because the key is to get there at your own pace. That's our goal. Not to count DOWN but to count UP,; to be always be growing, to always be learning, to finding endless fascination with the world around us with ever deeper levels of spiritual maturity. That's the goal, and we are all on that path as our souls grow richer and fuller through learning and life.