

6 The Buzz with Rabbi B



Running (or walking) the Omer Marathon

A few days ago, during his daily press conference, I heard Governor DeWine yesterday remind us that right now we are in a marathon, not in a sprint. Things aren't going to magically be all better when the first businesses are allowed to open during the beginning of May. And just because we are showing good results so far, it doesn't mean we should ease up and go back to how we've always done things. I have never run a marathon. I would probably make it a mile or so and then be searching for La Croix. But Lauren has run many half-marathons, as have my brother and sister in law. And from them I've learned some important lessons. When you're beginning a marathon, it's much better to focus on a couple miles at a time. Think about your breathing. Focus on your stride. If there's any way to enjoy the journey, now's the time to do it. That is the same in this pandemic. We can't focus only on when things will be back to normal, because we have likely a long road ahead. But we can focus on here and now. We can focus on the good that we can do even from inside our homes.

Just as this time should be thought of as a marathon, Jewishly, we are in a marathon as well. You have likely heard us talk about the Omer period, the time between the second day of Passover, and the holiday of Shavuot, where we celebrate receiving the Torah, there are 49 days. We are instructed to count each of those 49 days and acknowledge them. An Omer is a measurement of grain that was brought to the Temple after the second day of Passover. The Torah instructs us to count each day from the Omer offering to Shavuot. The big question is why? Why do we specifically mark this time? There is a great explanation from Rabbi Jacob Milgrom who writes the answer lies in the number of days that the Torah tells us to count. Shavu'ot is observed on the fiftieth day. The Hebrew word for fifty: Hamishim. The Arabic Word for fifty: Hamsin.

In Israel, a Hamsin is also a weather pattern. It is a rapid drop in the humidity, followed by a ferociously hot desert wind, so destructive that it can wipe out a crop overnight. Nowadays, meteorologists can predict a hamsin before it arrives. Now imagine a time when there were no meteorologists, and the dreaded hamsin could not be predicted. Farmers held their breath for the entire hamsin season, counting each day as a blessing if the hamsin did not come and their crops were not suddenly destroyed. That is why you had the counting, says Dr. Milgrom, and that is why you had the dread and the fear. "The Omer time was a period of fear and trepidation and a period of good behavior, lest God think us so cavalier about the great blessings of rain and dew and harvest that God gives us that divine punishment like hamsin, the hellish dry wind. That is why the Israelite farmer counted, and that is why the Israelite farmer was in semi-mourning, or, to be more exact, in fear and dread during these days." It makes sense. Each day that there is a chance your livelihood could be ruined and it's not, should be counted and acknowledged. We thank God for our blessings during the Omer.

There's another interpretation too. During these seven weeks, we run a spiritual marathon of cleansing our souls. We aim to be all-around better people at the end of the Omer than we were at the beginning. But that doesn't happen all at once. You can't cram for the Omer final the night before Shavuot. But what we do each day, when we can stop and offer our prayers of gratitude, when day by day we act in ways big and small to make a difference to other people, when we really learn to count our blessings and count our days and make our days count, that's how we run this spiritual marathon. We know that when we are trying to make changes in our lives that it's not always a steady path, sometimes it's two steps forward one step back. But that's why the Omer is 49 days long. We have seven weeks to turn it around. And guess what, if it doesn't happen before Shavuot, in a couple months we'll be at Elul, the month before the High Holy Days, and we'll have time to improve then as well.

So as we enter the third month of this pandemic, we are now about half-way through the Omer period (Shavuot is on May 29) let us take a deep breath. Some businesses are beginning to open, but the Stay-at-Home order still stands, and we can't gather in groups of more than ten people. But we can still be together virtually, and support one another as we run our way through this marathon. It was so touching to see the many pictures of people experiencing Passover with family and friends on Zoom, and we had a record number of participants at the Temple zoom seder. We have seen the kind acts of people buying groceries for one another, people checking in on neighbors, celebrating birthdays with socially-distanced parades. The Omer period reminds that even though the days feel like they blend together, it's important to stop and count each one, fill each day the best way we can; observe the mile-markers around us. If we can endeavor to mark each day in gratitude, to turn ourselves around, perhaps we will finish this Omer period, this pandemic marathon in better shape than when it started.