JOANNE: SEE MY NEW TAGLINE AT THE BOTTO AND P-L-E-A-S-E get Times of Israel to change my tagline, too. I am still getting grief from my old shul.

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Making ‘counting’ count

Shammai Engelmayer

We are in the midst of counting our days—49 days, to be exact, seven complete weeks—as we vicariously journey from Egypt to Sinai, from the slavery of Egypt to our birth as God’s holy nation.

Each night, we add another day, and remind ourselves, as well, of the days that already passed. Thursday night, for example, we said this—or we should have: “Today is the 22nd day of the Omer, which is three weeks and one day of the Omer.” One day added to another and then another, each day bringing us one step closer to the moment when God reveals to us our sacred mission as His kingdom of priests and holy nation.

That is why God told Abraham to leave his home and start a family. That is why God later took that family—took us—out of Egypt. The late physicist, rabbi and author Rabbi Yehudah Leo Levi, who, significantly, was on the rigidly right of the Jewish spectrum, put it this way: “To save humanity, God chose Abraham to become the progenitor of a nation which was to bring God’s message to humanity. That nation was formed on the night of the first Passover for the explicit purpose of teaching mankind what God wants of them, which is primarily the development of the world—physically, socially, and spiritually.”

In other words, we are God’s emissaries to the world. Our mission is to teach the world by example how God wants all His children to behave towards each other and towards all of creation. As we count the days, we are supposed to be looking forward to that mission, but we also look backward because we must never forget what it feels like to be the lowest of the low, even as we march forward to become the agents of the Most High.

“Counting Sefirah,” however, has become ritualized to the point of becoming trivialized, to be rushed through at the end of evening prayers. The counting itself is not the issue, however, and it never was. It is the reason for the counting that must concern us if the ritual of “Counting Sefirah” is to serve its purpose.

Instead of just counting, take 10 more minutes and study one of the many versions of the 613 commandments supposedly found in the Torah (there are several versions). In so doing, keep in mind that each commandment is actually a chapter heading for different areas of the Law.

Of particular relevance are those commandments, those mitzvot, that focus on how we relate to the people around us, and the responsibilities we have to the rest of creation—animal, vegetable, and mineral—down to the very air we breathe. Included among these are laws regarding how we treat those near and dear; how we treat the neighbor and the stranger; how we conduct our business (there are over 100 of these to explore); how we treat those we employ. There are the laws of torts and of property rights; there are laws protecting individual rights, including the right to privacy.

Study a handful of the 613 commandments each night. Read the law and then try to apply it to life in the 21st century.

Using the version of the list assembled by the Rambam, for example, Number 270 prohibits us from moving the boundary markers of our neighbors. What relevance does that have to us today? Is it just a commandment about actual, physical boundary markers, or is there a much wider scope to this law?

A former senior economist of the Bank of Israel, Rabbi Meir Tamari, who also is one of the leading halachic experts when it comes to Jewish business ethics, once explained the “boundary marker” to me in this way: A person is in the fur business here in the United States. He has a relative who lives across from the Russian warehouse where sable skins are stored, and he calls and says the warehouse is on fire. Said Tamari, the person in the fur business may not start buying up all the available sable. Rather, he has to call all his competitors and inform them of the fire, and that a shortage of sable is to be expected.

Is that what “boundary marker” means to you? Are you able to see how he got from that commandment to his explanation?

Take one night just to contemplate Number 35, not to put a stumbling block before the blind, which is found in the second half of this week’s double parashah. What is a “stumbling block” and who are “the blind”? Make a list—and then consider that list carefully. On another night, consider Number 34, not to insult the deaf. How does this commandment relate to the various laws we have regarding bad speech—and why?

What do Numbers 159 (not to offer an animal and its young on the same day), or 161 (chasing away the mother bird from the nest before taking its eggs) have to do with the rights of animals and our responsibilities to them? For that matter, what does Number 163 (not to boil a calf in its mother’s milk) tell us about such matters?

The counting itself is an empty ritual. Friday, May 1, is the 22nd day of the Omer. Big Deal.

Sefirah, however, is not an exercise in counting from one to 49. With each day, we figuratively edge farther away from slavery and ever closer to revelation; we are moving one step closer to becoming God’s kingdom of priests and holy nation. We need to understand what that means and what our mission entails. That is why we count the days. (It is also why we count.)

When we reach Day 50, we need to stop counting our days and start making our days count. We need to put into practice all we have learned in those 50 days. On Day 50, Shavuot, we stand at the foot of Mount Sinai. We are no longer pharaoh’s slaves; we are God’s treasured nation.

We have a job to do.

If culling through one or other of the lists of the list of 613 mitzvot is too daunting, here is another suggestion. The second half of tomorrow’s Torah reading is Parashat K’doshim, which I often refer to as the Reader’s Digest Condensed Version of the Torah. It begins with Leviticus 19. There are 35 verses in that chapter. Take each verse apart, dissect each phrase, and try to sense what is really being said and how that applies to our lives today.

Verse 3, for example, commands us to “each revere his mother and his father, and keep My sabbaths.” Is there a general significance in mother being mentioned before father here, as opposed to the “honor your father and your mother” commandment we are so familiar with? In what ways did revering parents and observing Shabbat—they go together in verse 3, as you can see—relate to each other then, and how do they relate now?

In K’doshim, we find the arguably most often quoted mitzvah in the Torah, to love our neighbors as we would love ourselves. What does that really mean? And how does that relate to perhaps the most ignored mitzvah in the Torah nowadays, also found here—to love the stranger as we should love our neighbors and ourselves?

Along with observing the ritual of Sefirah, therefore, if studying 613 mitzvot is too daunting, study these laws in Leviticus 19, one or two verses at a time. Also consider what many of these verses have to say about life during this coronavirus pandemic, and how we should be living our lives now, especially the mitzvah of not standing idly by the blood of other people.

Let us not make Counting Sefirah an empty ritual, or even one that we totally ignore. Instead, this year and every year from now on, let us all count the days from slavery to freedom, and then let us make our counting count—first by study, and then by putting what we learn into action.

Continue to stay safe, so that we can all benefit from the wisdom and goodwill we all have to share with each other.

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