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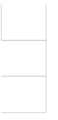
Counting the Omer, the Anti-Peloton

Why the ancient ritual is the perfect antidote to personalized spirituality on demand

BY STUART HALPERN

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MY WIFE AND I ARE BOTH OBSERVANT JEWS, BUT IF YOU INQUIRED about our daily lives and habits you'd notice that we're also quite Orthodox when it comes to our Peloton exercise bike. It lives in its own bedroom, and we approach it with much of the reverence and sense of ritual you're more likely to associate with shul than with a workout session: We put on special garments, we prepare physically and mentally, we follow the prescribed motions in a precise way. And, if you didn't know any better, you could listen to the instructors who motivated us via the bike's internet-connected screen and think they were young rabbis: You're more likely to hear Robin or Emma or Ally talk about hope and love and transcendence than about glutes or quads or abs. Which, perhaps, helps explain why so many people are willing to pay such a steep price for the bike: Peloton is the perfect spiritual accessory for an age that favors individual practice over communal participation, a full body and soul workout for the many, many of us who no longer have the time and the appetite for huddling together with other people in uncomfortable pews.

Did Judaism predate this trend by a few thousand years? Isn't counting the Omer the Peloton of Jewish observance? Unlike most major prayers, the blessing over the counting doesn't require a quorum. It doesn't have a designated time. It doesn't even require you to leave your home and head to shul. It's there when you want it, and, like the Peloton, it offers daily opportunities to meditate on different attributes that'll really open up the chakras. Isn't counting the Omer, then, the perfect manifestation of God on demand—solitary and slick and satisfying?

Thankfully, nothing could be further from the truth. If anything, the Omer is a warning against precisely the sort of personalized, solipsistic approach to spiritual satisfaction that is making brisk business these days. It may be performed alone, but it's really about counting to community, teaching us the world-impacting power in gathering disparate individuals around a common, unifying goal.

If that seems like overkill, consider the following. First, if there's any CliffsNotes version of counting the Omer, it's this: Every Jew counts. Literally. As the ancient rabbis noted in the midrash:

“Seven weeks shall you count *for yourself*.” (Deuteronomy 16:9) I might think that the Jewish court (is being exhorted to do the counting); it is, therefore, written (Leviticus 22:15) “And you shall count for yourselves”—each individual (is exhorted to do the counting).

Brilliantly intuiting that human beings might leave the work of community-building to legacy institutions, the rabbis reminded us that there are no institutions if we don't lend them our own unique voices. In order for the counting to serve its purpose, all of us are asked to put skin in the game. With the count being a tabulation until the holiday of Shavuot, which celebrates the Jewish people receiving God's word on Mt. Sinai, *Sefirat Ha-Omer* is a callback to that epochal experience where your great-grand-bubbe and zayde and mine stood shoulder to shoulder in a desert sublimely experiencing the revelation of God's eternal wisdom *ke-ish echad be-lev echad*, as one individual with one heart. No one slouched away and expected the professionals to handle it in their stead. No one was relegated to the sidelines. We count now as we counted then.

But our counting is no mere obsession with metrics—the sort that takes hold, say, when you get too attached to maintaining your perfect workout streak on your Peloton. It's about, to use a somewhat battered term, social justice: After reciting each day's count, a short line is usually added, a request to God to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem. This site was the wellspring from which Judaism's moral voice was meant to emanate to the world. It was this sanctuary, the biblical prophets envisioned, that was to serve as “a house of prayer for all nations,” where justice can “roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.” By counting, then, we are signaling our commitment to building a better world, and promising that we ourselves will partake in this building, that we're not about to just outsource the work of repairing what's broken.

How to begin this difficult work? The Omer count has one more lesson for us, and it involves learning. With Shavuot as its culmination, we are reminded that while some of us have become people of the bike, all of us are people of the Book. Even if your way of celebrating the holiday isn't pulling an all-nighter learning Talmud, there are still plenty of ways to connect. Maybe it's pulling up a chair at a socially distanced lecture from your rabbi. Maybe it's helping your kid with her Hebrew homework. Maybe it's learning your first line of Mishna, or just reading the next entry in your encyclopedia of all things Jewish. Whatever you choose to learn, the idea is the same: You can't begin to build a

community, let alone repair a universe, without engaging in learning, and whatever you choose to learn counts.

Don't get me wrong: My wife and I still enjoy our 30-minute HIIT rides, and may even try out that really trippy Grateful Dead themed workout one day soon. But as much pleasure as we take from our solitary rides, we take greater pleasure simply opening our siddurs and counting the Omer, a ritual that teaches us that true community occurs not despite our own discrete proclivities, yearnings, and lifestyles, but because of them, and because we work to bring all of our sensibilities together in one shared act of devotion. It's the wisdom we collected together, the laws we observe together, and the practices we share together that make us a people, a privilege no trendy exercise, meditation, or wellness routine could ever replace.

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