

A BIT OF BACKGROUND

To explore the story of the Counting of the Omer, we have borrowed the Japanese form of Renga—essentially a poetic conversation between two or more writers. It consists of a sequence of short stanzas, no more than 2 or 3 lines each. Developed by Japanese poets in both the Court and the countryside some 700 years ago, the renga structure—like haiku, tanka and other classic Japanese forms—has now been embraced by poets worldwide.

We started this project, almost by accident, in April 2022 (Nissan 5782 in the Jewish calendar) after exchanging text messages in renga form while one of us was at home in Edinburgh and the other was travelling back from Brighton to Scotland on a train. We realised, in a conversation about the Omer traditions, that we were at the beginning of the Count for the present year. So , in what was virtually “real time” we launched into a poetic dialogue of our own. We, like other modern-day Renga writers, occasionally deviated from the strictest rules of syllables-per-line etc.—but we did adhere to new rules of our own: Each of our contributions had to travel between us in the form of a text, had to contain an entry for each day of the 7 prescribed weeks, and absolutely had to be completed in time for the last day of the Count.

This Counting of the Omer is dedicated to our friend and teacher, Rabbi Mark Solomon, of the Edinburgh Liberal Jewish Community, Sukkat Shalom.

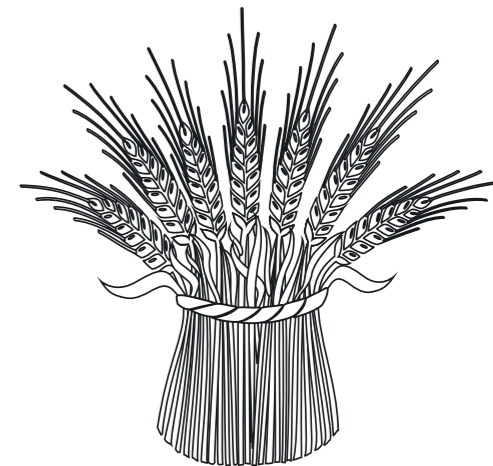
We’d also like to thank the members of our writers’ group for their encouragement and support.

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Counting the Omer

15 Nisan – 5 Sivan 5782 ; 16 April – 4 June 2022

Sue Bard and Ellen Galford



Counting the Omer is a Jewish custom of uncertain age and origin relating to the seven- week period between Passover, when barley was harvested, and the next festival, Shavuot (Festival of Weeks), the time of the wheat harvest.

Scholars, sages, mystics and others have added meaning to each day and week within this period, starting with the attribution of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt at the beginning, and of the meeting of God and Moses at Mt Sinai at its end. Over the millennia, mythical and actual events have been added, ranging from incidents during the 1st Century CE Roman occupation of Palestine via the Crusades to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

WEEK 1

1

Tell me, what is an omer?

An omer is a measure,
and a sheaf of unthreshed stalks.

2

When the sickle is
first put to the standing grain
start to count the weeks.

3

Do we note all grains growing,
or just the wheat of Canaan?

4

In the beginning (*b'reishit*)
go among the barley rigs
to cut the omer.

5

You shall count off seven weeks –
keep rhythm
with your remembered Temple.

6

Make fine wheat loaves,
wave loaves baked with leaven,
the Bread of First Fruits.

7

The journey of young seedlings
is a perilous progress.

WEEK 2

8

Green shoots must survive
scorching sun, lethal windstorms
and poisonous air.

9

Asking only one omer
Ha-Shem will watch over them.

10

The planting of crops
is a love story to the earth.

11

The sky bears witness.
The story is older than
every tongue it's told in.

12

What did time taste like
before we learned to mark it
by the lives of grain?

13

We track its transmutations
that give shape to weeks and years.

14

Through thousands of years
memories kneaded and baked
to imprint wonders.

WEEK 3

15

Seasons aren't measured
only by the lives of grain.
When we pray for dew (*tefillat tal*)

16

then the marching times begin,
soaking the earth with blood.

17

In Crusading times
smoke without fire billowed
over Christendom

18

with tales of ritual murder
that made saints of dead children,

19

perpetuating
lives ended or uprooted
in waves of terror

20

that rose and broke again –
pogroms on Russian lands.

21

Warsaw nineteen-forty-three,
Day One of the Uprising

22

and of the Omer.
There, the counting of the days
stopped at twenty-six,

WEEK 4

23

which makes three weeks and
five days -*hod in netzah* -
splendour in endurance

24

As this year's counting began
our world was counting War Days.

25

Today, ten weeks and six days
makes seventy -six.
Wheat fields sown with landmines.

26

Malekh-ha-moves
(Death's angel and samurai)
knows no slack season.

27

As new life rises from earth
some stories reach their endings.

28

“For our family”
my grandmother warned each
spring

“*Pesakh* brings *tsores*.”

29

Poisoned chalices of dread
bequeathed through generations.

WEEK 5

30

But also wisdom
handed down *l'dor va dor*
to outwit evil.

31

Today's sunrise, a blood moon
falling in earth's shadow

32

remembers *Al Nakba*.
Another people's story
obliterated.

33

Today is thirty-three days (*Lag
b'Omer*),
which makes four weeks and five
days.

34

Was that the day
the divinely ordered plague
stopped killing students?

35

Or was that the day
those students died in battle,
in glory for Bar Kochba?

WEEK 6

36

Either way, it's when
the mourning stops and joy begins
with feast and fire,

37

music, human company,
the band strikes up at weddings.

38

The ninth of May
my parents' wedding day
was chosen for them.

39

Lag b'omer nineteen forty,
my father on his way to war.

40

Overhead the moon
migrates, like a flock of birds
between the ages.

41

Shimon bar Yochai's
fire and flame-filled visions
travel over time

42

to Spain
where Rabbi Moses ben Shem Tov
described them as the Zohar.

WEEK 7

43

Seven *sefirot*
made the omer's abacus,
measuring the weeks.

44

*hesed, gevurah,
tiferet, netzah and hod,
yesod and malkhut.*

45

To live by, not to die for,
in times of sorrow and of joy.

46

It takes seven weeks
and several thousand years
to finish counting.

47

The Red Sea's far behind us
and we're approaching Sinai.

48

The sky opens like a scroll.
The mountain comes to meet us.

49

When you hear “Sinai “
do you see a Covenant
or a battleground?

50

In this tribe of many tribes
no two Sinais are the same.