

# **COUNTING THE OMER**



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**A Daily Devotional Toward Shavuot**

**William Mark Huey**



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## **A DAILY DEVOTIONAL TOWARD SHAVUOT**

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edited by J.K. McKee

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Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them,  
“When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD for you to be accepted; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. Now on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb one year old without defect for a burnt offering to the LORD. Its grain offering shall then be two-tenths *of an ephah* of fine flour mixed with oil, an offering by fire to the LORD *for* a soothing aroma, with its drink offering, a fourth of a hin of wine. Until this same day, until you have brought in the offering of your God, you shall eat neither bread nor roasted grain nor new growth. It is to be a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwelling places. You shall also count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering; there shall be seven complete sabbaths.”

Leviticus 23:10-15



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## Abbreviation Chart and Special Terms

Special terms unique to this publication that may be used have been provided in this chart:

Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament

ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)

b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)

BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)

BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*

CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*

CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)

EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*

ESV: English Standard Version (2001)

EXP: *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*

Grk: Greek

HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)

HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)

Heb: Hebrew

KJV: King James Version

LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)

LXX: Septuagint

LS: *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell & Scott)

m. Mishnah

NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)

NEB: New English Bible (1970)

NIV: New International Version (1984)

NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)

NLT: New Living Translation (1996)

NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)

RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)

t. Tosefta

Tanakh: the Old Testament

TNIV: Today’s New International Version (2005)

TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

YLT: Young’s Literal Translation (1862/1898)

# Introduction

An interesting experience happened to me on my spiritual journey between Passover and the Feast of Weeks in 2004 which actually inspired this volume. At that time, in my capacity as director of Outreach Israel Ministries, we were responsible for certain elements of a unified effort, by several independent Messianic ministries, to co-host a celebration of the festival of *Shavuot* (Pentecost) in Orlando, Florida. With the stated theme of “Unity in Spirit and Truth,” our collective efforts, among many goals, were devoted to displaying to much of the beleaguered Messianic community—at least for *a brief moment*—that Spirit-led followers of Yeshua the Messiah could actually work, worship, and minister together while commemorating the Feast of Weeks. In Biblical times, *Shavuot* was originally given to be one of the three times of ingathering at Jerusalem:

“Three times a year you shall celebrate a feast to Me. You shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days you are to eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the appointed time in the month Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. And none shall appear before Me empty-handed. **Also you shall observe the Feast of the Harvest of the first fruits of your labors from what you sow in the field;** also the Feast of the Ingathering at the end of the year when you gather in *the fruit of* your labors from the field. Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD” (Exodus 23:14-17; cf. Leviticus 23:11-16).

The important feature of *Shavuot* is to convoke and declare allegiance and dedication to God. Our primary objective in 2004 was to focus on the Holy One of Israel, and attempt—while scattered in the Diaspora, since most do not have the financial ability to convene in Jerusalem—to assemble as one and declare our love and obedience to the Lord, allowing His Spirit to minister. As a result, almost all who attended our convocation were treated to an awesome display of how events and gatherings focused on the Messiah Yeshua and His work for us, can be a spiritual blessing beyond description.

With the *Shavuot* gathering as a backdrop, one of my responsibilities was to encourage various Messianic Believers to consider coming to Orlando and attend, so that they might receive of His blessings. As we began to enter into the Spring 2004 appointed times, my attention was drawn to a piece of the Torah’s instruction that is to focus God’s people on the arrival of *Shavuot* after they commemorate the Passover:

“You shall also count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering [*omer ha'tenufah*, הַתְּנוּפָה הָעֹמֶר]; there shall be seven complete sabbaths. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh sabbath; then you shall present a new grain offering to the LORD” (Leviticus 23:15-16).

As I pondered this command, and reflected on my own personal negligence at the time to really understand how to follow it, I had a private conviction to “Count the Omer,” a process known in Hebrew as *sefriat ha'omer* (סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר). In Ancient Israel during the

## Counting the Omer

Passover season, “from the day when you bring the Omer of the waving—seven weeks” (Leviticus 23:15, ATS) were to be counted to *Shavuot* or the Feast of Weeks. For today’s Messianic Believers, who recognize Yeshua’s prophetic fulfillment of the Passover by His atoning sacrifice for our sins and resurrection as firstfruits, and the significance of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (as well as the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai)—I concluded that there must be an edifying way that individuals desiring to press into the Holy One could employ, making the season of Counting the Omer something special.

In my attempt to be obedient to Count the Omer, I did some examination to determine just what the Torah’s instructions meant, and if there were any existing, systematic method(s) for doing it. Certainly, I reasoned, the Jewish community which has faithfully observed the appointed times for millennia, was bound to have developed some useful methods or exercises to follow for Counting the Omer. The *siddur* or traditional prayer book certainly contains a customary blessing that is to be recited as one focuses on the holiness of this time, followed by a day-to-day number counting:<sup>1</sup>

*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu  
melekh ha’olam, asher kidshanu  
b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu al sefriat  
ha’omer.*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ  
הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו  
וְצִוָּנוּ עַל סְפִירַת הָעוֹמֵר

Praised are You Lord our God, who  
rules the universe, instilling in us the  
holiness of commandments by  
commanding us to count the *omer*.

Psalms 67 and 128 are among some of the traditional texts considered, especially as Psalm 67 was likely recited when sacrifices had originally been offered in the Temple. I am a Believer who often needs to follow a consistent regimen of an outlined plan or order, to focus my spiritual attention throughout the year (one of the main reasons why I so appreciate the annual Torah cycle), and I was most curious whether or not there was something available for me to employ during my Counting of the Omer in 2004. In my cursory search for outlines or programs, I found a variety of useful activities based off of the Scriptures.

The systematic way of Counting the Omer which really bore witness to me involved a number of Psalms, each of which was intended to focus on an aspect of God’s holiness, His provision for His people, His goodness, His mercy and grace, His justice, etc. In ancient times when the Temple and the altar were operational, the Levitical priests exclaimed psalms and hymns that were to extol the adoration and worship of the LORD God of Israel throughout the year, but especially during the fifty days of Counting the Omer. Reviewing this list of Psalms and considering this systematic plan for enhancing the command to Count the Omer, I found that the readings were a logical way to not only enhance my own spiritual pursuits, but also to especially encourage other Messianic Believers to Count the Omer themselves (for the list, see **Psalm Readings for Counting the Omer** in the

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<sup>1</sup> Jules Harlow, ed., *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2007), pp 55-60; cf. Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Nusach Sefard* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1985), pp 312-317.

“Counting the Omer” chapter following). I thought it a useful exercise to incorporate the list into a series of daily reflections which would be sent to our ministry’s e-mail update teaching subscribers.

(I was actually given this plan for Counting the Omer from an acquaintance of mine, and even though I have not been able to find out who originally put it together, I have no doubt that this person will be given great blessings by the Holy One throughout eternity!)<sup>ii</sup>

What I intended to do was very simple: to assist people Counting the Omer by providing a review of some contemplative Psalms. Psalm 67 was read or recited each day as the morning oblation would have been offered in the Temple, so each update reproduced Psalm 67 at its beginning. When you read this Psalm, it outlines and establishes the setting for the sacrifices presented at the altar, and to a certain extent, sets the tone for the order of worship:

**“For the choir director; with stringed instruments. A Psalm. A Song. God be gracious to us and bless us, and cause His face to shine upon us—Selah. That Your way may be known on the earth, Your salvation among all nations. Let the peoples praise You, O God; let all the peoples praise You. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy; for You will judge the peoples with uprightness and guide the nations on the earth. Selah. Let the peoples praise You, O God; let all the peoples praise You. The earth has yielded its produce; God, our God, blesses us. God blesses us, that all the ends of the earth may fear Him”** (Psalm 67).

As I read this Psalm, I could picture in my mind’s eye the actual sacrificial ceremonies that had once taken place on the Temple Mount. Since it was composed for the choir director, with stringed instruments, and referred to as both a “psalm” and a “song,”<sup>iii</sup> I could envision various priests gathered near the altar with their different instruments, offering up praise to God in conjunction with the sacrifices. Then I could hear the officiating priest declare what appears to be an abbreviated rendition of the Aaronic Benediction (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), followed by a pause, *selah* (שְׁלֵחַ), for reflection. Next, another stanza proclaims the sovereignty of God over the Earth, His offer of salvation to the nations, and the joy this brings to those who know Him. This is followed by another pause to soak in these declarations. Finally, the priest places the daily offering on the altar, and he beseeches the Holy One for His blessings.

*What can a simple ceremony like this teach followers of the Messiah of Israel?*

As you will discover when you begin your reading of this devotional, as I was writing my initial exhortations to encourage our ministry friends to simply consider participating in their own Omer Count, I found myself being spiritually exercised by this daily procedure. At first, it was actually not my intention to write a (long/er) daily devotional, but just send out a brief update really only reproducing the Psalm quotations to read. However, by Day

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<sup>ii</sup> Richard Booker, *Celebrating Jesus in the Biblical Feasts* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2009), pp 188-189 offers the same outline that we follow for Counting the Omer, with Psalm 119 employed for Days #1-22. After this our plans diverge, as he recommends Acts chs. 1-28 for the remaining twenty-eight days, a chapter of the Book of Acts each day, and we will employ other Psalm passages.

<sup>iii</sup> Heb. *mizmor shir* (מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר).

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#2, I was personally receiving so many meaningful thoughts by reflecting on these selections, that I began to put my thoughts to writing. By Day #3, I was personally committed to writing a daily commentary, to continue encouraging Messianic Believers who were perhaps also Counting the Omer for the very first time.

Throughout this devotional you will read my thoughts on how various Psalm selections moved me in my pursuit of following the Torah admonition to Count the Omer. At times, I noticed that the daily Omer Count enhanced my weekly study of the Torah portions, seeing thematic parallels or concepts which would be further illuminated by the various Psalms. In time, I concluded that the Holy Spirit was rewarding me for my obedience to focus my time and thoughts on these wonderful passages from the Holy Writ.

My prayer is that all of you who read through this devotional—but more importantly, who choose to remember the command to Count the Omer—will likewise be encouraged by the indwelling power of the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit), teaching you in the ways of holiness and righteousness. As we all draw closer to our Creator through diligent obedience to Him, may He be glorified!

Until the restoration of all things...

*William Mark Huey*

# Counting the Omer

Mark Huey with J.K. McKee

What is Counting the Omer, a process known in Hebrew as *sefariat ha'omer* (הַעֲמֵר הַתְּפִירָה)? An *omer* (עֹמֶר) is actually a measure of weight seen in the Tanakh Scriptures (Old Testament), the equivalent of about 2.3 quarts or 2.2 liters in modern units.<sup>i</sup> In the waving of the sheaf/*omer* ceremony during the season of Passover, the priest was to take this *omer* amount from the firstfruits of the barley harvest, presenting it before the Lord. Following the waving of the sheaf/*omer*, a fifty-day period would commence, counting toward the Feast of Weeks or *Shavuot* (שָׁבֻעוֹת).<sup>ii</sup> *Shavuot* is often known by its Greek-derived name “Pentecost,” as *Pentēkostē* (πεντηκοστή) means “fiftieth.” The principal instructions regarding how *Shavuot* or Pentecost is to be observed are seen in Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16:

“Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD for you to be accepted; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. Now on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb one year old without defect for a burnt offering to the LORD. Its grain offering shall then be two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, an offering by fire to the LORD for a soothing aroma, with its drink offering, a fourth of a hin of wine. Until this same day, until you have brought in the offering of your God, you shall eat neither bread nor roasted grain nor new growth. It is to be a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwelling places. You shall also count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering; there shall be seven complete sabbaths. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh sabbath; then you shall present a new grain offering to the LORD” (Leviticus 23:10-16).

“You shall count seven weeks for yourself; you shall begin to count seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. Then you shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God with a tribute of a freewill offering of your hand, which you shall give just as the LORD your God blesses you; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your son and your daughter and your male and female servants and the Levite who is in your

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<sup>i</sup> Michael M. Homan, “Weights and Measures,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1374.

<sup>ii</sup> Pronounced as *Shavuot* in the Ashkenazic Jewish tradition.

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town, and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst, in the place where the LORD your God chooses to establish His name” (Deuteronomy 16:9-11).

Before you read through my daily devotionals for the fifty-day Counting of the Omer, an overview of the subject is in order. Within the Torah, it is stated that the Counting of the Omer is to begin during the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:6-8); it is to specifically start “on the day after the sabbath” (Leviticus 23:11).<sup>iii</sup> For many Bible readers, when to start the Counting of the Omer is a closed issue: there is a weekly Sabbath or *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת) that occurs during the Festival of Unleavened Bread, meaning that the start of the Omer Count begins and ends on a Sunday, the day after the Sabbath. This means that *Shavuot* will always fall on a Sunday. Does this not align with the admonition to count “seven complete sabbaths” (Leviticus 23:15)?<sup>iv</sup> It should not really matter that Deuteronomy 16:6 uses different terminology, saying that the Counting of the Omer involves “seven weeks.”<sup>v</sup>

If you have been a part of the Messianic community for any period of time, then you have probably heard the expression, “two Jews, three opinions.” While to many people, the instructions on how to Count the Omer may seem pretty straightforward, within Jewish history they have been interpreted differently. Different sects of Second Temple Judaism, in which Messiah Yeshua conducted His ministry, had their own views on the Torah commandments for when to Count the Omer. Of the two main Jewish groups of the First Century C.E., the Sadducees interpreted the “day after the sabbath” in Leviticus 23:11 to be the weekly Sabbath during Unleavened bread, **but** the Pharisees interpreted “the day after the sabbath” to actually be the High Sabbath which begins the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The Saddusaical Omer Count would always be observed from a Sunday to a Sunday, but the Pharisaical Omer Count would begin on the 16th of Aviv/Nisan and end on the 6th of Sivan, fluxuating on any day of the week year-by-year. Jeffrey H. Tigay summarizes in his commentary on Deuteronomy,

“According to Leviticus 23:11, the counting begins with an offering of the first sheaf of the harvest ‘on the day after the Sabbath.’ From the context this seems to refer to the Sunday after the first sheaf is cut, whenever that should occur, some time during or after the Feast of Unleavened Bread. In Second Temple times it was assumed that ‘on the day after the Sabbath’ does not refer to an exact date. There was controversy among various Jewish sects as to whether a Sabbath within the Feast of Unleavened Bread was meant or one following it. The Pharisees held that ‘the day after the Sabbath’ does not mean a Sunday at all, but the day after a Sabbath-like holiday, namely the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This became the basis of the halakhic ruling that the first sheaf is brought, and the counting begins, on the second day of the feast, the sixteenth of Nisan, and that the Feast of Weeks falls on the sixth of Sivan (May-June).”<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>iii</sup> Heb. *m'mochorat ha'Shabbat* (מִמְּוֹחֶרֶת הַשַּׁבָּת).

<sup>iv</sup> Heb. *sheva Shabbatot temimot* (שֶׁבַע שַׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימוֹת).

<sup>v</sup> Heb. *sheva shavuot* (שֶׁבַע שָׁבוּעוֹת).

<sup>vi</sup> Jeffrey H. Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 157.

Within Jewish history, schisms and divisions between different sects and groups widely occurred on the basis of what religious calendar was employed. The differences of interpreting “the day after the sabbath” (Leviticus 23:11) were one of the main areas where the Sadducees and Pharisees, who both composed the religious council known as the Sanhedrin, were divided. The Sadducees largely made up the Temple priesthood and Jewish aristocracy, and the Pharisees composed many of the Rabbis, teachers, and scribes that the people as a whole looked to for spiritual leadership. A third group, the Essenes or Qumran community (who gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls), interpreted “the day after the sabbath” to be the last weekly Sabbath during the week of Unleavened Bread, meaning that they would keep *Shavuot* a week after the Sadducees. When the Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. the Sadducees disbanded, the Essenes faded away, but the Pharisees continued on, giving rise to Rabbinical and Talmudic Judaism. Within today’s Jewish community (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform), the theological descendants and offshoots of the Pharisees, *Shavuot* is remembered on the 6th of Sivan.

What all positions regarding the Counting of the Omer agree upon for certain **is that the Counting of the Omer lasts fifty days**. Whenever you begin the seven weeks to *Shavuot*, you will count forty-nine days and then the day of *Shavuot*.

Surveying today’s broad Messianic community, which largely includes Messianic Judaism, and both the Two-House and One Law sub-movements, there is no agreed-upon way over when to Count the Omer to *Shavuot*. It is safe to say that most of Messianic Judaism follows the same Pharisaical reckoning as does the Synagogue, but in the independent Messianic movement—of which our ministry largely finds itself a part—one encounters a great deal of variance. Just as divisions within Judaism have often been focused around calendar disputes, so can the method of Counting the Omer divide Messianic Believers during the season of Passover to Pentecost. Sadly, there has often not been a great deal of maturity or forbearance present regarding this issue, and people are frequently perplexed over factionalism that can manifest—especially during a season when Messiah followers should especially be coming together!

### Why the Debate on How to Count the Omer?

Our ministry strongly feels that the Messianic movement does not need any more reasons than it already has to be internally divided or factionalized. Given the many things that our broad faith community has endured since the *Shavuot* 2004 gathering Outreach Israel helped put together, “Unity in Spirit and Truth,” there has sadly been a great deal of disunity and misinformation circulate among Messianic Believers. There have been significant waves of theological and spiritual error hit the Messianic world, requiring Outreach Israel Ministries and TNN Online to take a very proactive, apologetic stance on many issues. This has certainly helped refine our vision and purpose for the long term future, and circumstances have forced us to conduct many studies and inquiries into topics that we may not have otherwise done.<sup>vii</sup>

In past years, as our ministry has faithfully been able to teach on the Spring festivals of the Lord, Count the Omer, encourage people to use this season to draw closer to Him, and be involved with various *Shavuot* gatherings and celebrations—we have **never allowed** differences of interpretation over *when* to start the Omer Count to divide Believers. While

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<sup>vii</sup> Consult the author’s article “Refining Our Vision,” appearing in the July 2007 issue of Outreach Israel News.

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it is easy to discern who the Saddusaical and Pharisaiical Omer Count advocates are in much of the Messianic community, few of you have been aware of the fact that our ministry has had *both positions* internally represented. Externally in the past, we would send out *Shavuot* teachings by following the Saddusaical method, Counting the Omer from Sunday to Sunday, concurrent with what our local congregation in Florida was doing. Internally, though, we would continue to have friendly discussions over the method of Counting of the Omer, and the pros and cons that the Saddusaical and Pharisaiical methods have for the broad Messianic movement.

So as our engagement with this issue has developed over the years, especially since 2004, **where does our ministry currently stand regarding this issue?**

The debate over how and when to Count the Omer is not easy, because it is a part of a much larger controversy regarding the religious calendar Messianic Believers should be following. There are typically three groups of people that one encounters within the broad Messianic movement, regarding which calendar for the dates of the appointed times is to be observed:

1. Those who follow the traditional Rabbinical calendar for all dates
2. Those who follow the traditional Rabbinical calendar for most dates, with a few modifications
3. Those who follow a non-traditional calendar, either of the Karaite movement, or one developed by themselves

All of the Messianic congregations that our family has been a part of in the past have fallen into the first two categories, and our ministry has promoted *Shavuot* celebrations in the past modified off of the traditional Rabbinical calendar used in today's Jewish and Messianic Jewish communities, with the difference from the 6th of Sivan only being a few days. We have never been a part of a local congregation where a completely non-traditional calendar was followed, with the appointed times being remembered a month earlier or a month later than the mainline Synagogue.

The controversy over the calendar Messianics are to use, which has become especially piqued since 2005, is not easily going away—and our ministry does feel that there are aspects of the discussion which have purposefully been avoided for far too long, by all sides.<sup>viii</sup> Much of the debate surrounding the calendar used by today's Messianics is associated with people who have tried to calculate the Second Coming of Yeshua (and then have often recalculated *and* recalculated it), and have been consistently proven wrong. We think that trying to calculate the return of the Lord is something that is largely a futile exercise, as it is the righteous and holy actions of the saints which hasten His appearing (2 Peter 2:11-12), not our mortal prowess in crunching numbers.<sup>ix</sup>

Over the past five to seven years, our ministry has significantly strived to cultivate a positive outlook on the contributions of the Messianic movement's Jewish and Christian forbearers and ancestors, as we continue the work of faithful Jews and Christians who have preceded us. A critical part in recognizing not only the Hebraic Roots, *but* the Jewish Roots of our faith, comes in acknowledging that the Jewish people “were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Romans 3:2), and they are to be afforded a great deal of respect and honor. All of the methods of how the Jewish people follow the Torah cannot just be disregarded as

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<sup>viii</sup> Consult the FAQ on the TNN website “6,000 Year Teaching.”

<sup>ix</sup> Consult the blog editorial post from 06 July, 2008 by J.K. McKee, “The Hastening of Righteousness.” This topic will also be explored in the forthcoming *Messianic Prophecy Helper* by TNN Press.

so-called “tradition(s) of men.”<sup>x</sup> While there are many claims made about the Rabbinical calendar used by Judaism, it is undeniable that it has kept the worldwide Jewish community bound together throughout the past two millennia, and especially united in today’s world given the influence of secular assimilation. *This cannot be easily dismissed.*<sup>xi</sup>

It is also quite easy to detect a large amount of hostility not only toward mainline Jewish tradition, but even some anti-Semitism, from many of those who promote a different calendar than the Rabbinical calendar of today. Many actually think that the Jewish religious leaders have *purposefully* misled people to disobey the Lord, than issue a reasonable judgment that the worldwide Jewish community can follow to observe the appointed times together. With this, it is unavoidable that most of those who use an alternative calendar follow the Saddusaical method for Counting the Omer. And it is also unavoidable that while many of these same people speak forth their desire to bring unity not only to Israel—but to the Two Houses of Israel even—that they have probably deterred the restoration they so eagerly look for. This has made them easy cannon fodder for various Messianic Jewish leaders, who have purposefully decided to not consider the restoration message of all Israel, precisely because of a negative spirit issued toward the Synagogue and mainline Jewish practices.<sup>xii</sup>

We cannot ignore the bad behavior and mean-spirited attitudes of many of those who speak against the Rabbinical calendar. The question of whether or not Outreach Israel Ministries really wants to be lumped in with those who deride mainline Judaism has to be asked, and over the past several years *has piqued our need* to reevaluate whether or not the Saddusaical method of Counting the Omer, which is quite affluent in the independent Messianic community, is the proper way. We have made it quite clear in various articles and books that the only issue we are *really willing* to be divided over with Messianic Judaism is the lack of equality that is often witnessed between Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, including a mutual submission ideology (Ephesians 5:21; Philippians 2:3-5) and an egalitarian view of gender roles (cf. Galatians 3:28).<sup>xiii</sup> Issues pertaining to the calendar or when various holidays are observed is simply not as important to us as it is to some others.

As a teaching ministry, though, we cannot be exclusively guided by looking at some of the bad attitudes or rotten fruit of those who (intentionally) create divisions over the calendar debate; we have to still be *principally* guided by the text of the Bible, and by a reasonable examination of Scriptural passages.

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<sup>x</sup> Grk. *tēn paradōsin tōn anthrōpōn* (τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων).

While Yeshua the Messiah did condemn some human traditions adopted by the Rabbis of His day, the majority of these pertained to how various practices subtracted from the Torah’s ethical and moral imperatives. A clear example would be claiming to use family finances as an offering unto God, while failing to use those monies and provide for the well being of one’s aged parents (Mark 7:8-13). The issue of the calendar is notably not among the human traditions addressed by the Lord, contrary to some of the thoughts of a few outspoken or sensational voices in the Messianic community.

<sup>xi</sup> For further review, consult the blog editorial post from 22 March, 2009 by J.K. McKee, “A Few Thoughts on the Calendar,” and his thoughts in the forthcoming *Torah In the Balance, Volume II*, in the chapter “How Do We Sanctify the Appointed Times?”

<sup>xii</sup> For a further summary, consult the article “Anti-Semitism in the Two-House Movement” by J.K. McKee.

<sup>xiii</sup> Consult the author’s commentary on the Torah portion *Shelakh-Lekha* (Numbers 13:1-15:41), “Scriptural Equality,” appearing in *TorahScope, Volume I*, and the exegetical paper on Galatians 3:28, “Biblical Equality and Today’s Messianic Movement” by J.K. McKee.

Also consider the fact that many of the things that Outreach Israel Ministries and TNN Online asserts about human equality in the Messiah Yeshua runs contrary to the thoughts of not only many Messianic Jews, but also those within the Two-House and One Law sub-movements.

## Counting the Omer

In the past, looking at Leviticus 23:15 in my English New American Standard, I thought the command for Counting the Omer looked fairly simple. The command is to “count for yourselves from the day after the sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering” (Leviticus 23:15). Like many who read this, I thought that during the Festival of Unleavened Bread, which lasts for seven days, there is always a regular weekly Sabbath which is observed. I did not think there needed to be any confusion over this, as I would ask others, “What is so difficult about starting the Omer Count after the weekly Sabbath?”

Furthermore, if Yeshua the Messiah had been resurrected by the Sunday morning after His crucifixion (Matthew 28:1), as the Saddusaical priests in the Temple were offering up the firstfruits beginning the Omer Count, would this not nicely correspond to Yeshua being the firstfruits of those resurrected from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:3-6, 20)? The early Christian Church, having been largely severed from its Hebraic Roots in the Second-Third Centuries C.E., still largely commemorated Easter Sunday to honor the resurrection of Jesus, which continues until today. I thought it logical to conclude that they must have just overlooked the symbolism between what the Torah says about the waving of the sheaf/*omer* on the day after the Sabbath, Sunday, and the Messiah’s coming forth from the grave. In spite of the questionable traditions surrounding Easter, Christians the world over do commemorate Yeshua as firstfruits.

With the disbanding of the Temple authorities and Sadducees after 70 C.E., I further assumed that the Pharisees and their Rabbinical descendants—who interpreted “the day after the sabbath” (Leviticus 23:15) to be the High Sabbath of the Festival of Unleavened Bread—made this determination to invalidate the Sunday resurrection of Yeshua. With many Jews having acknowledged Yeshua as the resurrected Savior, would it not make sense to want to hide this in any way possible? Starting the Counting of the Omer at a different time from a Sunday would be an easy way to downplay the Messiah’s atoning work.

While some of this sounds good, as it helps to criticize the Pharisaical religious authorities, and it looks good from a reading of Leviticus 23:15—it takes real humility sometimes to realize that our observance of appointed times or *moedim* (מוֹעֲדִים) of Leviticus 23 extends beyond Leviticus 23. If we were to base our method for Counting the Omer and commemorating *Shavuot*/Pentecost entirely on the Hebrew of Leviticus 23:15, *m'mochorat ha'Shabbat* (מִמּוֹחֶרֶת הַשַּׁבָּת), then perhaps the Saddusaical method has validity. But our ministry can compile far too many examples of not only Christian leaders, but even Messianic leaders, who simplistically base their entire ministries and doctrinal presuppositions on a single verse of Scripture, with little engagement with other points of view or other Biblical and historical factors.

In evaluating the debate over when to Count the Omer, it is insufficient for us to *only* look at Leviticus 23:15 and what we think it might say in the Hebrew. There are additional factors which have to be weighed into our deliberations, which include:

- The variance of how the Hebrew term *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת) can be used to describe the weekly Sabbath, or how it can be used to represent “week.” Leviticus 25:8 gives instructions about when the jubilee year is to be remembered, as the “seven sabbaths of years” or *sheva shabbatot shanim* (שִׁבְעַת שַׁבְּבוֹת שָׁנִים) to be counted has to mean “seven weeks of years” (RSV, NRSV, NJPS, ESV).

- The Septuagint rendering of Leviticus 23:11 clarifies what “the day after the sabbath is,” with *tē epaurion tēs prōtēs* (τῆ ἐπαύριον τῆς πρώτης) or “on the day after the first” (New English Translation of the Septuagint), a reference to the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Due to the many direct quotations and allusions to the Septuagint in the Apostolic Scriptures on a whole host of issues, the LXX’s authority bearing witness to the Pharisaic method cannot be ignored.
- The Pharisaism of the Apostle Paul (Acts 23:6), and how Yeshua the Messiah bid His followers to respect Pharisaical authority (Matthew 23:2-3).
- The doctrine of the resurrection was quantitatively denied by the Sadducees, among the many foundational doctrines of our faith they derided, but was fully affirmed by the Pharisees (Acts 23:8; cf. Matthew 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:6).<sup>xiv</sup> Should today’s Messianic Believers really follow the views of an ancient Jewish sect that flat out denied the resurrection of the dead (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:16-17)?<sup>xv</sup>
- The Quartodeciman debate in Second-Fourth Century C.E. emerging Christianity, where Eastern churches claiming to follow a tradition from the Apostle John, commemorated Jesus’ resurrection three days after the Jewish Passover on the 14th of Nisan on *any day* of the week. The Roman Church observed it on the first Sunday after the vernal equinox.<sup>xvi</sup>

When all you choose to look at is the Hebrew of Leviticus 23:15, and are not really considering anything else, it is easy to jump ahead and think that the motivation for the Pharisees deciding that the waving of the sheaf/*omer* of firstfruits is to be on the day after the High Sabbath, and not Sunday, was to purposefully discount Yeshua the Messiah’s resurrection from the dead. But the Septuagint rendering of “the day after the Sabbath” demonstrates that this was a debate going back at least three centuries *before* the Messiah’s ministry (cf. Joshua 5:10-12). The Pharisaical religious leaders of the First Century did not conspire to try to forcibly dismiss the resurrection of the Teacher from Nazareth; many actually stood up to the defense of Paul in the Sanhedrin, exclaiming, “We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” (Acts 23:9; cf. 23:6).

Furthermore, even though it might be easier than not for today’s Christians to associate a Sunday morning resurrection of Yeshua with a Saddusaical firstfruits and start of the Omer Count, is it not true that something is lost during those years when there will actually be six days to wait between the commemoration of the Passover on a Monday and starting the Omer Count on a Sunday? Church history itself demonstrates that there were early sects which commemorated the resurrection of the Lord on any day of the week, concurrent with the Gospels’ claim that He would be raised on the third day.<sup>xvii</sup>

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<sup>xiv</sup> Cf. “Pharisees,” Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), pp 478-479.

<sup>xv</sup> “For if the dead are not raised, not even Messiah has been raised; and if Messiah has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:16-17).

<sup>xvi</sup> Consult “Quartodecimans,” in David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 547; “Paschal Controversy,” in *Ibid.*, pp 500-501.

<sup>xvii</sup> Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 27:64; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 21, 46.

## Counting the Omer

The debate about when to begin the Counting of the Omer is actually more about *what factors* to consider in Biblical interpretation, and how much or how little data we compile, than anything else. Considering other uses of the same Hebrew term elsewhere in Scripture, the witness of the Greek Septuagint, the theology of the Sadducees and Pharisees in terms of the resurrection, and early Christian history on commemorating Yeshua's resurrection—all fall well within an acceptable window of responsible hermeneutics. These very same factors are also used for us to confirm that the Bible is reliable history, and to confirm through exegesis that the Tanakh (Old Testament) has indeed foretold that Yeshua is the Messiah and Savior of the world. If we fall into the habit of not considering some of these things, among others<sup>xviii</sup>—as the issue of Counting the Omer is rather minor in the scope of Biblical interpretation—then will we ignore them on far more complicated and major issues? Simply consider how many of today's Messianics ignore the Septuagint, yet its distinct translations and value judgments of ambiguously Hebrew terms can bear direct witness to Yeshua's Messiahship (i.e., *alma*, אֵלְמָה and *parthenos*, παρθένος; “virgin” in Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23).

Today in 2012 as Outreach Israel Ministries and TNN Online look at the future of the Messianic movement, the different calendar disputes which have erupted across the spectrum, and the two main ways of Counting the Omer—we have developed a preference and leaning toward the traditional, Pharisaic method. Starting the Omer Count and celebrating the Festival of *Shavuot*/Pentecost in conjunction with the worldwide Jewish community on the 6th of Sivan does not at all subtract to how on the year of Yeshua's resurrection, His empty tomb was found on Sunday. In the years and centuries following, many Believers remembered our Lord's resurrection on any day of the week. Many sincere Christians and Messianic Believers also remember Yeshua's resurrection on Sunday as well, with the latter beginning their Counting of the Omer for *Shavuot*.

The Apostle Paul wrote the Corinthians, “For I determined to know nothing among you except Yeshua the Messiah, and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). He likewise said, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Nowhere in these verses is it claimed that one *has to believe* that Yeshua was crucified and resurrected on a particular day of the week to be saved; **one has to believe that He was crucified for our sins and resurrected from the dead to be saved.** The most important part of our faith is *what* the Messiah has accomplished for us, so whether we believe that we should start an Omer Count on the first Sunday during the week of Unleavened Bread, or from the 16th of Aviv/Nisan after the High Sabbath of Unleavened Bread: *to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords be all the glory!*

The emphasis of this daily devotional is really *not to argue* the various viewpoints. Being compiled in 2004, they were written employing a Sunday-to-Sunday Saddusaical method. Sooner or later, those who Count the Omer following the traditional Pharisaical method from the 16th of Aviv/Nisan to the 6th of Sivan are actually going to commemorate *Shavuot* on a Sunday. Even with us having shifted our preference toward the traditional determination for Counting the Omer, these commentaries have not been altered on those dates where I have reflected on what the Lord was doing in my life on a weekly *Shabbat*

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<sup>xviii</sup> Consult the article “The Role of History in Messianic Biblical Interpretation” by J.K. McKee.

during my Omer Count. *Counting the Omer: A Daily Devotional Toward Shavuot* is all about drawing closer to our Heavenly Father over a very special fifty-day period, not about splitting hairs over the minutiae of when to start the Omer Count. Regardless of what position you personally take regarding when the Omer Count should begin, you should be able to derive spiritual benefits from my daily reflections and thoughts.<sup>xix</sup>

### Focusing on the Lord

Regardless of when today's Messianic Believers start their Omer Count, all of us need to consciously recognize how the Holy One of Israel *is intently observing the hearts of His people* and how they treat one another. Any categorical declaration of when to begin the Counting of the Omer and how to observe it properly, which excludes or demeans others who hold to different interpretations, is both unnecessary and ungodly. When Yeshua the Messiah returns and He rules and reigns from Mount Zion, **we will all be given the correct interpretation** as to when we should celebrate *Shavuot*, as well as the answers to many other questions about the Father's plan for the ages. Until then, whether you start Counting the Omer on the 16th of Aviv/Nisan following Jewish tradition, or from the day after the weekly Sabbath during the Festival of Unleavened Bread, **the most important thing is to simply draw closer to the Lord.**

The great advantage, of annual seasons such as the Counting of the Omer, is that each day builds with anticipation, as over a seven week period we get closer and closer to the remembrance of *Shavuot* or Pentecost. For traditional Jews, the season between Passover and *Shavuot* is when one considers the deliverance of Ancient Israel from Egyptian bondage and being brought to Mount Sinai to be given the Ten Commandments and the Torah. For today's Messianic Believers, we not only consider the freedom of the Passover and the giving of the Law to Israel to be most worthy of reflection—but *most especially* the offering up of the Passover Lamb, Yeshua the Messiah, His resurrection from the dead, and how on the *Shavuot* following the Holy Spirit was poured out upon all of those gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2).

With the many things that we face individually and corporately as Messianic Believers and as a developing faith community, the discipline of Counting the Omer every year toward *Shavuot* can be a most useful exercise, as we press into our Heavenly Father and seek His will. Surprisingly to many of you, though, in traditional Judaism the season of Counting the Omer is actually one of sober reflection and introspection. This is not really a season of great rejoicing or exuberant adulation, but one of reserved piety and contemplation. Ronald L. Eisenberg summarizes the following in *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*:

“The Omer period is observed as a time of semi-mourning. Traditional Jews do not get haircuts, celebrate weddings, or play musical instruments during this time. Initially, these restrictions may have been related to the intense anxiety felt by the Israelites during the vulnerable weeks leading up to the harvest. Ultimately, however, the mourning was connected to the plague that struck Rabbi Akiva's students during this time [b.*Yevamot* 62b]...The Conservative movement has reduced the time of no celebrations to the few

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<sup>xix</sup> For a more detailed analysis over when to Count the Omer, consult the Appendix, “Sadducees, Pharisees, and the Controversy of Counting the Omer” by J.K. McKee.

## Counting the Omer

days from the end of Passover through Yom ha-Shoah [Holocaust Remembrance Day].

“A popular custom during the Omer period is the study of the mishnaic tractate *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers). Beginning after Passover, one of its six chapters is studied each Sabbath following the afternoon service. In this way, the final chapter dealing with the Torah is read just before Shavuot, the festival commemorating the Revelation at Mount Sinai. (Sephardim still continue the custom of reading *Pirkei Avot* only during this period, but most Ashkenazic congregations repeat the entire treatise until the Sabbath before Rosh Hashanah.) A less-observed custom is to study the talmudic tractate *Shevuot* during the Omer period...”<sup>xx</sup>

I am not necessarily asking that you abstain from a haircut or from listening to music during the Counting of the Omer, but I would ask you to consider some of the serious messages of what took place in conjunction with the Ancient Israelites beginning their journey to the Promised Land. You should also reflect upon some of the thoughts and feelings of the early Disciples and Apostles of the Messiah Yeshua, as He had been resurrected from the dead and was preparing to ascend to the Father in Heaven. The season of Counting the Omer is definitely one of *transition* for the people of God. Much can be taken to Him in prayer, perhaps as you may find yourself in a time of personal uncertainty, or as you plead before Him that today’s Messianic movement can truly develop into a great force of positive spiritual change for the worldwide Body of Messiah.

As we enter into the appointed season known as *sefrat ha’omer*, the Counting of the Omer, we can once again use this opportunity to draw closer to our Creator. He is always faithful to give us a variety of admonitions that continually require us to reflect upon Him, who He is, and our relationship to Him! *May you be blessed!*

## Psalm Readings for Counting the Omer

Just as is seen throughout any of the appointed seasons of the Lord, there have been a variety of systematic ways which have been formulized to make it easier for God’s people to Count the Omer and focus on Him. For the purposes of this devotional, I have started each day of the Omer Count by reproducing Psalm 67. Since it was used historically as a hymn of praise for the morning and evening oblation, I found it fitting to read, contemplate, and meditate upon each day—in order to prepare my own heart for some additional Psalm reflections.

The following is the list of the selected Psalm readings I have employed, which correspond to the various days of the Omer Count:

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<sup>xx</sup> Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 294.

You may wish to consider the author’s companion to this volume, *Sayings of the Fathers: A Messianic Perspective on Pirkei Avot*, which can also be used during the season of Counting the Omer.

Day	Meditation/Declaration	Psalm Reading
<b>WEEK ONE</b>		
1	The Law of God	119:1-8
2	Obedience to Law of God	119:9-16
3	Happiness in Law of God	119:17-24
4	Determination to obey Law of God	119:25-32
5	A prayer for understanding	119:33-40
6	Trusting the Law of God	119:41-48
7	Confidence in Law of God	119:49-56
<b>WEEK TWO</b>		
8	Devotion to Law of God	119:57-64
9	The value of the Law of God	119:65-72
10	The justice of the Law of God	119:73-80
11	Prayer for Deliverance	119:81-88
12	Faith in the Law of God	119:89-96
13	Love for the Law of God	119:97-104
14	Light from the Law of God	119:105-112
<b>WEEK THREE</b>		
15	Safety in the Law of God	119:113-120
16	Obedience to the Law of God	119:121-128
17	Desire to obey Law of God	119:129-136
18	The justice of Law of God	119:137-144
19	Prayer for deliverance	119:145-152
20	Plea for salvation	119:153-160
21	Dedication to Law of God	119:161-168
<b>WEEK FOUR</b>		
22	A prayer for help	119:169-176
23	True happiness	1:1-6
24	Confidence in God	11:1-7
25	What God requires	15:1-5
26	The Creation of God	19:1-7
27	A prayer for guidance	25:4-10
28	Longing for God	63:1-8
<b>WEEK FIVE</b>		
29	A song of thanksgiving	67:1-7(8)
30	God and His people	78:1-16
31	God and His people	78:17-31
32	God and His people	78:32-39
33	God and His people	78:40-55
34	God and His people	78:56-72
35	God, the King	93:1-5

## Counting the Omer

<b>WEEK SIX</b>		
36	God, the Judge	94:12-23
37	A song of praise	95:1-7
38	God, the Supreme King	96:1-13(14)
39	God, the Ruler of the world	98:1-9
40	God, the Supreme King	99:1-9
41	The love of God	103:1-22
42	God and His people	105:1-11
<b>WEEK SEVEN</b>		
43	God's graciousness	106:1-5
44	In praise of God	111:1-10
45	The happiness of a good person	112:1-10
46	The reward of obedience	128:1-6
47	A prayer for help	130:1-8
48	A call for the universe to praise God	148:1-14
49	A prayer of thanksgiving	138:1-8
<b>SHAVUOT</b>		
50	Praise God	150:1-6