

Counting Up: Parashat Emor

The longest marriage ever recorded, at least if you trust the internet, was between Zelmyra and Herbert Fisher who wed on May 13, 1924 and remained together for 87 years until Herbert's death in 2011. This loving couple was blessed with 5 children, 10 grandchildren, 9 great-grandchildren, and even a great-great grandchild. In speaking about the secret to staying happily together for nearly nine decades, the Fishers, who both lived to be 105, had this advice: "Remember marriage is not a contest, never keep a score. God has put the two of you together on the same team to win."¹ In 2008, with a mere 84 years of wedded bliss, the Fishers entered the Guinness Book of World Records and secured a place in history. They serve as a stunning example of the power of commitment.

In normal years, and perhaps even in this unusual one too, spring is so often the time for fresh beginnings – weddings, graduations, the start of new jobs and new careers. I have so much sympathy for those high-school and college seniors, deprived of final weeks on campus together with friends and teachers; those soon to be newly minted professionals, robbed of the opportunity to march in commencement ceremonies and receive the degree or perhaps even the new title they've worked so hard to achieve; those hopeful couples who have been dreaming about standing under the chuppah (wedding canopy) surrounded by friends and family as they begin their new life together. Despite all the energy being put into virtual celebrations and gatherings, it is hard to get back a "Senior Week" or a graduation or the first day of a new job that now may happen only via Zoom. These moments stand alone as discrete, once-in-a-lifetime opportunities and we deeply mourn their loss.

¹ <http://www.epicdash.com/their-marriage-broke-a-world-record-but-their-secret-is-simple-everyone-needs-to-know-this/>

While I love these milestones of new beginning as much as anyone else, what I have perhaps come to find even more moving recently is anniversaries – of couples married long time, of professionals who have remained in their chosen field for years, of families putting down roots in a neighborhood or community for decades. Here at TIC I have been privileged to witness spouses marking 40, 50, or even 60 years together and, while these celebrations may be less lavish than their original counterparts, I think that they represent something even more significant, not the promise of partnership and commitment but rather evidence of its strength and endurance. I am always moved at the Rabbinical Assembly's annual convention by a ceremony honoring colleagues marking 50 years since ordination, individuals who have served the Jewish community with distinction for half a century. And at parlor meetings this summer I loved watching members of our community playfully compete for the title of "been here longest," with families' commitment to TIC stretching three, four, and even five decades or longer. Weddings and graduations and the start of first jobs are magical and beautiful and filled with possibility. How much more romantic, however, are the wizened faces of two mature partners who have experienced a lifetime of joy and sorrow together and remain very much in love!

At this moment on the Jewish calendar we also find ourselves in a season of counting, a period known as *Sefirat HaOmer* (Counting of the Omer). This interval, which began the second night of Passover and continues through *Shavuot*, is named for the new grain harvest which was brought to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem beginning on the second night of *Pesach* and is counted each evening in fulfillment of the command from this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Emor*: "You shall count until seven full weeks have elapsed; you shall count fifty days until the day after the seventh week" (Leviticus 23:16). Many of us know that the *Omer* period is considered one of partial mourning in remembrance of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva who all died from a terrible illness between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*, according to the Talmud (Yevamot 62b) because they did not treat one another with respect. Counting the *Omer* is

also a way of connecting Passover and *Shavuoth* – indicating that the deliverance which began with our Exodus from Egypt does not yet become complete until we have received Torah and become a religious community at Sinai.

One of the things that is unique about *Sefirat HaOmer* is that we do not “count down” as we do towards so many exciting events in life – four more months until the baby is born, one more week to my birthday, six more days before our trip. Rather, we “count up,” marking the days and weeks that have passed since *Pesach* instead of those that are left until *Shavuoth*. We say, “*Hayom shloshim yom shehem arba’a shavuot u’shnai yamim la’Omer* - Today is thirty days which is four weeks and two days of the *Omer*.” We count time that has elapsed rather than time that is yet to come.

What is the difference between counting down and counting up? I think it is the difference between a wedding and an anniversary, the difference between a graduation and a lifetime achievement award, the difference between seeing success as captured in a discrete moment versus seeing it as a process that deepens and evolves over time. As much as we look forward to *Shavuot* and its celebration of the 10 Commandments, what we truly mark during the period of the *Omer* is not the day itself but the process that has brought us here – our first seven weeks as a free people! We count up, treasuring each and every moment of our liberation while also looking forward to the event that will make it even more meaningful - the receiving of a Torah which we are now free to live out with full body and spirit. Like so many other things that we count up in life – our age, the number of years we have lived in our home or been part of our synagogue, the length of our marriage or the amount of time we’ve been at our current job - we see beauty in longevity and not only in newness.

Over the past many weeks, tragically, I have been called upon to do an unusual number of funerals and it is striking the way that loved ones talk about the most significant events and achievements in the lives of those they now mourn. To be sure there are stories about how a couple first met, inside jokes and memories that have now become the stuff of family lore, incredible tales of courage, bravery, or survival – particularly if someone has experienced extraordinary events; there are details shared about specific, discrete moments in the lifespan of the human being. But so often what comes to sum up a person’s existence is the long-standing commitments that person made – she was married for over 50 years, he raised three children in this house where he’s lived since 1975; she practiced law for four decades; he struggled courageously with Alzheimer’s for the last 7 years. Life’s most exciting moments might be the photo-friendly occasions towards which we *count down* the days with so much anticipation, the events that we often spend weeks, months, or even years imagining in our minds will look a certain way and be just so. But life’s most significant moments, I would argue, exist in the *counting up*.

One need not be a great sociologist to realize that loyalty, commitment, and staying power are not entirely the cultural norm these days. In addition to the high number of marriages that fail to last, Americans – particularly younger ones – switch jobs with great frequency and there can be a sense that pursuing the next big thing is somehow more “bold” or “ambitious” or “worthy” than staying solidly in a place that has done us well. With all the enormous choice we have in virtually every area of human experience and with all the emphasis that society places on what is new, cutting-edge, and fresh, we can easily get caught up in a culture of celebrating possibility over permanence. We can prefer to count down rather than to count up.

One of the great lessons of *Sefirat HaOmer*, I believe, is that durability is also a blessing – perhaps an even greater one than that of new beginnings. *Shavuot* may recall the very first time our people stood

at Sinai but what it really celebrates is that we continue to stand there - year after year, generation after generation, maintaining our tradition and our community with steadfast faith and commitment for over 3,300 years. Firsts are wonderful and stirring and exciting – they inspire us to count down to their arrival, so much do we look forward to greeting their promise. Real measures of success, however, cannot be evaluated fully for time to come. Maintaining dedication to the various “firsts” that we have celebrated is where true achievement lies.

And so, this Shabbat we celebrate the blessings of longevity. We celebrate the Jewish people who have managed to survive for thousands of years despite overwhelming odds and who have consistently passed our faith down from one generation to the next. We celebrate Temple Israel Center – the long, proud history we share and the many members who have been part of our community for decades; the fact that this Zoom service might represent an amazing new first for our congregation but it also represents amazing continuity as we join together for Shabbat as we have for over a century. We celebrate long lives and long marriages and long careers; we celebrate putting down roots in a place and living there for ages.

I would never want to minimize the pain and disappointment of those who are being robbed of special celebrations during this terrible time of the Coronavirus; these losses are significant and real. And yet, ultimately, I hope that some small amount of comfort may be found in the longstanding gifts that these celebrations – even in their absence – usher in: the jobs, careers, relationships, and other commitments that will surely last for many, many years to come.

Today is the 30th day of the *Omer*. I, for one, am proud to be part of a religion that is so very old.

Shabbat Shalom!