

Our Passover Things (Sung to the tune of "My favorite things", from *The Sound of Music*)

Cleaning and cooking and so many dishes
Out with the hametz, no pasta, no knishes
Fish that's gefiltered, horseradish that stings
These are a few of our Passover things.

I must admit, I look forward to Passover, and, I look forward to it ending, too. It's a lot of work, exhausting, and, wonderful, all at the same time. It's demanding, physically, and, preparing mentally for it, demanding as well.

Passover is a time to think about slavery and freedom. Some people in the world are enslaved at this very moment. Our tradition instructs us to remember what it was like to be enslaved, and experience the exodus story as if you and I each had been slaves and then freed from bondage. From this we are to learn to think of others, to consider that what happened to us, unfortunately, still happens today. Nor are we to stand idly by. Why, because 50 days after we became physically free people, we, as our tradition relates, received Torah from God to Moses at Mt. Sinai. We give this date a name, its' called Shavuot, from the word, "weeks." After 49 days, a week of weeks, on the 50th day, it is Shavuot, and we receive Torah. And our Torah instructs us that we are not to stand idly by when we see the suffering of our neighbor. Our physical freedom doesn't mean that we can just do anything we want. We are free, we are redeemed, to be God's people. And that's not always so easy. And so we count those days between Passover and Shavuot, as we step from a holiday that is about physical freedom, to a holiday that is about spiritual freedom.

So what does spiritual freedom look like?

I think that spiritual freedom encourages us to seek that which is the best in our selves. To seek peace in our selves, and in our relationships, and also, to make that possible through refinement of our character. To be free from interpersonal blunders and doing or saying things that offend others requires restraint and discipline. Spiritual freedom may not sound like freedom, but I think personal restraint and discipline is the only way to get there – it is a kind of reverse-intuitive sort of thing.

Yay, we're free, God freed us, but for what? To jump around and play, say and do anything we want, regardless of others? Perhaps, but we can't live our lives doing that all the time. I remember as a young parent, it took a while for my child to learn restraint, that we cannot just go and push someone down because they did something you don't like. We had a mantra that we went through each morning before school: no hitting, no biting, no kicking, no pushing. It's not always easy learning restraint and discipline, but eventually it worked.

In relationships, it doesn't take long to learn that we don't get to do or say just anything we want – not if we want to have friends, no – we have to learn to respect others, listen to others, and to behave responsibly. And that takes personal growth and refinement, and in our own ways we've likely been working on that. Our moms cannot follow us around reminding us of the rules all the time. And so, physical freedom offers us today, and the Israelites then, an opportunity to grow up, and to grow into what is also our human inheritance and gift from God, spiritual freedom.

The Omer was an ancient Hebrew measure of grain, and according to Biblical law, (Leviticus 23:9-11) we were forbidden to use any of the new barley crop until an omer was brought as an offering to the Temple in Jerusalem. Leviticus (23:15-16) also says: "And from the day on which you bring the offering . . . you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete." This instruction led to the traditional practice of S'firat HaOmer, or "Counting the Omer."

The seven weeks of counting the Omer spans the 49 days between the second day of Passover and the beginning of Shavuot. Thus, S'firat HaOmer connects the Exodus from Egypt with the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The kabbalists, the Jewish mystics, saw this 49 days as a connection between two types of freedom: the Jewish people's physical freedom (Pesach) and spiritual (Shavuot) freedom.

Of course, after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 C.E., the Omer offering could no longer be brought to the Temple, but the practice of counting the Omer continued and is still observed by many Jews today.

There is a prescribed ritual for counting the Omer. Each evening of the 49 day period, Jews say a special blessing for counting each day, then read a psalm and a special prayer. Not including the first verse, the psalm has precisely 49 words.

In addition, there is a kabbalistic practice of the Jewish mystics, and now a mussar practice by many modern Jews who participate in a practice of character refinement.

What's mussar, you might ask? I mentioned that we are each likely working on our own personal refinement, learning as we go, how better to get along with others, but did you know that our Jewish tradition has a Jewish practice of personal refinement, of character refinement? It's called mussar, character refinement. For the counting of the omer, the Kabbalists and Mussar practitioners take seven attributes or qualities of character, and examine and develop them over the 49 day period spanning the second day of Passover to Shavuot. For example, the first week is dedicated to the quality of *chesed*, or loving kindness, and the second week is dedicated to the quality of *gevurah*, or justice, discipline, and restraint. The remaining weeks are *tiferet*: beauty and harmony; *netzach*: endurance and fortitude; *hod*: humility and splendor; *yesod*: bonding and foundation; and *malchut*: sovereignty and leadership.

To keep track of each day of the 49 days, there are even apps for our phone, such as Omer: A Counting, and email lists, and even a few books that are available now, each focusing on our personal development during these days, offering multiple ways to increase awareness of, and agility in, our inner life, our inner character. If you are interested in finding out more about counting the omer, or about mussar, let me know. I'd be delighted to speak with you more about it.

The Temple was destroyed 1,949 years ago. We no longer bring offerings. We bring our prayers and give of our time, and gather together as a community, in prayer. We no longer bring the Omer offering, but we still count the omer, and find more and more meaningful ways of observing this ancient ritual that speaks to us today, that is relevant to us today, and applies to our modern concerns and struggles in being human beings.

May our holidays, our rituals, our traditions, bring us together, as community, even as we strive to improve ourselves to be better human beings. May we be blessed, and bring blessing, as we strive towards spiritual freedom, so that we may truly be a blessing, bringing goodness and healing to our world.

Shabbat shalom.