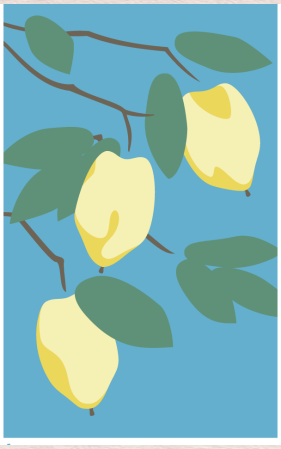
Emor: Vayikra (Leviticus)

What's it all about?

The parsha kicks things off by discussing the laws pertaining to the priests and the service in the Temple. Then, it details the festivals and their commandments: Shabbat, Passover, the counting of the *Omer*, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and Shemini Atzeret. It concludes with the penalties for blasphemy, murder, or causing an injury.



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"I am God, who sanctifies you, and who took you out of Egypt to be your God; I am God."

Take a deeper dive

Of all of the laws and commandments detailed in this week's parsha, one that still resonates is **the counting of the *Omer***. Each year, beginning on Passover and ending on Shavuot, we mark 50 evenings by counting and reciting special blessings. Why? **What, exactly, is the *Omer* about?**

Our rabbis have long pondered this question, explaining that the *Omer* was the ultimate countdown: Like a child excited and counting down to her birthday, so, too, do the Israelites count down to the ultimate gift, *matan Torah*, the giving of the Torah.

That's a nice idea, but there's one big problem with it: **When we count the *Omer*, we're not counting *down*; we're counting *up***, starting with one and ending with 50. Why is that?

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook explained that the idea here is to remind us that kedusha, or holiness, the real theme of this week's parsha, isn't about arriving at some sacred destination; it's about the journey, about movement. Someone can be occupying a really low level on the ladder of holiness, he argued, and another person a much higher level, but if the person at the lowest level is working hard and observing mitzvot and moving up, and the person at the highest level feels self-satisfied and is doing little to nothing, it's the former who should be considered holier.

Nice! But, again, why obsess about the *Omer*? What is *Omer*, anyway? It's a unit of measurement of barley. And that, right there, Rav Kook tells us, explains it all. "The *Omer*," he wrote, "represents the shared elemental power of man and beast, which is inherent to barley. When it is subsumed in the *Omer* offering and it goes on the altar as an offering with intention, namely, the inclination of the collective will towards elevation and sanctity, it positively agitates all souls and all aspects of life and existence that pertain hereto."

In other words, the *Omer* count is all about working on the barley within us, taking the raw and coarse elements of our nature and, through observing the commandments, converting them into feed that helps the soul grow.

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