

Parshat Emor - in Torahnet

- David Gutterman. Counter Intuitive - counting up

Counter Intuitive

Isn't it true that typically when we count - we count down. The world of NASA has Americans counting down to a shuttle launch, and the world of Macys (or is it Madison Avenue?) has many of our non-Jewish friends counting down shopping days...The only count that we Jews have on the books is a count - up. I guess we are nothing else if not, counter-intuitive.

There is only one time of year that we link events by counting them and that is from Passover to Shavuot. Think about this. We do have other times and events that are calendrically and conceptually connected, but they are not ritualized via a count.

For example, the period between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippurim is formally called in our literature, the Ten Days of Repentance - but there is no official count. The Talmud mandates that Passover must come thirty days after Purim even if the calendar had an extra month of Adar appended to it. Why? Answers the Talmud: to link one redemption to another redemption. Yet, those thirty days are not counted.

The one time that we do ritualize with a count - up is between Passover and Shavuot. These are the days in which we find ourselves now. Why? Because when we left Egypt we were a people of Jews; the goal was to journey to Sinai to become a Jewish people - a people with a purpose.

We are not just a community. We are, to use Rabbi Soloveitchik's phrase, "a covenantal community," that is, a community with a charge and mandate. We are not just an ethnicity. We are, to use the balance of the Rav's phrase, a covenantal community of faith - a community with a unique way of seeing and being in the world. That's why the linkage between Passover and Shavuot matters.

I love the story because it is somewhat counterintuitive - after all, no one accused Golda Meir of being ultra-religious. In her autobiography she writes that after Prime Minister Levi Eshkol died, representatives of the Labor party came to her apartment to beg her to become the leader of the Labor Party, which would have automatically made her the prime minister. She initially refused and offered a reason. "How can I be the prime minister of the Jews? I don't know TaNaKH, the Hebrew Bible well enough." I don't think Golda was frum - but she certainly was from Sinai.

I love the story because it is somewhat counterintuitive - after all, no one accused Yitzchak Rabin of being ultra-religious. In his riveting autobiography, Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, former chief rabbi of Israel movingly and poignantly recounts his initial meeting with Yitzchak Rabin. At the time, Rabbi Lau was the chief rabbi of Tel Aviv (a post that he again holds) and Mr. Rabin was then prime minister. After much conversation about Jewish responsibility, Jewish values and religion, Rabin did something that startled the chief rabbi. He took out a piece of paper and wrote on it his unpublished and direct home phone number. He told him, "Chief Rabbi, call me and call me often. Particularly if you feel that I am doing something that does not conform to the Jewish

way - I want to hear from you." I don't think that Rabin was frum - but he was certainly from Sinai.

In a recent editorial, Natan Sharansky said it sharply. "If, heaven forbid, we cut ourselves off from the chain that links us to the Jewish people, if we cut ourselves off from 3,000 years of Judaism, if we cut ourselves off from being the realization of 2,000 years of Jewish hope -for next year in Jerusalem -then we will lose the right to our existence. And in losing that right, we will be lost."

Today, we call this special counting up mitzva, Sefirat HaOmer - Counting the Omer. Though Biblically it also had an agricultural function as it was the day that the first barley offering was brought in the Temple, today, it retains its status and stature as formally linking these bookend holidays because without our counting - up to Sinai, we Jews would still be wandering in the desert.

"Today is the 29th day - four weeks and one day in the Omer."

Shabbat Shalom,
David