

May 15, 2020
20 Iyyar 5780
36 Omer

B'Har-B'Hukkotai: Numbering Our Days

I've been thinking of the wisdom of grandmothers as the grandmothers of three community members died this week (of Sean Thibault, Noah Schechter, and Dr. Sarah Shulkind). My own grandmother often asks me when we speak if I've been keeping a journal. In recent years I hadn't been keeping a journal. I was just too busy. But she would always insist that I faithfully write down what I was doing with my days, to capture the life that I'm living. Her mother, my great grandmother, kept a daily journal throughout her life. I still have all of Great Grandma Della's journals and I've been slowly making my way through the daily reflections and events of her life. Most of it is mundane events and the ebb and flow of her feelings; the details of her day and the people who mattered to her. And there are also more exciting entries that capture the romantic drama between my Grandma Della and my great grandfather. I read about the hard days, about the hardship of supporting a large family with not much money. Every day in her journal has a date at the top. So, I know what my grandmother was doing and thinking about and struggling with in May of 1926, and August of 1941, January of 1954. And though I never actually knew my Grandma Della, I feel deeply connected to her through the stories my grandma tells me about her, and most of all, through her pages and pages of journal entries.

Since we've been sheltering in place and moving through this frightening and strange period of history, I have started keeping a journal again. At the top of each page I've been putting the gregorian date, the Hebrew date, and also the day of the omer. And throughout the day I'll jot down stray thoughts and bullet points of all the things I need to do. It's neither poetic or particularly interesting, but the act of tracking my days this way, especially during this time, has been incredibly meaningful.

It's not only my grandma and great grandma who urge us to keep a record of our days, but in a certain way the Jewish tradition does too. In the first part of our parsha this week — in Parshat B'Har — God commands the Israelites to let the land rest every seven years. This is the law of Shemittah. In the same way *we* are told to work six days and rest on the seventh, so too the Israelites are to work the land for six years, and allow it to rest in the seventh year. Beyond this, God commands that the Israelites count off seven shemittah cycles — seven cycles of seven years — that's 49 years — at which point there is an even more expansive release of the land and of debts. This release is called the Yovel. (Lev. 25:8)

And in the Jewish calendar right now, we ourselves have been in the midst of another kind of counting — the counting of weeks leading to Shavuot. Each day for 49 days — seven times seven weeks — we have been counting each day of the omer. (Today was the 36th day of the omer.) Some have a practice of associating each day of the omer with cultivating or meditating on a sacred value — like beauty or strength or compassion.

What this all points to is that we are a people who count. We are a people who count our days, our weeks, our months, and our years. For someone who lives by the Jewish calendar, they know where they are in relation to Shabbat, in relation to the moon, in relation to the land, and the growth of the trees.

In one of the most beautiful Psalms, the poet meditates on the fleeting length of a human life and says:

לְמִנּוֹת יָמֵינוּ כִּן הוֹדַע וְנִבְּא לֵבָב חֲכָמָה:

“Teach us to count our days rightly, so we may obtain a wise heart.” (90:12)

In his own way, the Psalmist was saying what the poet Mary Oliver wrote thousands of years later when she asked us to consider: What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? To count our days rightly means that we live like our days matter, like they are precious, worth keeping a record of.

Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, also known as the Piaseczno Rebbe, lived during the Shoah and died in the Warsaw Ghetto. It was there that he wrote his Torah commentary, the Aish Kodesh, which was stored in milk cans and miraculously preserved even after the ghetto was burned to the ground. What is remarkable about the work is not only the rabbi’s profound clinging to hope amidst the greatest darkness, but also how clearly he was counting his days. Although he was living in the worst of times and the worst of places, losing so many loved ones, we can now read how each day and each week he was counting, pulling wisdom from Torah and from the tradition to address his hopeless and downtrodden people.

In this strange time we are living through now, I want to urge us all to count our days, to keep some kind of record of what we’re experiencing. Since we’ve been sheltered in place, time has warped. Our days flow together. Hours can feel interminably long, yet the weeks seem to disappear. And of course we are all constantly wondering: how long will this last? When will we be able to see our friends again? Return to work? Do things without a mask and gloves? Gather with community? When will this be over? It can be easy to feel held captive by this uncertainty.

But when I read my great grandmother’s journals, and the Torah of the Piaseczno Rebbe, I can see the meaning of their days, and how they belong to profound stories of human life. Though neither of them knew what would come, they each claimed each day of their lives by counting it. The simple act of numbering our days — our weeks, our years — helps us to claim that time as precious and as ours.

When we number our days, we appreciate our days. We give ourselves the opportunity to spend our time consciously, asking ourselves, what is this day for? What is this week for? We are not simply in a state of waiting and enduring... Though we are confined to our homes, and bound by circumstances and by the unknown, we do have a choice about how we relate to this minute, this hour, this day.

So — I pray for all of us: Help us to count our days, to appreciate that they belong to a greater, unfolding story that spans years and generations, to live each knowing how sacred and precious it is. Help us to count our days so that we can make our days count.

Shabbat shalom.