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Iyar 3, 5786/April 20, 2026

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Important Dates in The Omer Period

- **Yom HaZikaron LaShoah VeLaGvurah** (Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day). This is the official day in Israel to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust and those who fought against it. It usually falls on the 27th of Nisan, but if that date conflicts with Shabbat, it is moved.
- **Rosh Chodesh Iyar**: 1–2 Iyar (New Moon of Iyar)
- **Lag BaOmer**: 18 Iyar (Celebration, bonfires, end of mourning period)
- **Yom HaZikaron**: 4 Iyar (Adjusted if necessary; Memorial Day)
- **Yom HaAtzmaut**: 5 Iyar (Adjusted if necessary; Independence Day)
- **Yom Yerushalayim**: 28 Iyar (Jerusalem Day)

Note on Adjustments: The dates for Yom HaZikaron, Yom HaAtzmaut, and Yom Yerushalayim are subject to adjustment in the Israeli calendar to prevent them from falling on Friday (which would create a two-day weekend starting on Shabbat) or Sunday (which would create a two-day weekend ending on Shabbat). If the fixed date falls on Friday, the observance moves to Thursday. If it falls on Sunday, it moves to Monday.

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The Great Calendar Debate: Why We Count the Omer the Way We Do

The period between Passover and Shavuot is a unique bridge in the Jewish calendar—a fifty-day journey known as the **Counting of the Omer** (*Sefirat HaOmer*). While today the practice feels uniform across the Jewish world, it was once the center of a fierce theological and political battle that defined the identity of the Second Temple era. At its heart, the debate wasn't just about math; it was about authority, the interpretation of the Written Torah, and the survival of the Jewish people.

The Ambiguity of "The Morrow of the Sabbath" The Torah command for the Omer is found in **Leviticus 23:15–16**: *"And you shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf (Omer) of the wave offering; seven complete Sabbaths shall they be... until the morrow of the seventh Sabbath you shall count fifty days."*

The Hebrew phrase "**Mi-Macharat Ha-Shabbat**" (*from the morrow of the Sabbath*) is the fuse that lit the fire. In the Second Temple period, three major schools of thought emerged:

The Sadducees: Comprised mostly of the priestly elite, they took the word "Sabbath" literally. They argued that the Omer must always begin on a Sunday (the day after the weekly Saturday Sabbath) during the week of Passover. This meant Shavuot would always fall on a Sunday.

The Boethusians: A sect closely related to the Sadducees, they held a similar view, likely to ensure that the holiday of Shavuot—the culmination of the harvest—always fell on a weekend, maximizing the convenience for those traveling to Jerusalem.

The Pharisees: The "people's scholars" and the predecessors of the Rabbinic tradition, they argued that "Sabbath" in this context did not mean Saturday. Instead, it referred to the first day of Passover itself, which is a *Yom Tov* (a rest day). Therefore, the counting begins on the **16th of Nisan**, the second day of Passover, regardless of what day of the week it is.

Why the Pharisees Won the Decision

History shows that the Pharisaic view became the standard. This victory was both theological and practical.

1. Linguistic Consistency

The Pharisees pointed out that the Torah often calls holy days "Sabbaths." In the very same chapter of Leviticus, Yom Kippur is called *Shabbat Shabbaton*. By interpreting the "Sabbath" as the festival day, the Pharisees ensured that Shavuot would always occur exactly 50 days after the start of Passover, maintaining a fixed link between the Exodus (Physical Freedom) and the Giving of the Torah (Spiritual Freedom).

2. Popular Support and Continuity

The Sadducees were the elite, but the Pharisees were the teachers of the masses. Josephus, the Jewish historian, notes that the public followed the Pharisees. Because the Temple service required

the participation of the entire nation, the communal practice naturally gravitated toward the Pharisaic interpretation.

3. The Power of the Oral Law

The Pharisaic victory solidified the concept of the **Oral Torah**. They argued that the written text could not be understood without the traditional explanations passed down from Sinai. If the Sadducean view had won, the calendar would be untethered, and the unity of the Jewish people's festival cycle would have been fractured.

The Sanhedrin and the Finality of the Calendar

We hold to the Pharisaic tradition today not just because of ancient debates, but because of the legal authority of the **Sanhedrin**—the supreme Jewish legislative and judicial body.

The Pharisaic tradition was codified by the Sanhedrin during the Second Temple period and immediately following its destruction. However, the calendar we use today was finalized during the era of the "Last Sanhedrin."

The Turning Point: 358–359 CE

As Roman persecution intensified and the Sanhedrin was forced into hiding, the authority to sanctify the new month by eyewitnesses became impossible. **Hillel II**, the Nasi (President) of the Sanhedrin, realized that the Jewish people needed a permanent, fixed calendar to maintain unity in the Diaspora. In **359 CE**, the Sanhedrin met for one of its last truly authoritative acts: they released the secret mathematical intercalary laws of the calendar to the public. By doing so, they formally ratified the Pharisaic method of counting the Omer for all future generations. Because there has been no Sanhedrin of equal authority since that time to change it, this ruling remains the binding "Law of the Land" for the Jewish world.

How It Was Done: The Omer in the 2nd Temple

To understand exactly how the Omer was handled when the Temple stood, we turn to several primary sources

- **The Mishnah (Tractate Menachot 10:3-4):** This is the definitive source. It describes a grand public ceremony designed to explicitly contradict the Sadducean view. It explains how the messengers of the Sanhedrin would go out on the night after the first day of Passover to reap the barley. They would ask the crowd three times: "*Has the sun set?*" and "*Is this the sickle?*" and—crucially—"*Is this the Sabbath?*" (referring to the festival). This ceremony ensured everyone knew the count started *now*.
- **Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews 3.10.5):** Josephus provides a Greek-speaking audience with a description of the "Omer" (a measure of about 2.2 liters) of parched barley brought to the Priest as a wave offering (*Tenufah*).

- **The Septuagint (LXX):** The ancient Greek translation of the Torah actually translates "the morrow of the Sabbath" as "*the morrow of the first day [of the festival]*," proving that the Pharisaic understanding was widespread as early as the 3rd century BCE.

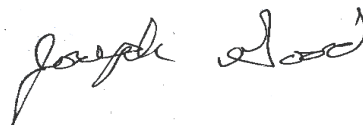
The Procedure:

1. **Harvest:** Barley was cut at night (the start of the 16th of Nisan).
2. **Processing:** It was threshed, parched over fire, and ground into fine flour.
3. **The Offering:** A handful of flour mixed with oil and frankincense was burned on the Altar, and the rest was eaten by the Priests.
4. **The Permission:** Only after this offering was brought could the new harvest of grain (*Chadash*) be eaten by the people of Israel.

The Legacy of the Count

Today, we no longer have the golden sickles or the barley offerings on the Temple Mount. However, we have the **Sefirah**. We count the days not just as a ritual, but as a testament to the Pharisaic victory of communal tradition over elitist literalism. By following the calendar established by Hillel II and the last Sanhedrin in 359 CE, we remain connected to the same heartbeat of time that echoed through the courts of the Second Temple. We count fifty days, moving from the bread of slaves (Matzah) to the two loaves of the harvest (Shavuot), ensuring that the chain of the Oral Law remains unbroken.

Blessings and shalom! Your friend, Joseph Good



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Answers to last month's trivia for Passover/Chag HaMatzah/Sefirat HaOmer...

1. Which Temple-era ritual required the public to verbally confirm three times that the sun had set before proceeding with the harvest?

Harvesting and Counting and cutting of the first omer, see Menachot 10:3

2. Which biblical figure served matzah long before the Exodus narrative, and why is this detail considered unusual?

Lot did w/the three angels in Genesis; this was prior to the giving of the Torah

3. In which tractate of the Mishnah is the earliest recorded debate between the Pharisees and Sadducees over the meaning of "מִמְחֶרֶת הַשְּׁבֹת"?

Menachot 65a-b

4. Which Jewish sect used a solar calendar that caused their Passover to fall on different days than mainstream Judaism?

The Qumran sect

5. Which item on the Seder plate has no explicit biblical command but is preserved as a symbolic remembrance of the Korban Pesach?

Shankbone/Z'roah

6. Which medieval commentator suggested that the command to eat matzah for seven days may predate the Exodus itself?

Ibn Ezra

7. Which biblical book refers to the festival exclusively as "Chag HaMatzot" without using the term "Pesach" in the Exodus sense?

Ezra

8. Which halakhic authority ruled that matzah baked after midday on Erev Pesach is preferable for fulfilling the mitzvah?

The Vilna Gaon (the Gra) was a proponent of the view that matzah baked after midday on Erev Pesach (*Matzah Shmurah*) is superior, as that is the time when the Paschal lamb was historically sacrificed.

9. Which Talmudic sage taught that the world was created in Tishri but the Exodus occurred in Nisan?

Rabbi Eliezer taught that the world was created in Tishrei, while Rabbi Joshua argued that the world was created in Nisan, the same month as the Exodus (Talmud Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a).

10. Which ancient historian recorded that Passover was the most heavily attended pilgrimage festival in Jerusalem?

Josephus, In *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*, he describes the massive scale of the pilgrimage, estimating that millions gathered in Jerusalem.

11. Which of the Four Sons in the Haggadah is associated with a verse from Deuteronomy rather than Exodus?

Wise son

12. Which early rabbinic source first describes reclining at the Seder as a symbol of freedom?

The Mishnah in Pesachim (10:1) is the first to codify that even the poorest person in Israel must not eat until he reclines, though the specific symbolism of freedom is further elaborated in the Gemara (Pesachim 108a).

13. Which sectarian group insisted that the Omer count must always begin on the Sunday during Passover week?

The Qumran Community (often associated with the Essenes). Their 364-day solar calendar ensured that holidays always fell on the same day of the week, putting them at odds with the lunar-based mainstream calendar.

14. Which biblical offering is uniquely commanded to be eaten with both matzah and bitter herbs?

Korban Pesach

15. Which Mishnah describes the ceremonial cutting of barley for the Omer offering using three men, three baskets, and three sickles?

Menachot

If you find any of these answers to be unclear or have questions, please email us or call us so we can clarify further.