

Omer=Barley Harvest



COUNTING THE OMER WITH THE KABBALAH: Forty-Nine Blessings Leading to the Giving of the Torah

by Max Amichai Heppner

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COUNTING THE OMER WITH THE KABBALAH

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INTRODUCTION

Counting the Omer. This handbook explores a spiritual journey into "Omer time," the special time period between *Pesach* (Pay-sach) "Passover" and *Shevuot* (Shav-voo-oat) "The Feast of Weeks." This practice responds to a universal spiritual yearning in a typically Jewish way. For that reason, an understanding of Jewish culture and practice helps the practitioner to go more than skin-deep into the process. This guidebook is intended to explain enough of Jewish lore that not only Jews, but also caring others, can cultivate the secret garden of the Omer counting that has brought insight and peace to many over the centuries.

The season of the *Omer* [pronounced, as you'd expect, to rhyme with Homer] was based on early agricultural concerns of our Jewish ancestors; it was later expanded and adapted to the devotional aspect of our religion, and, more or less simultaneously, applied to Kabbalistic practice. It develops much of the traditional imagery associated with the two holidays it connects: *Pesach* and *Shevuot*, which could be termed, respectively, the launching pad and landing pad for the journey into Omer time.

Pesach: The Launching Pad. *Pesach* started as an agricultural festival. While we were principally herdsmen, we celebrated the arrival of the new lambs in the sheep flocks. When we turned our attention to farming, part of the emphasis shifted to the ripening of the first grain harvest: Barley. However, the major sacrificial totem of spring remained the sheep, as a symbol of thanks to God for good harvests.

As the Jewish religion developed, sheep (and in particular the lambs) became increasingly symbolic of Jewish culture. While peoples round-about had cattle as their totem, we symbolized our new life view by sheep. Violating the sheep totem made the apostasy of Aaron [Ex. 32] all the more extreme. Not only were the rebels to whom he toadied denying the primacy of God and the leadership of Moses, but they also defied the newly-found totem of Israel. A golden lamb would not have been as defiant as the Golden Calf.

Lambs are at the heart of the story of our emergence as a free people. God freed us from slavery in Egypt by having us paint lamb's blood on the outside door posts of our houses. This was the signal for the Angel of Death implementing the Tenth Plague to "pass over" the houses of the Jews [Ex. 12:11], leading to the name **of Passover**.

To the early Christian Jews, of course, Jesus the Savior, became the lamb. The New Testament holds that Jesus, by dying on Passover, became the lamb "who takes away the sin of the world" [John 1:29].

Feast of Weeks: The Landing Pad. *Shevuot* (Shav-voo-oat)

"The Feast of Weeks" has its own agricultural base. It started as a Festival of Thanksgiving for the first harvest, especially the wheat harvest. In the time of the Temple, families brought the first measure of wheat from their harvest as a sacrifice of thanks for the success of their agricultural venture. The measure they used was an Omer, about two dry-measure quarts of wheat. Wheat was so basic to the agricultural economy that people actually counted the days as the crop grew between *Pesach* and *Shevuot*.

The Omer: The Vehicle of Travel. Counting each day of the seven weeks between the two holidays is founded on a Biblical injunction: "You shall count seven weeks from the day on which you bring the sheaf of wave offering [meaning the start of the Second Day of *Pesach*]. Your count must be complete: You must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Lord" [Lev. 23:15-16].

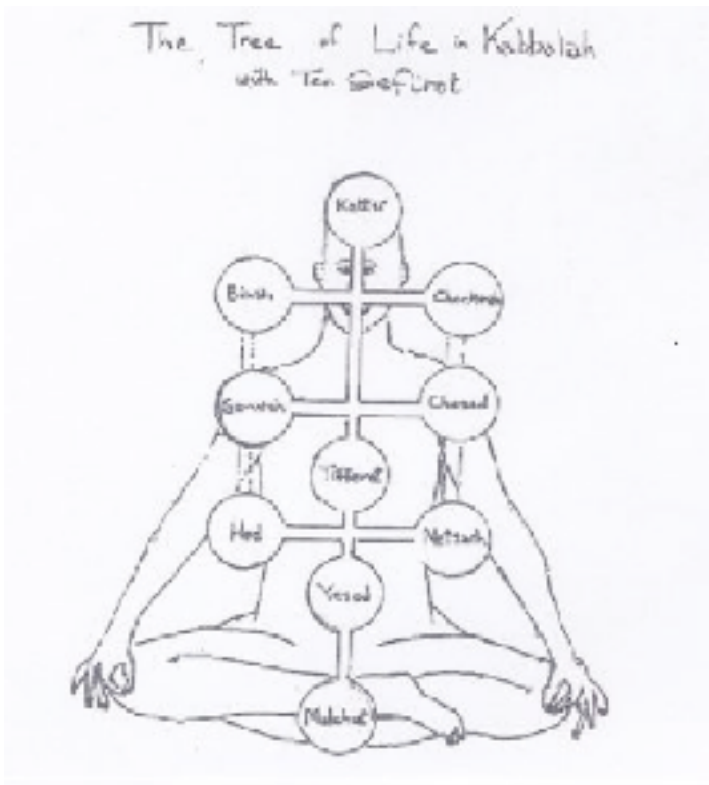
The sheaf of wave offering on *Pesach* was barley, which ripens earlier than wheat, a more important crop economically. After the barley offering, people watched nervously as their wheat was growing, with a prayer each day that the wheat should grow and yield well. Each week in the process was honored, leading to the very name of the holiday at the end, *Shevuot*—literally just "weeks."

Today, when most Jews are not wheat farmers, we have made the daily count into a devotional practice. We religiously count each of the 49 Days of the Omer, starting at the traditional time, the eve of the second day of *Pesach*. We consider each day counted as a blessing and feel a real loss if we miss the midnight deadline the rabbis set for this practice.

The shift from the agricultural to the devotional aspect of the practice highlights the notion that although we Jews gained freedom from slavery on *Pesach*, we only gained our religious mission on *Shevuot*. That holiday is seen as the time when the Torah was proclaimed to Moses and brought down to the entire People of Israel. Each of the days in the Omer season is honored for bringing us a step closer to our Torah.

Sefirot: The Energy for Travel. Kabbalists put a spiritual spin on the Counting of the Omer by assigning each day of the Omer a quality-called a *Sefirah* (Seff-ee-raw), the plural of which is *Sefirot* (Seff-ee-roat), related to the English "spheres." The idea is that if we examine how the *Sefirot* interact, we can attain greater insight into how enlightenment can be attained. The *Sefirot* have been identified in modern times as "energy centers" or "nerve ganglia" that can be located

in specific areas of the human body. They also find a parallel in the "Chakras" of the Hindu-Sanskrit spiritual lexicon.



Kabbalistic Jews see the *Sefirot* as making up the *Etz Chayim* (Aits Chay-yim), the "Tree of Life." [The pronunciation of Hebrew in my parenthetical transliterations presents a challenge mainly with the blend "CH," which differs from the same blend in the word "Chakra." Rather, consider the sound of CH as it appears in a Scots word like *Loch*.] It is a kind of guttural "H," which simply can be pronounced "H" if your throat doesn't constrict properly for

the guttural sound. Actually, the sound isn't all that important; it is the idea behind terms like *Etz Chayim* (Aits *Chay-yim* or Aits *Hay-yim*) that counts.] This imaginary "tree" represents the structure of your spiritual self as well as the structure by which God holds the Universe together.

The Tree of Life invites you to open up each of its *Sefirot* in the sense of "opening your heart." This expression is right on target because your heart is right at the center of the ten *Sefirot*. If you can open up your heart, you can open up your other *Sefirot* as well.

Seven: The Stages of Travel. Typically, spiritual masters see the spiritual energy in the body (and in the Tree of Life) as seven-tiered. Seven is a life-giving number. There are **seven** days of creation, **seven** times seven years to Jubilee, and even **seven** dwarfs to support Snow White.

The Kabbalistic Tree of Life seems to vary from this magical number because it contains 10 *Sefirot*, in contrast to the Hindu chakra system, which contains the standard seven.

This seeming discrepancy disappears when you realize that three of the energy levels don't consist of just a **single Sefirah**, but rather are made up of **pairs of Sefirot**, thereby producing the same net number of energy levels (seven) as the Hindu model. The Tree of Life concept sees the energy flow at these three levels pulsating horizontally between the two paired *Sefirot*. For example, the energy at eye level stretches from *Chochmah* (Choch-mah) "Wisdom" to *Binah* (Bee-naw) "Understanding," with the balance point at *Daat* (Daw-at) "Insight."

As an alternate way of reaching the "magic" number of seven *Sefirot* for counting the Omer, many Kabbalists use only the seven "lower" *Sefirot* of the Tree of Life. (The "upper" three are seen as too ethereal to work with—relating more to God than to man.) I don't see much of a difference as to which of the *Sefirot* are best used for counting the Omer—my motto is: "It ain't whatcha do, it's the way thatcha do it." So I'm adapting to the standard, and I use the seven lower *Sefirot* to permute during the *Omer* season.

There are 49 days between *Pesach* and *Shevuot*, and each **week** is assigned a specific *Sefirah*; each **day** also is assigned a specific *Sefirah*. The first day and the first week are assigned the same *Sefirah*, which can make the system seem a bit complicated. For example, the second day of the Omer finds us still in the first *Sefirah* for the week, but on the second *Sefirah* for the day. The Kabbalists see the energy of the day's *Sefirah* as being contained in the energy of the week's *Sefirah*, prompting the student to ponder how the energy of one affects the energy of the other.

It can get a bit cumbersome to do the permutations of the *Sefirot* as the Omer progresses, which is why a guide like this is helpful to keep your place. To determine which *Sefirah* applies to a particular day or week, I use the so-called "lighting flash" method. This approach starts with *Chesed* (in the upper right hand corner) and zigzags its way along the tree of life until it reaches *Malchut* on the seventh day (again, see the drawing on page 6).

Please don't take as gospel my interpretations below as to the message contained in the permutation of each Omer day. What you see is the amalgam of four years of doing the practice; each year my conclusions are a bit different. Sure, I hope you enjoy reading my views, but I hope even more that they'll inspire you to find your own meaning in each Omer day.

FIRST WEEK: Blessings of Chesed, Celebrating Mercy

Chesed (Chess-ed) is a poetic concept in Hebrew that seriously challenges the translator. The universe of meaning in *Chesed* contains

love, kindness, mercy, righteousness, grace, and—perhaps most of all—charity. It is *Chesed* to which the beggar appeals and *Chesed* that inspires *Chasidim* (Chaws-ee-deem) "Righteous Ones" to appeal to God for merciful acceptance. The Kabbalists call *Chesed* both "The Right Hand of Mercy" and "The Left Hand of Creation" (or vice-versa, because in the Mirror of Life, everything is easily reversed).

The Grace in *Chesed* is the Pure Soul that God invested in all human beings. We don't have to earn our right to exist. We merit our pure soul through the blessing of *Chesed*. When the Jewish philosopher paraphrases Descartes, he says: "I received *Chesed*, therefore I am." And he adds: "The universe is founded on *Chesed*."

Chesed also is associated with truth—with uttering pure speech. God spoke in *Chesed* and created the Universe. God keeps speaking in *Chesed* to keep the Universe moving and intact. Similarly, *Chesed* requires us humans to govern our speech, which is seen as our own creative power.

Jewish sages teach: "Be your word! Your life gains in validity as your word gains in truthfulness."

First blessing: Inner Grace. The Essence of Mercy.

Chesed sh'b'Chesed (Chess-ed shah bah Chess-ed) "Righteousness within Righteousness" is the spark of creation, the kernel of truth, and the essence of mercy. It recalls the blessing of creation and the liberation from Egypt. It is the stimulus for us to laugh, dance, shout, and celebrate: "We are here, we are loved, we are thankful."

This first day of the Omer is extra-special because it launches our whole Omer journey, recreating the prospective of our people as they marched confidently behind Moses into a future of freedom and toward an investiture with Torah. Our people, pictured in the Biblical story of Exodus as persistent grumblers and groaners, didn't mutter a word of complaint that first day—streaming exultantly out of Egypt, the Narrow Place, the House of Bondage.

In recalling that wondrous first day of freedom, words fail. We jubilate at being Free at Last. We rejoice that Pharaoh, the Hard-Hearted One, succumbed to God, the Creator of Mercy. Hallelujah!

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 1st day of the Omer.

Second blessing: Strength within Grace, Caring with Involvement.

Gevurah sh'b'Chesed (Gev-voo-rah shah bah Chess-ed) points to the difference between a patsy and a donor. A patsy gives a thoughtless handout in response to any whining plea. A donor cares about a cause, or, better, the beneficiaries of a cause; this involves understanding a need and taking action to eliminate (not feed) the need.

Kindness, in the view of the Kabbalah, is on a continuum stretching from pure strength to pure grace. If you shift too far toward strength, you, as caregiver, run the risk of taking over the beneficiary's life. If you shift too far toward grace, you run the risk of disengagement. While some non-Jewish masters see merit in mindless goodness, the Jewish ideal is taking an active role. In the Jewish lexicon, non-involved charity is an oxymoron.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 2nd day of the Omer.

Third blessing: Balance within Mercy. Unconditional Love.

Tiferet sh'b'chesed (Tiff-air-et shah bah Chess-ed) proclaims that grace enriched by love produces unconditional love. The most complete provider of unconditional love in my life was my foster mother, Dina. I entered her life during that risk- and threat-filled time now termed the Holocaust, when my family and I were running away from the Nazis.

Dina's husband, Harry Janssen, brought me to her like a puppy rescued from the dog pound. I arrived at her doorstep without notice, much less any input from her. Dina already was mothering a family of 13, including nine natural-born children. She hardly needed another waif to care for.

Dina, however, didn't hesitate to join *Tiferet* and *Chesed*, and she locked me into her heart. Without formalities, she extended to me every sign of love her own kids enjoyed. She instantly committed herself to caring for me and to defending my life with hers. She saw this, not as her duty, but as her right. Risk was a distant shadow in Dina's life. Love, on the other hand, was nearby and palpable.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 3rd day of the Omer.

Fourth blessing: Victory in Mercy. Respect for the Other.

Netzach sh'b'Chesed (Ney-tzach shah bah Chess-ed) teaches the need to overcome the tendency to see the self as holier than thou. Your favorite *Rebbe*, your revered Master, may have a unique way of creating a holy life style. It seems just perfect for you. However, that doesn't mean that every other life style is evil or at least to be shunned.

Moment magazine [page 49, February 2000] carried cartoon showing a candelabra with six of the seven branches twisted off. Just the top branch remained, with the candle holder made to look like a black hat with side curls protruding. The obvious point is that excommunicating others is not the Jewish way or the humane way. Each branch of our menorah must be maintained in full splendor and burn with a bright light appreciated and supported by the others.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 4th day of the Omer.

Fifth Blessing: Splendor in Mercy. Beauty in Grace.

Hod sh'b'Chesed (Hoad shah bah Chess-ed) tells us why the portrait of Mona Lisa is smiling and why the sculpted Buddha looks benign. They tell us why there's beauty in grace. You'll know what I mean if you just look at these images. Enough said!

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 5th day of the Omer.

Sixth Blessing: Foundation in Mercy. Common-Sense Grace.

Yesod sh'b'Chesed (Yay-soad shah bah Chess-ed) shows us the difference between a gracious act and a gracious person. Even a boor can be gracious on some occasions. Gracious people, however, are gracious at the core. Grace under all circumstances has become part of their personality.

We also learn, at this point, to distinguish noninvolvement from indifference. Both have an element of withdrawal. If we withdraw emotionally from other people's problems, we become hard and harsh. If we become overly involved in other people's problems, we become dissipated and scattered. *Yesod sh'b'Chesed* builds a foundation in grace that keeps us from both extremes—caring, but with gracious boundaries!

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 6th day of the Omer.

Seventh Blessing: Majesty in Mercy, Majestic Guardianship.

Malchut sh'b'Chesed (Mawl-choot shah bah Chess-ed) is personified by the eagle, the King of Birds. Jewish lore is filled with imagery using the royal bird as metaphor for the compassion of the King of the World, our caring God. God is pictured as sheltering His people under His eagle wings; and as rescuing His people on eagle wings to restore them from exile to the Holy Land [Ex. 19:4]

This imagery was brought to life in the rescue of Yemeni Jews in 1949. The newly constituted Israeli Air Force was given the task of evacuating Jewish citizens of Yemen who were subjected to worsening persecution by local Arabs after the establishment of the State of Israel. The Jewish Yemenites, although quite ready to depart, were frightened when confronted by the large cargo planes that came to fetch them. They never had seen airplanes on the ground before, so their fright is understandable.

A quick-thinking airman wisely solved the problem. He cited the "wings of eagles passage," with which the Bible-trained Yemenites were quite familiar, and then, pointing at the cargo planes, he announced: "Look, these are the eagles! Just enter under their wings, as it says in Torah." Reassured, the Yemenites boarded, convinced by the Majesty in Mercy.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 7th day of the Omer, which completes the first week of the Omer.

THE SABBATH OF CHESSED. Restfulness of Mercy.

The Jewish way to be restful about mercy is to stop analyzing and criticizing. Restful grace is to be aware of where other people are and fully respecting their views. It requires honoring their rights and making room for their needs, thoughts, and behavior. That's the Jewish way of living with even unpleasant people: Concentrating on improving one's self and let the responsibility of improving others remain with them.

SECOND WEEK: Blessings of Gevurah--Celebrating Fortitude

Gevurah (Gev-voo-rah) "heroic strength" points to the fortitude that supports the balanced self and the peaceful world. This type of power keeps the world from imploding and the self from losing control. *Gevurah* implies exercising discipline, not only in resisting others, but also in resisting powerful impulses.

For example, one of the most troubling questions about the Shoah— often asked in the light of a victorious State of Israel—is: “Why didn’t we Jews resist the Nazis with force even though we were poorly armed? Even sticks, rocks, Molotov cocktails used in a losing battle are better than going like sheep to slaughter.”

The answer is that heroic strength differs from an instinctive hitting back.

First, if you believe in law and order, you don't strike out at the first lawless attack you experience. You delay, hoping law and order will return to restrain the attackers. When it came to resisting the Nazis, expectation of protection from even a hostile government proved wrong. Law and order was turned into lawlessness and disorder. This was done in the name of the State, which is why the Nazi regime is seen as the greatest morally defunct government in the history of the civilized world.

Second, if you see law and order overwhelmed, you still reflect how your actions may affect your family and friends. You restrain the instinctive urge to strike back so as to avoid retribution that the perpetrators might inflict upon others.

Both concerns came into play during the Nazi attack on the Warsaw ghetto. In stage one, the leadership relied on international law and humanitarian support from abroad. This hope proved surprisingly false. In stage two, they restrained resistance fighters to avoid further inflaming the powerful enemy. The ire of the enemy, however, was immune to reason. Only in stage three, when both law and reason obviously had failed, did the ghetto fighters strike back with a heroic battle to the death.

The way this played out is that the entire ghetto, its houses, its streets, and its people were utterly destroyed in the process. It proved wise to use heroic resistance only when it was totally clear that there was no alternative to using force.

This principle also is illustrated by comparing the Binding of Isaac with the Death of Samson. In the first biblical legend [Gen. 22], Isaac allowed preparations for his sacrifice to go ahead, relying on his belief that a

Higher Order would prevail (and it did). In the later story [Judges 16], Samson saw no succor and was then willing to pull the house down on himself in a final act of resistance against an unprincipled, overwhelming enemy.

Eighth Blessing: Merciful Potency, the Peace-Lover's Power

Chesed sh'b'Gevurah (Chess-ed shah bah Gev-voo-rah) is an olive branch taped to a sheathed sword. A truly strong soldier is a person of peace and serves only to preserve the peace. Conversely, a cold-hearted soldier is a coward who looks to the sword to gain respect but really only generates disdain and hate.

Similarly, the studious person who spreads modesty and love is the true hero, while the one who studies only for self-aggrandizement is soon exposed as a fraud.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 8th day of the Omer, which makes 1 week and 1 day of the Omer.

Ninth Blessing: Spiritual Power, the Boost of Inner Strength

Gevurah sh'b'Gevurah (Gev-voo-rah shah bah Gev-voo-rah) says that true strength takes spiritual power as well as brawn. Reb Gershom quotes a friend [49 Gates of Light, p. 26] who said that the observant servant of the Lord straps tefillin (prayer straps and boxes) to his left arm (or his weaker arm) and on his forehead. He is mindful of the Divine source of his strength (head strap) and aware of his strongest defense, God's strength (arm strap). He is like a Roman soldier with sword held in his right hand and shield strapped to his left—an unbeatable combination.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 9th day of the Omer, which makes 1 week and 2 days of the Omer.

Tenth Blessing: Balance with Strength, the Concerned Warrior

Tiferet sh'b'Gevurah (Tiff-air-et shah bah Gev-voo-rah) supports me in seeing myself as a warrior with a caring heart, balancing myself between hope and despair. To use the words of Jay Litvin, a writer at the Chabad-Lubavitch World Headquarters, published in an electronic press release released on the Internet during the Omer of 2000:

A warrior is one who enters the battlefield with a healthy dose of fear and a larger dose of love. I feel like I am on the battlefield, each time I confront the imperative of what I must do with the reluctance of what I want to do. The battle challenges me to transform thoughts and attitudes formed through years of life and conditioning into holy thoughts and holy attitudes. As a spiritual warrior I find my obedience to the Almighty when I feel the most rebellious.

I am a spiritual warrior when I find the hope to go on while fully feeling my despair. When I discover my trust even though I feel betrayed. When I reach higher than I should and then discover that I have landed at a station higher than the one from which I reached.

I find this battle terrifying, because I have no idea where it will lead. It forces me to open myself to G-d and allow Him into the innermost, most intimate confines of myself. It forces me to confront the plaguing question: If I truly let G-d in, what will He do to me once He is there? Who will I be? What will the world have become? And what is my place and purpose within it?

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 10th day of the Omer, which makes 1 week and 3 days of the Omer.

Eleventh blessing: Heroic Strength, Undoubted Victory.

Netzach sh'b'Gevurah (Ney-tzach shah bah Gev-voo-rah) overcomes the self-doubt of the strong. Conscious heroes always are winners to themselves and their followers. People who are sure of victory ahead never look back to see who might be gaining on them, nor do they even worry if others momentarily are ahead in the race. They know they are going to come out winners eventually, no matter what numbers flash on the Scoreboard today.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 11th day of the Omer, which makes 1 week and 4 days of the Omer.

Twelfth Blessing: Splendiferous Strength, the Splendid Understatement.

Hod sh'b'Gevurah (Hoad shah bah Gev-voo-rah) proclaims that strength is splendor. It reminds me of "Splendid China," a theme park of Eastern

culture in Central Florida, set in an attractive, natural environment. The park presents the strongest architectural wonders of China, recreated in only one-tenth their actual size. They are beautiful, strong understatements of splendor.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 12th day of the Omer, which makes 1 week and 5 days of the Omer.

Thirteenth blessing: Foundation of Strength, the Supportive Pediment

Yesod sh'b'Gevurah (Yay-soad shah bah Gev-voo-rah) is the spiritual pediment that holds up the statue of pure strength. The strength of Abraham, our Founding Father, isn't pictured in the same way as the physical power of Samson. Instead of muscular strength, Abraham is imbued with a spiritual sense of the right. This is illustrated by his expedition to rescue his nephew Lot.

The legend goes [Gen. 14] that Abraham and his small band of warriors single-handedly take on an alliance of the strongest kings of the neighborhood because one of the kings had taken Lot prisoner. Abraham tastes victory in his campaign primarily because of his moral rectitude and faith in God, not principally because of overwhelming physical or numerical strength.

"Free the captive" is the moral lesson of this legend, and this battle-cry has become a cornerstone of Jewish obligation. God is not quoted in the Bible as spelling out this rule, even though it is expounded on extensively in other Jewish literature; Abraham's example clearly says it all.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 13th day of the Omer, which makes 1 week and 6 days of the Omer.

Fourteenth blessing: Majesty in Strength, the Rein on Reign

Malchut sh'b'Gevurah (Mawl-chóót shah bah Gev-voo-rah) connects the homonyms rein and reign. The message is that we must impose limits on absolute power. This is as true for earthly rulers as for people who consciously manage their own life. True, we are captains of our ship and masters of our fate. Even so, we must be aware of and responsive to the needs of others. That's the message that the Prophet Nathan conveyed to

King David when the latter clearly overstepped the bounds of his power. His message was that your ability to do anything you set your mind to must be limited by the realization that you shouldn't do everything you want.

Another dimension of Malchut sh'b'Gevurah illustrates that you should carefully pick causes into which you put your energy. On the one hand, you can err by pursuing a lost cause that doesn't fit into our world. Conversely, you can err by stopping the pursuit of a worthwhile ideal that the rest of the world won't immediately accept. You must learn to know the difference. Praying for the insight of Malchut sh'b'Gevurah can help you make a valid distinction.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvo-tav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 14th day of the Omer, which makes 1 week and 6 days of the Omer.

THE SABBATH OF GEVURAH, the Respite of the Strong

Rest is built into life. The Sabbath practices of Jewish tradition meely guide a basic human need into a fixed channel. Experiments show that even the brightest, strongest, healthiest young people must have rest or else their life degenerates into illusion and disorientation. Body builders alternate a day with weights with a day of rest from weights; they know the training breaks down muscle fiber, and to keep building it, rest is needed.

So how about the professional student? If you learn in Yeshivah all week, what do you do on Shabbat? The Talmud contains a morality tale about a great scholar, Rabbi Yehuda ben Chiyya, who was so entranced by a new inspiration from the Torah that he forgot to go home for the Sabbath. The story goes that "his fire went out" and he died [BT Ketubot 62b.]

My sense is that the professional student must stop studying on Shabbat and not only spend time with his family (as the Talmudic story suggests) but also work on his body. I think there is a message in the stereotype of the professional student who is bent, pudgy, and out of shape. As the Romans used to advise: *Mens sana en corpora sano*: you need a strong body to support a strong mind. Those with strength in their studies must also develop bodily strength, and they should consider making their Sabbath into a *Shabbat* of Gevurah. Or else, their fire, also, may go out.

THIRD WEEK: Blessings of Tiferet--Celebrating Centeredness

Tiferet (Tiff-ay-ret) literally means "beauty," but often is identified with "heart," as if to say "Beautiful Heart." *Tiferet* is the emblem of centeredness and sits at the center of the Tree of Life, the place where the Divine of the World Above meets the Mundane of the World Below.

The heart is not only the center from which life blood flows, but also the center of the spirit that infuses our soul. It sends sustenance to each cell and brings a blessing to every atom of our spirit. *Tiferet* holds together what is below so that it doesn't drift away from what is above. *Tiferet* lets us be totally in the place where we are spiritually without being pulled away from the center.

Fifteenth Blessing: Mercy of Heart, Cleansing the Heart with Forgiveness

Chesed sh'b'Tiferet (Chess-ed shah ba *Tiff-ay-ret*) says our heart can be purified by forgiveness and mercy. Our prayer "Purify our hearts to serve God in Truth" means that we cannot be spiritual with resentment in our heart. We must show mercy to ourselves and others to cause our spirit to be fully functional and active. We cannot reach God until our heart is at peace.

When I give lectures about the Holocaust, I often am asked whether I have forgiven the Germans for launching and supporting this travesty, and if so, why and how. I find that the best answer lies hidden in *Chesed sh'b'Tiferet*. I know I lose spirit by nurturing visions of revenge in my heart. I can't work on my spiritual self until my heart is freed from such visions. In freeing my heart, forgiveness almost becomes irrelevant. Rancor just fades from my heart, and I let the Germans worry about carrying the burden of living down the ignominy of the Holocaust.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 15th day of the Omer, which makes 2 weeks and 1 day of the Omer.

Sixteenth blessing: Strength of Heart

Gevurah sh'b'Tiferet (Gev-voo-rah shah ba *Tiff-ay-ret*) says that the more centered you become, the stronger you must work to stay centered. We admire the adept who can not only inspire others with his spiritual strength but also maintain his own internal balance.

Remaining centered is difficult. The Master's disciples accord him special merit and look up to him. That is no problem until the Master lets all that admiration go to his head and he loses the very balance that supports his mastery. He must stay so strongly centered that adulation can't tempt him off his path.

Furthermore, the balanced adept learns to adapt—he can't just blindly pursue his mission. The story of Jonah, the off-balance prophet, illustrates this point, albeit negatively. In the book of Jonah, God commanded him to prophesy the doom of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the Big Power of the times, so Jonah's assignment was very risky. It was like sending Martin Luther King to the Kremlin during the height of the Cold War to tell Krushchev to get right with God, or else.

Jonah was told to say: "Another 40 days, and Nineveh will be history." Jonah sat outside town and watched for the minarets of Nineveh to come tumbling down. Instead, the king and the people repented.

God forgave the people of Nineveh, but Jonah couldn't adjust. He bitterly protested to God that he had staked his life and his reputation on this perilous mission. Now his reputation was ruined because his prophesy didn't come true. (Actually, it did, but not until later. The Assyrians hardly became role models of piety and neighborliness, and about 50 years later—606 BCE—the Babylonians came visiting to make Nineveh into rubble, as predicted.)

Jonah lost his power as a prophet because he forgot that the repentance of the citizenry of Nineveh was his true mission, not his desire to shine as a prophet. The lesson is that we should focus on staying balanced, not on becoming a star.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 16th day of the Omer, which makes 2 weeks and 2 days of the Omer.

Seventeenth blessing: Heart of Hearts, Our Magnetic Core

Tiferet sh'b'tiferet (Tiff-ay-ret shah ba Tiff-ay-ret) pulls together love, life, and spirit, so that we are truly at peace and in balance. Sure, life events can drain our spirit while we strive to attain perfect love. However, Tiferet sh'b'Tiferet can pull our spirit back to center. We need to put effort into keeping the core of our hearts "magnetic," so that our heart stays locked onto love.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 17th day of the Omer, which makes 2 weeks and 3 days of the Omer.

Eighteenth blessing: Victory Emerging from the Heart, the Spiritual Medal of Honor

Netzach sh'b'Tiferet (Ney-tzach shah bah Tiff-ay-ret) is the victory you attain when you bring your life into control so that you can be fully centered. It is a spiritual Medal of Honor that says, "You deserve a medal today for fighting off temptation and distraction."

If you face the world with *Netzach* in your Heart, you can deal more effectively with the sticks, stones, and spread sheets in the world.

The *Netzach* type of Victory comes to play in the legend of the reconciliation between Jacob and Esau [Gen. 33]. Jacob is returning home to the land of his fathers, which currently is being administered by his twin brother Esau, from whom he had to flee many years earlier because he had fleeced him out of his birthright.

Jacob brings with him a sizable group of fighters, but he intuitively that military confrontation isn't the right way to settle with his brother. He spends a restless night wrestling with the topic, and wakes up in the morning with a sore hip (a symbol of his wrestling with "an angel") and a new name, Israel (a "medal" for attaining new insight). His dream prompts Israel to send his brother a conciliatory message and generous gifts instead of a challenge.

Esau lets Jacob by without engaging him in battle, truly an example of a victory of the heart, not alone for Jacob, the hero of the story, but for Esau as well.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 18th day of the Omer, which makes 2 weeks and 4 days of the Omer.

Nineteenth blessing: Splendor of the Heart, the Call to Joy

Hod sh'b'Tiferet (Hoad shah ba Tiff-ay-ret) says, "Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think." It says, don't focus so hard and relentlessly on the spiritual path that joy goes out the window. Look at your progress and

exclaim: "Wonderful! Now, how much more can I be aware of the beauty in the world if I walk the spiritual path." The Holocaust-era movie *"Life is Beautiful"* shows how love and optimism can continue under extremely adverse circumstances. Its theme is: If you are balanced and together, life is beautiful for you no matter what happens in your world.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 19th day of the Omer, which makes 2 weeks and 5 days of the Omer.

Twentieth blessing: Foundation of the Heart, the Secure Heart

Yesod sh'b'Tiferet (Yay-soad shah ba Tiff-ay-ret), reminds us that the best balance is unstable unless it rests on a firm foundation. The heart needs to feel secure before it can shine forth in beauty. Well-anchored, the heart feels at home and in its place, right where it should be to function effectively.

The Life of Doña Gracia of Nasi illustrates that point. She was a rich and generous Jewish woman, who lived under the shadow of the Inquisition in Sixteenth Century Europe. However, she was at her most influential when she moved to Turkey--out of the reach of the Inquisitor. The protection of the Sultan provided her the firm foundation from which to more effectively endow the needy, protect the persecuted, and promote Jewish culture.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 20th day of the Omer, which makes 2 weeks and 6 days of the Omer.

Twenty-first blessing: Kingship of the Heart, the Heart's Message

Malchut sh'b'Tiferet (Mawl-chóót shah ba Tiff-ay-ret) provides control as well as balance, overcoming the tendency to just remain still when in balance. It says: Actively promote spiritual growth; don't just sit on it.

In Jewish religious study, the practice of "Each one teach one" is standard procedure. Students typically learn in pairs, and often a more advanced student is paired with a student of lesser accomplishments. The system benefits both; the advanced student, even a great master, finds that he, too, enjoys and learns from paired study.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 21st day of the Omer, which makes 3 entire weeks of the Omer.

THE SABBATH OF TIFERET, the Holiness of Time

The Beautiful Heart of Shabbat is *time*. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Master of our day and age, explains this at great length in his book, "The Sabbath." He points out that at the center of other religions we typically find a place: A holy mountain, an obelisk, or a huge cathedral. In contrast, the center of Judaism is the sanctification of time.

Rabbi Heschel points out that the Jewish legend about the creation of the world doesn't end with God appointing a holy location at which people could worship and give thanks. He appointed a holy DAY for the purpose. Time is made sacred and the holiest time of all in Jewish practice is the Sabbath--that's the message of the Sabbath of Tiferet.

FOURTH WEEK: Blessings of Victory--Celebrating Mastery over Self

Netzach (Nay-tsach) "Victory" should not be understood in a triumphalist sense as victory over somebody else. It is not a "Ha, now I've gotcha, you SOB," kind of feeling.

In a spiritual sense, Victory means mastery over the negative side of the self. Even that victory shouldn't be triumphalist, but rather a modest feeling of inner satisfaction.

It is true that traditionally, *Netzach* has been associated with the miraculous victory of the Maccabeans that is celebrated during the holiday of Chanukah. Note, however, that the Victory of Chanukah was seen from the outset as an opportunity to purify the Great Temple in Jerusalem. Symbolically, *Netzach* means the celebration of attaining inner purity.

Kabbalistic masters posit that the spiritual structure of the Universe parallels that of the Human Being: "God shapes and rules the Universe through His *Sefirot*." *Netzach* may thus be seen as the Power in the Universe that allows good to triumph over evil. God created both the Power of Good and the Power of Evil, but the world would not continue to run if God hadn't set up the Power of Good as ultimately victorious.

The connection of God with Victory also raises the intriguing question, why do we sometimes call the Deity *Adonai Tsevaot* (Ah-doan-ah-ee Tza-

vah-oat) "God of Hosts" (an appellation used by both Jewish and Christian sources)? The Hebrew translates into *Lord of Armies*. At the head of what army does God march?

We can find an answer in the first mention of the term in Hebrew scripture—in the Book of Samuel. In that story, the barren woman Hannah addresses her famous, heart-rending plea to God as "Lord of Hosts" to "open her womb" and beget a son [I Sam.:6]. Was she thinking of God as a Major General?

Of course not. The God she addressed is not a general but a keeper of a host of souls. Hannah's plea, reworded in this light, would be: "Dear Master of Disembodied Souls, please send one of these myriads to me that it may become my son." As we know, Hannah's plea was answered—in spades! Not only did she beget a son, he turned out to be the prophet Samuel who wrote her story for posterity.

Twenty-second blessing: Mercy in Victory.

Chesed sh'b'Netzach (Chess-ed shah ba Ney-tzach) says that a victor finds release only when he promotes peace. The enlightened victor should ensure peace beyond victory.

Compare, for example, the follow-up to victory of the Allied Forces in World War I with that of World War II. After hostilities ended in 1918, the Allies exacted severe reparations, the opposite of what *Chesed sh'b'netzach* would indicate. That demanding response to victory helped provoke a deep depression, in which the evil of National Socialism took root and then grew into the horrid excesses of the Holocaust.

By contrast, America, the chief victor at the end of World War II in 1945, instituted a Marshall Plan to help the vanquished foe back to his economic feet. That led to the first truly democratic government in Germany, and the German economy blossomed into an economic miracle that has upheld the economic balance in Europe ever since.

To put *Chesed sh'b'Netzach* on a personal scale, when you want to conquer some bad habit, cursing the vanquished part of the self is not merciful and it isn't healthy. Great masters often tell with humor and grace about the escapades of their youth. And if they counsel people, the Masters are never judgmental, always kind. It is a good model to follow.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 22nd day of the Omer, which makes 3 weeks and 1 day of the Omer.

Twenty-third blessing: Heroic Strength in Victory.

Gevurah sh'b'Netzach (Gev-voo-rah shah ba Ney-tzach) asks a riddle: Do you need power when you have Victory?

Of course you do. You need strength in victory to restrain yourself from lording it over the vanquished, or else rape and robbery result. The Bible instructs Jewish armies to spare the trees of the enemy even if uprooting them would make victory easier; and to deal fairly with women taken from the vanquished party. The more others are at your mercy, the more inner strength you need to act with restraint and dignity.

On the personal level, if you reach mastery over the weaker parts of yourself, you must not gloat or boast. When you become a true hero of self-mastery, you use strength to attain balance and maintain perspective. You blend into your environment and look like you belong beautifully right where you are. That takes true strength.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 23rd day of the Omer, which makes 3 weeks and 2 days of the Omer.

Twenty-fourth blessing: Balance within Victory.

Tiferet sh'b'Netzach (Tiff-ay-ret shah ba Ney-tzach) posits the startling notion that a victor can be pictured as having a beautiful heart, a balanced view of the world. You'd rarely see that attitude in, let's say the Chairman of the Board who just won a take-over battle with a rival corporation.

Tiferet sh ' b 'Netzach almost seems an oxymoron today. But in the days when the romantic notion of the Noble Knight was popular, people wouldn't laugh if a victorious knight was said to have a beautiful heart. In fact, the knight's beautiful heart won him the love of the Beautiful Princess.

The noble knight was firm in the saddle, had a firm grip on his lance and was confident in life's struggles. You can face life like that noble knight. This attitude will help you avoid acting haughty when achieving a personal victory, so that you remain in balance with yourself and your world.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the

days of the Omer. Today is the 24th day of the Omer, which makes 3 weeks and 3 days of the Omer.

Twenty-fifth blessing. Innate Victory, Victory over Distraction

Netzach sh'b'Netzach (Ney-tzach shah ba Ney-tzach) holds that Victory comes to its own only when the victor is at peace with himself. The peaceful victor doesn't have to prove anything. He let the seeds of victory flower into beautiful structures. He maintains the stasis of peace to set boundaries for himself and others so all can live in peace. He uses strength only to defend against evil, against distractions, and against invasion of privacy.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 25th day of the Omer, which makes 3 weeks and 4 days of the Omer.

Twenty-sixth blessing. Splendor in Victory. Accomplishment Without Guilt.

Hod sh'b'Netzach (Hoad shah ba Ney-tzach) tells you that you have every right to enjoy your accomplishments and that you fully deserve what you have created. It is victory without guilt, enjoyment without static.

The static I'm referring to is the constant self-criticism that I often have ringing in my ears. It's as if a little crow is perched like a gremlin on my shoulder, ready to disparage any victory. When I accomplish something I could justifiably be proud of, the discouraging bird likes to crow: "What's so great about that? You could have done it better, sooner, faster, more elegantly. You always were kinda clumsy, you know! And you really don't deserve better, anyhow. Caw-caw."

Hod sh' b'Netzach can calm that static; it is a comforting canary that coos: "Good job, fellow. You used your noodle and accomplished something for yourself. You deserve this. And more!" That kind of message is essential to fully savoring victory.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 26th day of the Omer, which makes 3 weeks and 5 days of the Omer.

Twenty-seventh blessing. Foundation of Victory, Ideals as Basis for Action

Yesod sh' b'Netzach (Yay-soad shah ba Ney-tzach) says a solid victory has to be based on an ideal. It suggests that you should define and refine the reasons why you want victory before you sharpen your lance and saddle your horse. Ask yourself, is the prize worth the effort and the cost?

Assess the input needed from your own energy and whether eventual victory would be worth what it would cost you. Then, ponder the possible disturbances you may be creating in your environment. How does your objective stand up to the scrutiny of others? Sure, it may be necessary to go up against the disapproval of others. However, *Yesod sh' b'Netzach* encourages you to assess the overall impact of victory before you go into battle.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 27th day of the Omer, which makes 3 weeks and 6 days of the Omer.

Twenty-eighth blessing. The Majesty of Victory, Ruling with Wisdom.

Malchut sh'b'Netzach (Mawl-choot shah ba Ney-tzach) comes to the fore in the oft-quoted story of how King Solomon adjudicated a case of competing mothers [1 Kings 3:16-28]. Two squabbling women are brought before him, each claiming custody of a baby. Both mothers allege that the baby is their natural-born child.

King Solomon rules that the issue should be resolved by cutting the baby in half, so each mother can have a fair share. Solomon the Wise figures that the true mother would rather give up the baby than have it cut in half, while the pretender, in spite, would agree to the verdict.

And so it happened. The pretender accepted the verdict, while the true mother burst into tears and dropped her claim. Thereupon, Solomon awarded her the whole baby!

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 28th day of the Omer, which makes 4 entire weeks of the Omer.

THE SABBATH OF NETZACH, the Quiet in Victorious Reflection

Shabbat sh' b'Netzach takes a step back from the dust in the arena of victory and covers up the score on the Scoreboard. It asks: Has victory achieved inner peace or just outer acquisition?

Can you sit in victory and not feel disquieted, lonely, or even bored? Can you withstand the disdain and resentment of the vanquished? Are you secure in your center? Can you justify the cause that impelled you to victory without belittling others? Can you forgive the vanquished for perceived injustices done and forget about requiring restitution? Can you forgive your enemies without and your weaknesses within? These are the questions to ponder on the Sabbath of Victory.

FIFTH WEEK: The Blessings of Hod, Celebrating Life!

Hod (Hoad) "splendor" shines is like a lantern at a birthday party, celebrating a successful life. The lantern of Hod differs from the birthday lantern in that it shines for you daily, like the sun, not just once a year, on your birthday. There may be days when life's troubles seem to overwhelm you. But if you keep the lantern of *Hod* ever burning in your heart, you will maintain confidence that the clouds in your life will pass and that you will overcome life's challenges.

Kabbalists have called *Hod* by the name of Aaron the Priest and use the Bible story about the first priestly service [Lev. 10] to explain why. On that momentous day when Aaron was first invested as High Priest, his two oldest sons performed their priestly duties in an unauthorized way. They died on the spot, but God instructed Aaron to continue the day's observance without even shedding a tear or uttering a cry of pain.

We may not be able to understand why God had to be this severe with Aaron, but the lesson behind God's action is clear. The Sun of Aaron must continue to shine despite the darkest cloud, or else Aaron would not be able to be a *Hod type* of priest.

Twenty-ninth blessing: Grace in Splendor, Compassion in Kindness

Chesed sh' b'Hod (Chess-ed shah ba Hoad) teaches that kindness should be judged by the outcome, not by the intent. If you mean to do a kindness and it feels like an assault by the recipient, then you must apologize and change your behavior, no matter how noble your motivation. When there is grace and compassion within splendor, the act enables the receiver to feel love and the giver to feel true satisfaction.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 29th day of the Omer, which makes 4 weeks and 1 day of the Omer.

Thirtieth blessing. Strength in Splendor, the Power of Charisma.

Gevurah sh' b'Hod (Gev-voo-rah shah ba Hoad) is the Power of Attraction, the force that draws us to charisma. The Talmud contains a legend about the encounter of two paragons of charisma. One is Rabbi Yochanan, a noted scholar and "the most beautiful man in Pumbedita." The other is Resh Lakish, a strongman, a Robin Hood of Israel, who at the start of the story is fearlessly leading a band of bandits [BT Bava Metzia 84]. Attracted by each other's charisma, each champion started challenging the other. Said Resh Lakish: "May your beauty be for women." Countered Rabbi Yochanan: "May your strength be for Torah. If you turn aside from your ways, I will give you my sister, who is more beautiful than I."

On impulse, Resh Lakish accepted the challenge from Rabbi Yochanan. What the wily bandit didn't know is that Rabbi Yochanan's "beautiful sister" was the Torah. When he caught on to Rabbi Yochanan's metaphor, he stayed the course, became the Rabbi's disciple and close friend, and gained a great name as a Torah scholar.

Resh Lakish came to understand that his charisma derived from strength and beauty that is God-given.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 30th day of the Omer, which makes 4 weeks and 2 days of the Omer.

Thirty-first blessing. Balance in Splendor, Disciplined Celebration.

Tiferet sh' b'Hod (Tiff-air-et shah bah Hoad) is the balance you look for in planning an elegant party in your home as opposed to a bawdy bash in a bar. In making up your invitation list, you must go beyond selecting people who would enjoy and support the party theme. You would balance the invitations to include introverts and extroverts, fun people and thoughtful people, leaders and followers.

Similarly, the activities you'd plan would be balanced: Learning games and fun games; games of skill and games of chance; activities with motion and quiet pastimes. The same would go for the menu: Meat and

tofu; veggies and pasta; sweet pies and ripe fruit for desert. . . you get the idea, right?

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 31st day of the Omer, which makes 4 weeks and 3 days of the Omer.

Thirty-second blessing: Victory in Splendor, Just Deserts.

Netzach sh' b'hod (Ney-tzach shah ba Hoad) prods us to enjoy the splendor of our lives with abandon. With our eyes glancing over our shoulders at the Victory we have attained, we are free to shout for joy, sing hallelujah, and jubilate: "Ashreynu ma tov chelkeynu, ma nayim goralenu, ma yaffa yerushateynu," Let us be happy with our good breaks, our pleasant fate, and our lucky stars" [Chasidic song of praise].

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 32nd day of the Omer, which makes 4 weeks and 4 days of the Omer.

Thirty-third blessing: Splendor Unlimited, The Glory of Everything.

Hod sh' b'Hod (Hoad shah ba Hoad) is the glory of everything, the call to enjoy the beauty of nature, the innate splendor in life. It is regarded as stopping place in the counting of the Omer, a time to catch our breath. Even traditions that see the Omer as a period of mourning for our many losses recognize the splendor and joy of the 33rd day.

At its roots, Day 33 was the wheat growers' moment of truth. If the crop was doing well, they could heave a sigh of relief, because the conventional wisdom held that once wheat made it to Day 33 in good shape, a plentiful harvest was virtually assured.

For this reason, we have come to observe Day 33 as a holiday called *Lag b'Omer*. The name stems from the Classical Hebrew practice of having the letters of the alphabet do double duty as numerals. (Like this: One is *Alef*, two is *Bet*, three is *Gimmel*; and ten is *Yud*, twenty is *Chaf*, and thirty is *Lamed*.) In this system, 33 is expressed as LG. With a vowel sound added, LG becomes the "LaG" of the Omer.

To celebrate the holiday, it's customary to go on picnics and play games out of doors. A bittersweet legend explains the origin of this observance.

During the time of the Second Temple when the Roman-occupied Judea, they forbade Jewish study. However, they admired games of skill and military drill.

To fool the Romans into letting them continue their studies, the rabbis and their students started going out into the fields with bats and balls and bows and arrows and set up camp. Of course, once there, they resumed their studies. However, if they heard strangers approach, they picked up their balls and bats or bows and arrows to mask what they were really doing.

I suppose, with all that sports equipment lying around, the young students played some games and sports between lessons anyway. That's what we do today. We take a break from study, work, and meditation and go to the park to picnic and play games and sports.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 33rd day of the Omer, which makes 4 weeks and 5 days of the Omer.

Thirty-fourth blessing: Foundation of Splendor, the Smile of Wisdom.

Yesod sh' b'hod (Yay-soad shah ba Hoad) points to the difference between real gold and fool's gold. Both glitter, but only one has true monetary value. Similarly, a smile can be the expression of splendor in an integrated person or the empty posturing of a fool.

The smile of wisdom reveals inner peace and the confidence of true knowledge. It warms the observer's heart. A fool's smile, on the other hand, is manipulative and the hallmark of cheap public relations. It doesn't reach the heart of the observer. So, *Yesod sh' b'hod* urges us to look for the wise smile, not the wise-ass smile!

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 34th day of the Omer, which makes 4 weeks and 6 days of the Omer.

Thirty-fifth blessing: Majesty of Splendor, the Outreach of Greatness.

Malchut sh' b'hod (Mawl-choot shah ba Hoad) examines how demonstrating splendor in public—revealing and sharing leadership and charisma—poses a great personal risk. The Master who shines *and* acts in

the world attracts both enemies and followers with extremely strong feelings.

To look at the flip side, a leader without *Malchut sh' b'hod* stays in his castle and fortifies the walls and deepens the moat. He is a Slobodan Milosevich or a Saddam Hussein, and they seem to survive beyond all expectations. Conversely, a leader who is blessed with true *Malchut sh' b'hod* becomes a Jesus, a Martin Luther King, a Rabbi Akiba, a Gandhi, all lives that were tragically and brutally cut short. This outcome shows the sad truth that *Malchut* with *Hod* poses a risk. Truly charismatic leaders are aware of the risk but are willing to reach out nonetheless. Let us pray for their reward in Heaven.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 35th day of the Omer, which makes 4 entire weeks of the Omer.

THE SABBATH OF HOD, Mystical Splendor

I just love the image of the Sabbath as a beautifully robed vision of splendor—a personage of great beauty, robed in majesty. Hebrew assigns gender to its nouns. Day and Holiday are masculine. Sabbath, by contrast, is feminine. She is called a bride, a queen, a mystical beauty.

Although Judaism tends to stay away from personification, in this case, the Kabbalists of Sefad invested *Kabbalat Shabbat* (Welcoming of the Sabbath) with great drama. They walked from their place of worship to the edge of the city on Friday afternoon. Precisely at the hour of official nightfall and the start of Shabbat, they would start a parade into town as if they were escorting a corporeal queen, greatly beloved by her people. If we can capture that image, we will have gained access to the Sabbath in her full splendor.

SIXTH WEEK: Blessings of Grace, Celebrating Creativity.

Yesod (Yay-soad) is the foundation of human endeavor, the seat of creativity, the root system of the Tree of Life. With *Yesod* I am free to visualize, to dream, to wish—secure in the knowledge that my wishes will come true. In *Yesod*, I find permission to use all my creative powers, and for *Yesod*, to give out my thanks for collecting the fruits of my wishing.

It is remarkable that Jewish adepts have put a high value on creative endeavor, when the standard advice of Eastern mystics is to stop doing.

The Jewish view holds that we humans are co-creators with God. And God's creation of the world is seen as an act of love, quite different from the cataclysmic creation stories of other cultures.

Jewish masters say that if we keep our spirits attuned, we will do creative and good work, bringing us closer to God. The Jewish adept counsels us to work hard and then rest wholeheartedly on a regular schedule every week because rest and study are rewards for good creative work.

The creative energy of *Yesod* also is identified with sexual power and creation of new life, especially new life that leads to salvation. Actually, Jewish lore has two such stories—we Jews just love to look at great truths from more than one angle.

In the first of the two related story in the Bible [Gen. 38], which is rich in detail, sexual seduction is seen in a positive light. In this story, the heroine, Tamar, enforces the practice of the *levir* (providing an heir to the first-born male in the family). She uses her wiles to force the patriarch Judah to provide her with an heir. Through this seductive work by Tamar, a son is born who connects the Abrahamic line to our Ideal King, King David, who in turn is seen as the progenitor of the Messiah.

The Torah strays chronologically by putting the second of the seduction stories virtually cheek to jowl [Gen. 39:7-20] with the first. Here sexual seduction is put in a negative light. The heroine, identified only as Mrs. Potiphar, uses her wiles to distract God's servant, Joseph.

Even though her seductive behavior is deplored, it still is seen, willy-nilly, as promoting God's plan for the Jews. Joseph, by distancing himself from the sexy Mrs. Potiphar, is rewarded by becoming perhaps the most powerful Jewish politician in history. And a lesser-known tradition honors this politician by picturing the Messiah as the "Son (descendant) of Joseph."

Thirty-sixth blessing: Mercy in Foundation, Grace in Judgment.

Chesed sh'b'Yesod (Chess-ed shah bah Yay-soad) brings us to the immense Jewish preoccupation with numbers.

When it comes to counting people, we seem to hate the idea of having ourselves numbered. In Hebrew, the same word root, *Zachar*, covers both the word "male" (the unit to be counted) and the word "remember." The implication is that we need to remember each person making up the count, not just the totality of the numbers counted.

Through the ages, Jews always had problems with submission to a census. Some say a superstition is behind this—the sense that being assigned a number strips the soul from its natural protection.

Even in today's non-superstitious climate, we still hate just being a number. Calling me by my Social Security Number takes away my dignity as a person and opens me up to invasion of privacy. Sensitive to this unwillingness to call people just by a number, the *gabbai* in charge of certifying a *Minyan* (the Jewish group-prayer quorum), traditionally counts the congregation as "Not one, not two . . .," etc.

Anyhow, the Bible relates that this resistance to numbering was at its superstitious peak when Moses first suggested doing a headcount [Ex. 30:12]. He wanted a working figure on how many able-bodied men he could muster as soldiers. To get cooperation, Moses tried his usual arm-twist, a pronouncement that he had a message straight from God.

In this case, this tactic didn't work. So Moses had an inspiration. He required each draftable male to pay a half-shekel tax. Instead of counting heads, Moses now could count half-shekels. The solution was brilliant because in this way he accrued a war chest of shekels to buy the latest armaments.

King David, the other great hero of Judaic lore, had similar census problems [I Samuel 24]. Almost immediately after he ordered a census, an epidemic broke out in the land, killing 70,000 inhabitants. Obviously, the people blamed the epidemic on the census and David almost lost his throne over this incident.

The moral of these stories is that you need to see behind the number to see a person's soul. The Bible calls the half-shekel census tax "a ransom to the Lord." This rather mysterious appellation points to the Mercy in Yesod.

However, when dealing with numbering anything other than humans, Jews are positively in love with numbers. For example, we tease meaning out of the spelling of words by looking up their numerical equivalent. Take the Hebrew word for "life," *Chai* (Chah-hee). Its numerical value is eighteen, seeing that it is spelled with a *Yud* (10) and a *Chet* (8). Life carries a high value, so 18 is seen as a propitious number. Gifts of money often are made in multiples of 18.

So the 36th day of the Omer is double-lucky. Jewish lore even holds that God preserves the world thanks to the merit of 36 saintly people. That's real *Chesed sh' b'Yesod*.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 36th day of the Omer, which makes 5 weeks and 1 day of the Omer.

Thirty-seventh blessing: Strength in Foundation, Constructive Peace.

Gevurah sh' b'Yesod (Gev-voo-rah shah bah Yay-soad) says that an effectively working society is based on peace. A great variety of Jewish prayer asks God for Peace, which they call "His most precious gift." God Himself is called "*Oseh ha-Shalom*" Maker of Peace.

During most of our recent history, we Jews have been living precariously as outsiders in other people's countries. We defenseless people constantly were caught in the middle of other people's bellicosity. We have been, to put it positively, living atop an observation post that shows the benefits of a peaceful life.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 37th day of the Omer, which makes 5 weeks and 2 days of the Omer.

Thirty-eighth blessing: Heart of Foundation, Absolute Value.

Tiferet sh' b'Yesod (Tiff-ay-ret shah bah Yay-soad) says my foundation must be level and balanced, or else my Tree of Life will shift with the first earth tremor.

Great moral values, such as telling the truth, can't stand when shifted just a little off center. A firm stance for truth requires me to be totally truthful in all things. That's a tough stance to take, especially for a Libra like me, who believes in Moral Relativity.

To give myself minimum moral wiggle room, I have resolved never to lie to benefit myself, not even just to make myself more comfortable in my dealings with others. I still hold, however, that I don't violate the message of *Tiferet sh' b'Yesod* if I lie to make others more comfortable, even at a cost to myself. I also will lie to preserve my life, because Judaism holds life more important than just about anything else.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the

days of the Omer. Today is the 38th day of the Omer, which makes 5 weeks and 3 days of the Omer.

Thirty-ninth Blessing: Victory in Foundation, Rejoicing in Accomplishment.

Netzach sh' b'Yesod (Ney-tzach shah bah Yay-soad) is a lesson in appropriate pride. There is a place for both humility and joy, gratitude to God and awareness of your own creative power. You just shouldn't go too far in either direction—too much pride or too much humility.

Raising your spiritual level and taking happy stock in your progress is perfectly natural. A vibrant spiritual life feels good and sets straight your basic relationship with God and the people in your life. You've got every right to enjoy this. However, that doesn't make you any better than anyone else—just happier!

Should pride expand to where you stack stuff in a trophy case? It depends on your attitude. On some level, you have to realize that whatever good you accomplish gets done by the Grace of God. In that sense, *Netzach sh' b'Yesod* comes to mean that all glory should go to the Godhead, saying, "Thank, God, I made it."

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 39th day of the Omer, which makes 5 weeks and 4 days of the Omer.

Fortieth blessing. Splendor within Foundation. Pride in Building.

Hod sh' b'Yesod (Hoad shah bah Yay-soad) honors the artist in the builder. As a minimum, a building's foundation has to be solid and balanced. However, a Master Builder also makes the building shine forth in beauteous splendor.

Similarly, spiritual development depends on a solid basis in Jewish law, tradition, and culture. Yet spiritual masters also should find the beauty in their practice.

Today, "study" of the Kabbalah has attracted some high-profile entertainment figures who inspire copy-cats. Critics call this development dilettantism, and it certainly has the potential to make the whole practice seem like a fad. *Hod sh' b'Yesod* comments on this issue by saying that, at the end of the day, the foundation of spiritual practice must be constructed both solid and splendid.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 40th day of the Omer, which makes 5 weeks and 5 days of the Omer.

Forty-first blessing. Foundation of the Foundation, Clinging to Mother Earth.

Yesod sh'b'Yesod (Yay-soad shah bah Yay-soad) is the grounding Mother Earth provides for the lightning that descends from heaven with effective spiritual practice. Like lightning hitting a house without a lightning conductor, our spiritual practice can burn us humans if it isn't well grounded.

Some Jewish masters say that the Tree of Life has its roots in Paradise, alongside the famous Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This suggests that no matter how spiritually developed you are, you shouldn't stop honoring Mother Earth. She bore your cradle, she furnishes your sustenance, and she holds your foundation. In return, you should preserve Mother Earth against neglectful pollution, mindless exploitation, and senseless waste. *Yesod sh'b'Yesod* says: Come down from the heights of spiritual splendor long enough to compost your kitchen waste.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 41st day of the Omer, which makes 5 weeks and 6 days of the Omer.

Forty-second blessing. Majesty in Foundation, Single-minded Devotion.

Malchut sh'b'Yesod (Mawl-choot shah bah Yay-soad) typifies total devotion to a cause. This quality resided quintessentially in our Biblical founding father, Joseph. He is a majestic figure, secure in his ability to steer himself through life, who influenced Jewish history more dramatically perhaps than Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. If Joseph hadn't established our base in Egypt, we could never have launched the Exodus that led us to our Promised Land and began the history of Jews as a nation under the Laws of the Torah.

The story of Joseph's life is the longest and most convoluted narrative in the Five Books of Moses. Yet through all his vagaries, Joseph remained single-minded and steadfast, upholding the values he believed in. He was an amazing combination of faith in himself and faith in God.

One problem with Joseph, however, was that his single-mindedness was too extreme, as exemplified by the story of a mystifying but portentous dream the Pharaoh had him interpret. He dreamt about two groups of seven cows that came out of the River Nile. The first group, made up of full-bodied, healthy cows, was swallowed by the second group, made up of skinny, sickly cows. Joseph correctly said the dream foretold that seven good grain-producing years would be followed by seven miserable harvests [Gen. 41]. He wisely stored grain from the good years and sold them to the hungry people during the bad years. However, in the process, he monopolized the grain market and used the monopoly to make all of Egypt's ordinary citizens into slaves.

If his single-mindedness hadn't so strongly established the practice of slavery in Egypt, perhaps we Jews would not ourselves have later been enslaved in Egypt. Taking *Malchut sh' b'Yesod* to its extreme led to tragedy, and so we learn that excess of any type produces misery, even if the underlying principle is indisputably valid.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 42nd day of the Omer, which makes 6 entire weeks of the Omer.

THE SABBATH OF YESOD. Activity that Promotes Rest.

At first blush, it would seem that a Sabbath within *Yesod* is an oxymoron. *Yesod*, after all, is at the vortex of human activity, especially creative activities. And creative activities are the very opposite of rest in the Jewish religious lexicon. When God rested on the seventh day, he rested from *creating*.

A second look at the issue, however, reveals that you have to have creative activity to have a Sabbath—or else, what would you be resting from? Jewish tradition mandates creative activity. The Masters have said that you don't *have to* resume creative activities when the Sabbath ends after sundown on Saturday—you're just *allowed to* do so. However, they say you *have to* start creative work by Wednesday, so you work at least half a week, whether you're retired or not. Or else, the next Shabbat would be meaningless to you. That is the teaching of the Sabbath of Yesod.

SEVENTH AND LAST WEEK: The Blessings of Malchut, Surveying the Kingdom

Malchut (Mawl-choot) "Kingdom, or Governance" comes as the "crowning moment" of the Omer period. It invites us to review the spiritual journey we started at Passover and to apply its lessons to our life beyond *Shevuot*, to our normal daily existence.

Scripture points to a way to broaden our understanding. Immediately after the injunction to count the Omer and bring the appropriate sacrifices for *Shevuot*, the text advises: "And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and the stranger--so say I, the Lord Your God" [Lev. 23:22]. In other words, you don't just offer grain to honor God during a holiday—you also are responsible to other humans who may be in need of grain.

A Talmudic takes the train of thought leading from the Omer to grain-harvesting even further, ending with the high point in Jewish history, the rule of King David. This extended series starts with The Book of Ruth, whose life was saved by benefiting from the injunction to leave part of any grain harvest for the stranger. Ruth arrives penniless in the Holy Land, and is able to feed herself and her mother-in-law by gleaning the grain fields of a distant kinsman named Boaz.

Her devotion to her mother-in-law and overall superb character bring her to the attention of Boaz, who eventually marries her despite the fact that Ruth is not particularly a "good catch." The whole clan of Boaz is rewarded for his generosity by having the exemplary King David be the great-grandson of Ruth and Boaz. And from the offspring from this same union, we are told, the Messiah will come.

Not surprisingly, then, the Kabbalah calls *Malchut* the *Sefirah* of King David. The famous statue by Michelangelo says it all about what we see in David: Superb manly specimen standing fearlessly with slingshot in hand, confronting the fearfully armed Philistine Goliath [I Samuel 17]. David of course defeats this 9 ½-foot giant, which helps pave the way for David's eventually becoming King.

In Jewish folklore King David is pictured as excelling in every field. Poetry? The best Psalms are Psalms of David. Music? The Harps of Heaven are fashioned by him. Military genius? He wins all battles. Devotion? He conceived the Temple. Savior? The true Messiah must be his descendant. Learning? The Wisdom of Great Talmudic Learning comes from his mind. Even today, one of our most jubilant and popular folk songs goes "*David, Melech Yisrael, Chai ve-Kayam*, " David, the King of Israel, yet lives and will live forever."

But before David could attain his kingship, he first had to fearlessly confront and defeat evil. He did. And if we, David's people, want to attain good governance over our lives, we must defeat our own Goliath, the seemingly unconquerable negative impulses that are part of our nature. That's the ultimate message of *Malchut*.

Forty-third blessing: Grace in Governance, Mercy in Majesty

Chesed sh' b' Malchut (Chess-ed shah bah Mawl-choot) teaches us that the more kingly and the more developed we are, the more we need to remember grace and mercy. And the more we are in touch with the earthly rewards of our stewardship, the more we should remember our spiritual heritage.

The legend about King David and the return of the Ark of the Covenant [I Samuel 7] illustrates this point. The Ark that the wandering Jews carried through the desert for 40 years had been put into storage tent after we came "home" and established the first State of Israel. Once David brings peace out of the turbulent winning of the land, he becomes aware that the spiritual side of governance has been neglected.

Therefore, David ordered the ark to be taken from its storage place and brought to Jerusalem with great pomp and ceremony. *Chesed sh' b' Malchut* says that we who hold David as our model should periodically take stock of our life and reinvest it with its neglected spiritual side.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 43rd day of the Omer, which makes 6 weeks and 1 day of the Omer.

Forty-fourth blessing: Strength in Royalty, Responsibility of Power.

Gevurah sh' b' Malchut (Gev-voo-rah shah bah Mawl-choot) reminds us that a deep sense of responsibility must go along with royal strength. That misjudgment can lead to tragic results is illustrated by a story from King David's later life. In that story [starting at II Samuel 15], David's adult son Absalom decides to dethrone him. (Did the original story teller have his tongue in cheek when he called this rebellious son *Absalom* "Father of Peace"?)

Absalom succeeds in a palace revolution and King David has to flee with a contingent of loyal retainers to a sanctuary called Mahanayim across the river Jordan. Absalom, feeling threatened by his father's remaining power, decides to attack his father at Mahanayim.

David stands at a highpoint in Mahanayim, watching his son's army move in on him, and he takes a critical look at *Gevurah sh 'b' Malchut*. Should he, by using his strength against his son, try to recapture his kingdom—and thereby lose the son whom he actually loved very much? Or should he surrender and lose his kingdom—but thereby spare his son?

David opts to defeat his son, who is killed in the process. David now can return to Jerusalem to resume his reign, but he is struck with great sadness. Again he muses about whether he has done the right thing: "Oh, Absalom, my son!" he mourns, "would that I had died in your stead, Absalom, my son, my son."

In using strength and power at our disposal, we must, like David, ever assess whether its use is appropriate in the present situation. The story of David shows that lack of *Gevurah sh 'b' Malchut* can have dire consequences. David's reign never regained its old glory after his return to Jerusalem—even though, in our hearts, King David has ever remained the Greatest of our Kings.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 44th day of the Omer, which makes 6 weeks and 2 days of the Omer.

Forty-fifth blessing. Balance in Majesty. Willingness to Take Advice.

Tiferet sh 'b' Malchut (Tiff-air-et shah bah Mawl-choot) reminds us that, no matter how spiritually advanced we are, we can benefit from the insight of others. Again the life of King David comes to mind as an example.

David had a rock-fast impression of himself, yet he was able to listen to reason when power blinded him to his shortcomings. The story goes [II Samuel 11:14] that David had one of his faithful guardsmen killed, so he, David, could acquire Uriah's wife, Bat-Sheva, for his royal harem. When the Prophet Nathan hears about this, he comes to admonish David. The King takes the admonition in good grace and uses it to get himself back into balance.

The Prophet Nathan continued intervening in the life of the King. We read that he advised him not to build the Grand Temple, which was David's great dream; and he counseled him to name Solomon as his successor, bypassing Adonia, who was the favorite son of David's old age. Perhaps David's most admirable trait is that he continued to keep Nathan on as his friend and adviser, no matter how bitter the advice.

Like the Ideal King, we should never be too proud or overly self-sufficient to solicit advice from others or listen to suggestions they may volunteer. Even if the message comes as a jolt (most messages from Biblical Prophets sound on the harsh side), we should use them to get ourselves back into balance.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 45th day of the Omer, which makes 6 weeks and 3 days of the Omer.

Forty-sixth blessing: Victory in Majesty, Dealing with the Vanquished

Netzach sh'b'Malchut (Ney-tzach shah bah Mawl-choot) is a recurrent and difficult challenge. When the Great Leader wins a battle, how should he deal with the vanquished?

Early Jewish lore is extreme on this topic: No rights and no place for the beaten neighbors. For example, here are the military instructions God gives General Moses [Deut. 7]: "When the Lord your God brings you to the land that you are about to invade and occupy and He dislodges many nations before you—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites . . . and the Lord your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction. Grant them no terms and give them no quarter ... Instead, this is what you shall do to them: You shall tear down their altars, smash their pillars, cut down their sacred posts, and consign their images to the fire."

Compare that to the more complex situation encountered by a modern-day Supreme Commander of the Jewish Nation, Ehud Barak. His armies have beaten the Syrians, the Jordanians, the Lebanese, and the Palestinians—the descendants of the neighbors earlier defeated by Moses and his troops. Yet General Barak tries to talk nice to all these enemy nations—much less is he planning to "tear down their altars, smash their pillars, cut down their sacred posts, and consign their images to the fire."

What is General Barak's reward? The Syrians thumb their noses at the victors, the Jordanians complain about lack of water rights, the Lebanese send down murder squads trained in Iran, and the Palestinians demand their rights to Jerusalem and keep Jews from entering the great mosque built on the ruins of the Great Jewish Temple.

Neither policy has worked. Neither ruthless eradication nor a victorious hand extended in friendship has calmed the endless enmity of Israel's neighbors. It will take an even wiser leader than Moses or Barak to intuit

the true imperative of *Netzach sh' b' Malchut* and secure the peace of Israel.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 46th day of the Omer, which makes 6 weeks and 4 days of the Omer.

Forty-seventh blessing: Splendor of Reign, Financing Royalty

Hod sh' b' Malchut (Hoad shah bah Mawl-choot) illuminates another modern moral quandary, namely how much splendor is too much? Supporting the grand monarchy of Great Britain costs British taxpayers untold millions per year, not to speak of lost revenues from tax breaks that the aristocracy enjoys. This has led to serious discussions of what service is being rendered by the splendor of royalty and whether taxpayers today can afford this luxury.

It doesn't take a major leap of thought to apply this discussion to aspects of our own lives, let's say the grandeur of a fancy wedding. A respectable formal wedding and party can cost \$40,000 on today's market in urban America. Can a clear-eyed look at the cost morally sustain such an event? Can we afford it when much of the world goes hungry and doesn't even have enough money for a cup cake and a candle to celebrate a wedding? Instead of the money going to *Hod* (splendor), should it go to *Chesed* (charity)?

The defenders of costly weddings and parties say that the money spent isn't just thrown out—it helps sustain our economy. It provides work for the gardener who grows the gardenias, the delivery service that brings the gardenias to the wedding, the decorators who use the gardenias to decorate the wedding hall, and probably several others—and that's just the gardenias!

We could divert this money to staving off hunger in Eritrea (but much of the donation would probably be siphoned off to support the latest local war). If we did, however, we would deprive the local gardener back in the United States from his source of income. The same would occur with the deliverer, decorator, and their ilk, leading to poverty at home.

Furthermore, the argument goes, all *of Hod* isn't ostentation. A well-planned wedding and party sustains religion, invests wedding vows with communal support, lifts up the spirits of those attending, and gives them a chance to shmooze, dance, dine, and feel happy. Can we put a monetary limit on generating happiness?

Several of my friends have chosen a middle ground. They designate part of the budget for their wedding for charity. What's left still gives plenty of people work and plenty of celebrants a good time. How do you make the cut between charity and celebration? That's the question posed by *Hod sh' b' Malchut*.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 47th day of the Omer, which makes 6 weeks and 5 days of the Omer.

Forty-eighth blessing. Foundation of Majesty, the King's Resume.

Yesod sh' b' Malchut (Yay-soad shah bah Mawl-choot) asks, "What background and experience do you need to be a king?"— even though, in practice, most king candidates don't have to present a resume. It's the same type of question as, "What qualifications do you need to be born?" In both cases, the rule seems to be: If you follow the birth canal and the rules of the community, you're entitled.

Jewish lore says that the heart and soul God implants in us is pure. We all have pure hearts and souls in our resume. However, people who know I'm a Holocaust survivor have asked me, "From where you are today, can you forgive the Germans? Can you see a pure heart and soul in a Nazi?" I answer, "It is not for me to say. If God invests each human with a resume that includes a purified heart and soul, who am I to gainsay Jewish tradition?" As a human community, we certainly need purified hearts and soul. It is our mission to find out how to maintain them throughout life.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 48th day of the Omer, which makes 6 weeks and 6 days of the Omer.

Forty-ninth blessing. King of Kings. Who is Kingmaker?

Malchut sh' b' Malchut (Mawl-choot shah bah Mawl-choot) seems to ask, what is the origin of majesty? On a divine level, this is the naive question, "Who made God?" I don't know of a completely logical answer. It's like asking, "Who made nothing?" or "Who made the clay from which you made your sculpture?" I intuit the void and the "Origin of Origins" always existed. Creation means shaping, not voodoo.

On a human level, the question is easier to answer. The Jewish opinion, like the majority outside opinion, sees human majesty as divinely appointed. The Divine chain of command seems to see God as the CEO who appoints a managing director, called king, who, in turn, appoints middle and bottom-rung managers in the form of nobles and knights. Or, to put it more poetically, as in Handel's Hallelujah Chorus: "King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, and He shall reign forever and ever. Hallelujah!"

On the other hand, Biblical passages suggest that God, Himself, prefers no human king at all. In his discussions with the Prophets, God seems to say, "If you people really insist on having a king, it had better be a good one."

From a practical standpoint, it is more important whether the King cares about God than whether God cares about who's king. A king without God is a loose cannon, and a king who thinks he is God, like the Pharaoh of the Passover Liberation story, is a menace. The main theme I see in the Passover story is that God is trying to teach the King who really is boss. A wise ruler should never forget the hard lesson that Pharaoh had to learn. Persist in thinking God is immaterial, and you'll drown in a Sea of Reeds. A good thought to keep in mind on the last day of the Omer.

Baruch ata adonay, Eloheynu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha-Omer. Blessed are You, God and King of All, who makes us holy by directing us on the path by counting the days of the Omer. Today is the 49th day of the Omer, which makes 7 complete weeks of the Omer.

THE SABBATH OF MALCHUT. A King's respite.

You wonder, can a caring king ever rest? We don't have a king in Jerusalem today, but we did have a prime minister who had to decide what to do when enemies attacked on the Day of Yom Kippur. When do you spring into action on a day of rest—what justifies the decision to break the rest, what defines a true emergency?

One of my neighbors faced this issue in a remarkable way, when, one Shabbat a few years ago, I heard him in the street, yelling for help. What did he need? Someone to turnoff an electric switch in order to stop feeding an electrical fire in his house! *Shabbat* concerns made him unwilling to pull a plug even to save his home.

By my lights, my neighbor set his Sabbath limits way too high. He abdicated his responsibility as Master of his house.

On the other hand, many more of my friends set their Sabbath limits much too low. And the limits get lowered even further week by week because of stuff that "absolutely must be done." The Sabbath of *Malchut* teaches you to avoid both extremes. Setting your own personal Sabbath limits is a serious responsibility, and the last Sabbath of the Omer is a good time to reassess where you want to make your stand

ARRIVING AT SHEVUOT

by Dr. Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor

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Shevuot and Passover are linked by the daily counting of the Omer, so that the two holidays are inextricably related. However, *Shavuot* is with us for only a brief two days and never enjoyed the popularity of *Pesach*, that glorious, week-long holiday with its elaborate ritual drama and stirring universal message. Still, *Shavuot* should not suffer from inattention because, since the two holidays are linked, *Pesach* otherwise loses the closure it needs.

So let us take a deeper look at *Shavuot*. I think it addresses the basic question of what we are to do with our freedom. Without Sinai, the exodus from Egypt yields little more than a formless state of national disorder. With Sinai, the Exodus story takes on the brilliance of a Constitution that protects individual liberty.

Shavuot may repel some of us because we have lost our faith in amanuensis, the literal revelation that diligently records every word dictated from on high. But already the ancient rabbis dared to restrict this concept somewhat.

For example: There are two sets of blessings and curses in the Torah. The first last week, in Chapter 26 of Leviticus, is always recited in the synagogue just prior to Shavuot. The second set, near the end of Deuteronomy in Chapter 28, is always recited prior to Rosh Hashanah..

The second set contains a particularly long and grim list of imprecations, so harrowing that the Torah reader is obligated to lower his or her voice when reciting them. In interpreting this heavy-handed damnation, the rabbis focused on the difference in length and venom between the two sets. In Leviticus, God offers 22 blessings against 8 curses. In Deuteronomy, there are only 8 blessings but 22 curses, the exact reverse.

The rabbis concluded from this comparison that that only the first set of curses in Leviticus was the word of God. The second set in Deuteronomy, they decided, came entirely from Moses. They said this indicates a contrast between divine and human anger. God is seen as the more compassionate of the two.

With this sensitive *Midrash* (Mid-rawsh) "interpretation of Scripture," the Rabbis made Torah more human. The issue, they seem to say, is not who wrote the Torah, but what we do with it.

In dealing with another Bible verse the rabbis found unpalatable [Ezek. 20:25], they suggested that it refers to a situation in which "a person reads the Torah without music, or studies Scripture without melody." The charge of this *Midrash* to us is to put Judaism to music, to make it a work of art. It sets us a model: Not to carp over the likelihood of revelation, but to imbue and enlarge Torah with human artistry and ingenuity.

Judaism has always conceived humanity as God's partner. And partnership is the note which ends the magnificent prophetic passage [Hosea 2:21-22] read on the Shabbat preceding Shavuot. In it, God renews the covenant by retaking Israel as His bride:

And I will espouse you forever. I will espouse you with righteousness and justice, And with goodness and mercy. And I will espouse you with faithfulness. Then shall you be devoted to the Lord.

This partnership is the challenge of *Shevuot*.

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