

Sefirat Ha-Omer, 5770

Shalom Friends,

As you may know, we have recently entered the period of our calendar known as *Sefirat Ha-Omer*, The Counting of the *Omer*. Beginning on the second night of Pesach, we count each night for the next seven weeks, 1 to 49. The 50th night is Shavuot, the festival marking the receiving of the Torah.

An *omer* is a sheaf. In this case, it refers to a sheaf of barley, which was waved each of these 49 days by our ancestors, an expression of their prayers for an abundant spring grain harvest. Over the generations, liturgy for counting each day emerged in place of the agricultural rite. With the flourishing of Jewish mystical practice in the 16th century, each of the weeks and days acquired in addition a particular spiritual significance. According to the mystics, each of the lower seven *Sefirot*, Divine emanations, is represented by one of the seven weeks. Each week becomes an invitation for us to reflect on the presence, or absence, of that quality in our lives. What we have inherited, then, is an opportunity to refine our hearts and our behavior during this seven-week period each year.

We have just experienced the freedom of Pesach, hopefully feeling in some way liberated from that which encumbers us. Now the question is: Freedom to what end? For the Children of Israel in the wilderness, being freed from bondage to Pharaoh led to their choosing to be bound to Torah, to live individually and as a collective in obligation to holiness. For us then, as individuals and as a community, this period of the year provides a similar challenge and opportunity. To what do we dedicate our freedom? These seven weeks give us a road map through which to engage with this self-reflection. This year, I will be sending out a message every week, providing a portrait of the week's spiritual quality and suggesting ways in which we might utilize it as a means to examine our lives, both personal as well as communal. (For instructions on how to count the *Omer*, please email me at rabbi@beitam.org, and I will happily offer direction.)

May this period be a time of careful and loving attention to what really matters for each of us, so that we reach the 50th day prepared to receive insight to help us manifest our deepest aspirations. For the sake of all Israel, and all beings everywhere, may this journey be for blessing.

Lekh le-shalom—Go in peace,
Rabbi Benjamin

Week #1 **HESED: Loving-kindness, Generosity**

The journey out of *Mitzrayim* (Egypt), the “narrow place,” begins with love. There is a love in the universe, alive within each one of us, which flows freely and knows no bounds. Amidst the tight places of life, it is this wellspring of love and kindness that can reawaken us to our fuller, more expansive selves. There are moments, for example, when we are filled with a sudden sense of caring and concern for another being. In an instant, we are freed from the limiting, constricting forces of our lives by the grace of *Hesed*. Over these seven weeks, *Hesed* will be balanced by and channeled through the

other *Sefirot*, but the first step toward refining our hearts is one of generosity, in which we turn toward self and other first and foremost with kindness and compassion.

In the words of Rabbi Yael Levy, during this week of *Hesed*, “we notice what inspires our generosity and what causes us to close down and turn away. We wonder at our capacity to give and receive love.” The sages had no illusion that we could exhibit loving-kindness nonstop for seven days straight. Rather, this week of *Hesed* is an opportunity for us to look closely at the workings of our heart, and to bring awareness to the presence or absence of love and generosity in any given moment. We all shut down at points. The question is, can we become more conscious of the ways in which we cut ourselves off and restrict our capacity for love? When we become accustomed to the practice of bring loving attention even to these moments, we naturally cultivate greater generosity in our lives.

So, during this week of *Hesed*, I invite us to:

*Notice the ways in which we close ourselves off from others. What helps us to remain open, or open again, to giving and receiving love?

*Consider ways in which we as a community can receive with greater kindness and generosity anyone who walks through our door. Are there ways in which our individual openness can support an environment of greater loving-kindness at Beit Am?

*Offer support to a friend or community member who is suffering in some way. Is there a simple act of loving-kindness or generosity that could lighten that burden of suffering? (Do not underestimate how much such simple acts can do!)

May this week of *Hesed* be for each of us alive with openness and generosity.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Benjamin

Week #2* *GEVURAH: Strength, Discipline, Discernment

What is our strength? From where do we draw the capability to be who we aspire to be in our lives? While there is energy that flows through us, in order for it to have impact, it must be harnessed appropriately. *Gevurah* is this harnessing.

Gevurah receives the abundant generosity of *Hesed* and serves as a container through which that love is channeled and grounded. It is the discipline through which we, while in some sense more constrained, acquire greater capability to manifest our love in real and sustainable ways.

In the context of Jewish life and community, I think of *Gevurah* as being expressed through the rhythm of Jewish time. The weekly return of Shabbat, along with the seasonal cycle of holidays, provide venues through which we gather with one another and renew our lives again and again. This rhythm is reliable and, if we choose to follow it, continually grows with meaning and possibility. Our sacred days become more familiar each time we return to them again. And yet, staying in tune with this rhythm takes discipline.

I recently heard someone share that he did not want his and his family’s Jewish life to be “episodic.” He was expressing an intention for our holidays to be alive in his

home and community. The effort needed to realize this aspiration is in some ways straightforward. Yet, it takes commitment to maintain this consistency of practice in our lives, to honor these days as sacred each time they come around. When we honor these days in this way, when we place ourselves in the light of Shabbat and the holidays, their meaning and vitality grow on their own. It is this commitment simply to being there, to treating these days as set apart in some way, which contributes to their holiness and wisdom being woven into our lives.

For this week of *Gevurah*:

*Reflect upon discipline in your life. In what ways is it self-negating and limiting? In what ways is it strengthening and renewing? How can you adjust that balance if need be?

*Direct particular attention to Shabbat this week—*whatever that means for you*. If you generally carve little or no time out to honor its presence in your life, perhaps take just a few moments, or an hour, or whatever you can, and allow for rest and connection to take shape. If you are accustomed to honoring the day in its entirety, what new window can you open to immerse yourself more fully in Shabbat?

*Remember: each of the *Sefirot* is present within one another. So the discipline of *Gevurah* must always be tempered with the loving-kindness of *Hesed*. Let your commitments be guided by generosity, for self and other.

May this week of *Gevurah* strengthen us to serve more fully that which we consider most dear in our lives.

Blessings on the continued journey,
Rabbi Benjamin

Week #3 TIFERET: Harmony, Truth, Beauty

Tiferet is where *Hesed* meets *Gevurah*. The expansive loving-kindness to which we attuned in the first week joins the strength and restraint of this past week, inviting us to open to the array of all that life presents. In this way, *Tiferet* is an integration. In imagining the *Sefirot* as a map of the body, the mystics place *Tiferet* at the heart. And indeed, the Hebrew word for heart, *Lev*, is in the classical sense considered the seat of both emotion and intellect. *Tiferet*, then, is a weaving together of parts of ourselves that we often consider distinct and even conflicting.

In the same way, though, that the union of two is often greater than each one put together, *Tiferet* is very much its own entity. *Tiferet* is “truth” because truth lies neither in love nor justice on its own. Truth takes shape—a truth into which we can live and affect positive change in the world—through the ongoing endeavor to join love with justice, generosity with discernment.

Tiferet is our core. It is the center from which we meet all that life hands us. When we listen out for the authentic expression of this center, beauty radiates forth. In the context of our community, I think of this beauty as the joy that is present when we find ourselves at home with one another. This joy is not limited to a narrow range of emotion, but rather encompasses the gamut of experience present when people come together to share song and prayer, a meal, or their stories with one another. This joy, this

beauty, this harmony and this truth emerge when we find a way simply to be with one another and appreciate our being together amidst a life that is filled with challenge. In the words of Rabbi Yael Levy, “*Tiferet* shows us the beauty and brokenness of the world and says, *Open to all of it, this is where you live.*”

Practices for this week:

*Notice moments in which your beauty, your radiant heart, shines forth into the world. Appreciate its arrival. What facilitated this radiance?

*Keep your eyes open for the beauty and radiance around you—in the natural world, in the faces of those you encounter. Look for it, allow yourself to slow down enough to be able to see it when it comes.

*Enter the door of Beit Am with the intention of cultivating and sharing joy. Allow to fall away feelings of guilt for what you have or have not done, as well as expectations of what time in synagogue should look like, and simply appreciate the joy of our coming together as community.

In this week of *Tiferet*, may our hearts radiate, and may we perceive the beauty around and within us.

*Bivrakha/With blessing,
Rabbi Benjamin*

***Week #4* NETZAH: Vision, Endurance**

Literally “eternity,” *Netzah* is the place from which we point ourselves toward the fullness of what we can become. From *Netzah*, we envision who we aspire to be—as an individual, a family, a community, and a world.

Amidst our constantly shifting lives, there are aspects that endure. There are threads that represent the essence of who we are. They sustain us, give our lives meaning, and form a lens through which we perceive the world around and within us.

What do I most value in life? Where do I want to invest my time, energy, and resources, each of which is limited and precious? These are questions to explore in the field of *Netzah*. When we care—about ourselves, about our families, about our communities, and about our world—we need to ask these questions and examine closely the ways in which do or do not live up to our responses. *Netzah* is the quality with which we work to insure that what endures represents our truest vision for ourselves. It offers the perseverance to hold that vision before us as a beacon, guiding us and inspiring us even in the face of great obstacles. *Netzah* is a vehicle through which we grow and learn. On a path with no end, *Netzah* gives us the endurance to continue forward on the journey with all our heart and all our might.

Practices for the week:

*Examine the ways in which you invest your time and energy. Do the proportions align with what you value most?

*Consider, when you lose energy or focus, what helps you to endure and direct yourself once again? Can you bring more of that ingredient into your life?

*If you have not already, sign up to take part in one of the community conversations to explore Beit Am's vision. Just like a vision for self or family, a community needs periodically to look closely at who we are and who we aspire to be, in order to insure that we are investing our energy and resources in ways that reflect our highest aspirations. Follow this link <https://www.doodle.com/7vewd5f5kruqtsyg> to insure that your voice is represented in this vital conversation.

Week #5* *HOD: Presence, Appreciation, Gratitude

Last week, in *Netzah*, we looked forward. We imagined who we can become, and examined what it takes to endure toward that vision for ourselves and our world. In *Hod* (pronounced with a long "o"), we turn in appreciation toward who we are right now in this moment.

Just as love (*Hesed*) needs the channel of strength and discipline (*Gevurah*) within which to be effective, so does the striving of *Netzah* require a means of being harnessed. This channel is *Hod*, which recognizes that, no matter how clear and directed our vision is, we are not destined to attain it fully. *Hod* provides us with the equanimity to pursue our goals while honoring this glorious yet imperfect reality within which we dwell today.

In this life, we continually face weakness and loss. While *Netzah* instructs us to lower our shoulders and push with all we've got, *Hod* gently offers the teaching that there are times for surrender, times when comfort and freedom come through a recognition and appreciation of that which is greater than us. When we forget our limitations, we repeat the wrongs of the Tower of Babel, whose builders believed they could reach to heaven. *Hod* guides us toward aspiring to encounter the heavenly here on earth, by embracing our human existence, warts and all. Ultimately, we come to know a much greater security through facing and befriending the aspects of our lives and our world that are insecure and impermanent.

Hod is also translated as "glory." It is not the glory of celebrating our own achievements, but the silent splendor that we shine forth when we are aware of the great orchestra within which we are a single string. We can look around and cherish the unique contribution that each individual makes in support of our community and our world. In those moments, we are not clinging to our own success, but rather enduring and aspiring as acts of generosity, for the sake of all life. In *Hod*, we let go and trust that this very moment, each of us and this world as we are, resonate with meaning and value.

Practices for the week:

*Take some time to appreciate the ways in which you shine. What gifts do you offer to your loved ones, to your community, to this world?

*Do the same with those closest to you. Take some time to call to mind your closest family members and friends, one by one. What gifts do you receive from them? Take your time, and appreciate each one that emerges in your mind.

*In community, when you encounter difference in a way that is challenging for you, take the opportunity to step out of yourself and consider this person's unique

presence in the world. Can you see through to honoring and appreciating who they are and what they bring?

Week #6 YESOD: Connection, Foundation, Authenticity

We are getting close to the culmination of our Omer journey. Mythically speaking, the seven weeks lead us to revelation, when we stand side by side with one another again at Sinai. An essential component of our tradition's revelation narrative is that it occurred collectively. And so in this week of *Yesod*, literally "foundation," we are called upon to bring our awareness to the connections in our lives. *Yesod* represents the covenant through which we are linked with one another. It is from this place that we reflect upon our most vital relationships.

The Torah portion of *Vayakhel*, toward the end of the Book of Exodus, begins with Moses gathering the people to be able to address them. In response to the text, the rabbis inquired as to why the people needed to be gathered, when in fact they were already there together. The answer is that, while they were in physical proximity with one another, there was another step needed before they would actually be a community together. For the Children of Israel, Shabbat and the other instructions passed onto them provided a vehicle through which they were linked with one another to form a genuine community. It is upon each community to determine what creates that link for them. The word *Vayakhel*, often translated as "gathered together," would be rendered more appropriately as "communitied." We do not have an English verb form of the word community, but it is what we are trying to convey when we speak in Beit Am of our "gathering as a community." During this week of *Yesod*, we have the opportunity to consider what it is that transforms us from simply being near and around each other, to truly being *with* one another as a community.

In the context of community, *Yesod* asks each of us to listen out for the ways in which we as individuals express ourselves most authentically. It represents our vitality, the force within us that generates new life in the world. *Yesod* is the realm out of which trust emerges, calling us to align our actions with what is most central and enduring within us.

Practices for the week:

*Consider an important relationship in your life. What most clearly sustains and revitalizes that relationship? Give attention where it is needed.

*When and where are you manifesting yourself most authentically? Direct your energy toward bringing more of that into your life.

*In community, consider ways in which you feel linked to those around you, and look for means through which to appreciate and expand those connections.

Week #7 MALKHUT: Majesty, Nobility, Leadership

The sphere of *Malkhut* is referred to alternatively as *Shekhina*, which is the most immanent aspect of Divinity. Theologically, *Shekhina* represents the manifestation of God in this world. It is the realm within which the human-divine encounter can occur. In our own lives, then, *Malkhut* can be understood as the means through which we relate to and impact the world around us. The qualities and strength of the first six *sefirot* are gathered into *Malkhut*, from which point they are offered forth into the world. And so this is a week of integration and, in the spirit of this period's agricultural roots, harvest. The first fruits, the first grains, have been tended for weeks, and beyond. Now they are ready to be gathered. Likewise, the generosity, discipline, harmony, vision, gratitude, and authenticity we have been cultivating are forming into something tangible to be offered out toward the world around us.

Malkhut is majesty and nobility, in that this week asks us to recognize the gifts we have and courageously share them with those whom we encounter. We are asked to step up our game, to see ourselves as the noble ones we are, and to live up to this estimation as best we can. Truly, we each have a unique light to shine in this world. In *Malkhut*, we are called upon to let it radiate.

Interestingly, *Malkhut* is associated with the moon. Its light comes from reflecting the light of another. Similarly, true leadership is not a matter of imposing our will on others, but of being open to the wisdom and insight of those with whom we live and work, and shining it back out in return. One of the most vital skills of a genuine leader or organizer is the capability to listen. As an expression of *Malkhut*, I listen out for the particular way in which I am called to receive and reflect back the light of the world. This is a week for turning outward, for acting, for gathering what we have and who we are and utilizing it all toward the healing of this world.

Practices for the week:

*Ask yourself, What is the nature of my nobility? What is the special light that I have to reflect into this world? Let it shine.

*Assume leadership of a situation, be it great or small. Trust in your capability to affect a situation for the better, and take action—humbly perhaps, but boldly.

*What do you do in community to make the world a more loving and just place? Take part in doing or planning something toward that end.