Preparing for Enduring Disagreements

An Omer Reflection Guide

Curiosity  Humility  Honor  Patience  Equanimity  Silence  Truth
The period of the Omer marks the time between two peak moments in the history of the Jewish people. Passover celebrates the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt. Shavuot marks the moment when the Torah was revealed to us at Mount Sinai.

The Omer, then, represents the long period of wandering that was necessary to bring us from freedom to revelation. The Israelites emerged from Egypt as slaves, with constricted spirits. The gift of Torah would have been wasted on them had it been delivered immediately after they crossed the sea to escape Pharaoh’s chariots. Instead, they needed time to wander, to prepare themselves both individually and as a community, to enter into a different relationship with God, and to hear the Truth that was delivered at Sinai.

The Omer is traditionally a time for serious reflection and personal preparation. Among other things, during this period we mourn the loss of Rabbi Akiva’s 24,000 students, who were struck by a plague because they did not deal respectfully with one another. For lack of constructive, respectful disagreement, a great deal of Torah was lost.

We are told that when Torah was delivered at Sinai, each person present heard God differently, but that nonetheless, the different revelations were all true – and all originated from God. This Spring, we will be working as a community to prepare ourselves for the celebration of this multifaceted revelation by studying the Jewish art of constructive disagreement. When we arrive at Sinai on May 30, our hope is that we, unlike Rabbi Akiva’s students, will have honed our ability to respect the views of those who hear God differently than we do.

– Rabbi Nicole Auerbach, Central Synagogue, 2017/5777
How to Use this Guide

The texts and questions that follow are designed to assist you in using the period of the Omer as a time of reflection. They invite you to reflect on seven personal traits that will help foster your ability to engage in constructive disagreement: one for each week of the Omer.

Each day, take a few moments to reflect on the text or question of the day. We strongly recommend that you pair up with a partner (chavruta), and check in with one another by phone or email. (You need not respond to one another’s reflections). If this is not possible, you may wish to note your reflections in a personal journal.

It is our hope that by engaging in this sustained period of reflection, you will be better prepared to experience appreciate the Torah of your fellow human beings, as we all stand at Sinai on Shavuot.

In addition, if you like, you can engage in the ritual of counting the Omer by saying the following blessing. (The number of weeks and days for each day is indicated on the bottom of the page):

Hineini — I am ready to fulfill the mitzvah of counting the omer.

ברוך אתה נבון מלך העולמים estates הקדוש liar במצוותיו וברך על ספירת העומר.

Baruch atah, Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, asher kid’shanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu al sfirat haOmer.

Praised be You, Adonai our God, who rules the universe, instilling within us the holiness of mitzvot by commanding us to count the Omer.

Today is the ___________ day, which is ____________ weeks and ________ days of the Omer.
“[A person] who sees large crowds [of people] should say ‘Baruch Chacham Harazim’ – ‘Who is wise [to know] secrets,’ because their faces are not similar to each other and their minds are not similar to each other.”

_Tosefta Berakhot 6:5_

**For Your Reflection:**

- This text suggests that the fact that human minds are not all alike is a blessing. When do you appreciate this kind of diversity? When is it a challenge?

- Whose mind would you like to understand better, if you could? What stands in the way of that understanding?

Today is the first day of the omer.
Today, you are invited to spend at least 15 minutes reading or listening to news or commentary from a source that you do not normally frequent, and which you imagine will come from a cultural or political perspective that is different than your own. This could come from a website, podcast, book, or other media.

For Your Reflection:

- Did you learn anything new?
- What physical or emotional reactions did you notice when exploring this content? Were you angry? Resistant? Were you inspired to learn more?

Today is the second day of the omer.
Today, ask at least one more question than you normally would -- or start a conversation that you normally would not start -- that will help you learn something about someone else. This could mean making conversation with a taxi driver, or asking a coworker for a book recommendation. It could be as simple as asking “why” or saying “tell me more” when you would typically share your own thoughts.

For Your Reflection:

- Did you learn anything new about someone else, or the world at large? About yourself?
- Was this experience fun? Uncomfortable? Scary?
- What typically keeps you from asking these types of questions?

Today is the third day of the omer.
“I don’t have the life experience of those in the communities we are working with who have been most impacted by economic and racial injustice. I am not going to come up with the solutions. It really takes listening to figure out how to work.”

*Stosh Cotler, CEO of Bend the Arc,* in *David Jaffe’s “Changing the World from the Inside Out”*

**For Your Reflection:**

- We often find ourselves distanced from the stories of people whom we are trying to “help.” What are the social issues or causes you care most about? How often do you interact with the people who are affected by those issues? Are there any questions you would like to ask that might affect your views or actions?

- Why do you think we have traditionally been reluctant to allow those most affected by social injustice come up with solutions?

*Today is the fourth day of the omer.*
Today, be on the lookout for three things you can learn from observing those with whom you interact. These can be three things you learn from the same person, or one thing from three different people. What actions do you see in those around you that you might like to emulate or avoid?

For Your Reflection:

- What did you learn from your observation of others today?
- What difference did your intention to learn 3 things make in the way you observed the world around you?

Today is the fifth day of the omer.
The Talmud offers the following story, about a man who had travelled south from his home in the North of Israel to work for several years for a landowner there:

At the end of the three years, the man requested his payment from the land owner. The owner told him he had no money. The man asked if he could pay him in property and he answered that he had no property he could give him. The man asked if he could pay him in material goods or food. The owner answered that he had no material goods or food that he could give him. The man walked away dejected and returned to his home empty handed.

Several months later that owner travelled north to the man’s home. He asked him, “When I said I had no money to pay you, what did you think?” The man answered, “I thought you must have invested all your money in goods for your business.” “You are correct,” the owner answered and then asked, “When I said I had no property to give you, what did you think?” The man answered, “I assumed you must have dedicated your property to the holy Temple in Jerusalem.” “Yes,” answered the owner
and then asked, “When I said I had no material goods or food to give you, what did you think?” The man answered, “I also thought that you must have pledged them to the priests.” “Correct again,” answered the owner. “Because you judged me favorably, may God judge you favorably.”

_Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 127b_  
_trans. David Jaffe, Changing the World from the Inside Out_

**For Your Reflection:**

- Is there some aspect of curiosity or imagination that is required to give someone else “the benefit of the doubt”? Do you tend to be someone who jumps to conclusions? How might developing the habit of curiosity affect that tendency?

- In this story, the man is commended for his silence. But one could argue that he should have asked “why?” at the outset, rather than walking away. When you feel wronged, how likely are you to inquire about the reasoning behind the other person’s actions? To what extent do you make up your own story about their motivations?

Today is the sixth day of the omer.
Take a moment to reflect on this week’s focus on curiosity.

For Your Reflection:

- What did you learn about yourself, or others? What practices can you imagine carrying forward or trying again?
- What are you inspired to learn more about? Who might you learn it from?
- As we get closer to Shavuot, how will your curiosity better prepare you to receive “Torah”?

Today is the seventh day – one week of the omer.
“The Torah calls Moses the ‘most humble person on the earth.’ Right away this tips us off that humility cannot just imply taking a back seat and letting others lead. Moses confronted Pharoah, led the Israelites out of slavery and challenged both God and the people at moments of crisis in the desert. A Jewish definition of humility is something akin to healthy self-esteem. All [ethical attributes] exist along a continuum. For example, apathy and uncontrollable rage are the extremes of a continuum where patience and appropriate anger sit in the middle. True humility occupies a middle space between self-deprecation on the one hand and arrogance on the other... According to [Alan] Morinis, . . . the Anav (humble person) knows how much space to take up in any situation. When our Anavah is out of balance we take either too little or too much space.”

David Jaffe, IJS Tikkun Middot Project, citing Alan Morinis, Everyday Holiness

For Your Reflection:
- In what situations do you find it easy to take up the “right” amount of space? In what situations do you find yourself taking up too much or too little? How might you guard against distortions of ego that will distort your understanding of the space you are due? What practices might you try as a corrective?

Today is the eighth day – one week and one day of the omer.
Bahya ibn Pakuda (11th c. Spain), on his decision to write a book:

“When I planned to execute my decision to write this book, I saw that one like me is unworthy of writing a book such as this. I surmised that my ability would not suffice to analyze all the necessary aspects, owing to the difficulty which I perceived and to my wisdom being insufficient and my mind being too weak to grasp all of the issues, and that I am not fluent in the Arabic language in which I wrote it. I feared that I would toil at something that would evidence my inability, and that it would be a presumptuous undertaking, so that I considered changing my mind and abandoning my previous decision.

But when I designed to remove this laborious burden from myself and desist from composing the work, I reconsidered and became suspicious of myself for having chosen to rest . . . and I know that many minds have been lost out of apprehension, and many losses have been caused by fear.”

_Bahya ibn Pakuda, Duties of the Heart_

**For Your Reflection:**

- Bahya describes the tension between arrogance and self-doubt, both of which threaten to impede his ability to share his work with the world. Which poses a greater challenge to you?

**Today is the ninth day – one week and two days of the omer.**
“Even as a young man, I felt I have not the right to want to change another if I am not open to be changed by him as far as it is legitimate.”

*Martin Buber in Cissna and Anderson, Moments of Meeting*

**For Your Reflection:**

- What connection do you see between humility and being “open to be changed” by another person?
- How open are you to being changed by those with whom you disagree? Does it depend on the strength of your conviction? Should it?
- How do we decide the extent of change that would be “legitimate”? 

*Today is the tenth day – one week and three days of the omer.*
“The Talmud sometimes declares after an inconclusive debate, ‘Teiku,’ literally meaning ‘let it stand,’ colloquially understood to be an acronym signifying “Elija the Prophet will settle questions and difficulties.” That is to say, “In this world, the matter will remain unresolved. Only in some messianic future time will such arguments be settled.”

Amy Eilberg, From Enemy to Friend

For Your Reflection:

- One aspect of humility is the ability to recognize the limits of our own power to resolve matters of fundamental disagreement. But taking too dim a view of our power may lead us not to engage in productive debates. How do we determine where to draw the line?

- How do we recognize times when competing truths cannot be resolved? What is our proper role in such circumstances?

Today is the eleventh day – one week and four days of the omer.
“There is genuine dialogue -- no matter whether spoken or silent -- where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them. There is technical dialogue, which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding. And there is monologue disguised as dialogue, in which two or more men, meeting in space, speak each with himself in the strangely tortuous and circuitous ways and yet imagine they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their own resources.”

_Martin Buber, Between Man and Man_

For Your Reflection:

- When we engage in “monologue disguised as dialogue,” we are, in effect, taking up more than our rightful space in a conversation. We divert the attention due to the other to our own need to be heard.
- In what circumstances do you most often find yourself engaged in “monologue disguised as dialogue”? What emotion do you feel at those times: Fear? Envy? Anger?
- What is necessary for you to engage in “genuine dialogue”?

Today is the twelfth day – one week and five days of the omer.
“All virtues and duties are dependent on humility.”

Bahya ibn Pakuda, Duties of the Heart

For Your Reflection:

- What “virtues and duties” are required to engage in constructive disagreement?
- How is humility instrumental to the development of these virtues?

Today is the thirteenth day – one week and six days of the omer.
Take a moment to reflect on this week’s focus on humility.

For Your Reflection:

- What have you learned about yourself this week?
- In what situations is the practice of humility a challenge for you? What is one concrete step you might take to grow in humility?
- As we get closer to Shavuot, how will humility better prepare you to receive Torah?

Today is the fourteenth day – two weeks of the omer.
“The word kavod (honor) comes from the Hebrew root kaf.vet.daled (K.V.D.), meaning “heavy,” “weighty,” or “significant.” When we give someone kavod, we are saying, “You are significant and deserving of recognition and good treatment.” If kavod implies weight or gravitas, the opposite is kal, or “light.” We disrespect someone by treating them lightly, as if they are not significant -- and kal is the foundation of the word klala, or “curse.” It is a curse to treat people as if they are not significant by not giving them attention, or underpaying or mistreating them.”

David Jaffe,Changing the World from the Inside Out (paraphrasing Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe)

For Your Reflection:

- In your everyday life, what do you do to treat others as “significant and deserving of recognition and good treatment”?
- Are there any categories of people whom you tend to treat “lightly”?
- What do you imagine the connection is between treating someone “lightly” and “cursing” them?

Today is the fifteenth day – two weeks and one day of the omer.
Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai were two rival schools of ancient Jewish legal thought. In the Talmud, the two factions are described as being locked in an intractable argument, when a voice from heaven comes and declares that both “these and those are the words of the living God. But the law is according to Beit Hillel.” In explaining why Hillel prevailed, Rashi explains:

“[Beit Hillel] studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai. When Beit Shammai would bring proof to their rulings from the Torah and Beit Hillel would bring proof from another verse, and Beit Hillel would expound the verse of Beit Shammai to show its relevance, and it was not light in their eyes.”

*Rashi on Talmud Eruvin 13b*

**For Your Reflection:**

- As discussed in yesterday’s text, in Hebrew, the opposite of “light” – “kal” – is “heavy” – “kaved,” which has the same root as kavod, or “honor.” What is the connection between honor and Beit Hillel’s practice of studying the rulings of Beit Shammai?
- Do you agree that seriously considering the arguments of those with whom you disagree is a matter of honor?
- What steps might you take to show honor to those with whom you disagree?

*Today is the sixteenth day – two weeks and two days of the omer.*
“Jealousy, desire, and [seeking] honor drive a person from the world.”

_Pirkei Avot 4:28_

For Your Reflection:

- What connection do you see between jealousy, desire, and the seeking of honor? Why do you imagine the sages believed these three things “drive a person from the world.”
- In what circumstances do you tend to seek honor or recognition? In what situations do you tend to feel slighted? How do you tend to respond?

Today is the seventeenth day – two weeks and three days of the omer.
“Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua said: ‘Let the honor of your student be as dear to you as your own; the honor of your colleague as the reverence for your teacher; and the reverence for your teacher as the reverence of heaven.’”

_Pirkei Avot 4:18_

For Your Reflection:

- This text urges us not to honor only those who are our “equals” or above us in a hierarchy. In practical terms, how should we honor our students or employees? How should we honor our colleagues?
- Think of someone who is “below” you on some hierarchy. (It could be at work, in an organization, or some other setting). How might you act if that person’s honor “be as dear to you as your own”?

Today is the eighteenth day – two weeks and four days of the omer.
“Kavod (honor) is a palpable sense of presence; it is receiving everyone, including ourselves, with ayin tovah – alive with Divine, ultimate goodness. We are getting out of the way of the relentless critic and judge.”

Sheila Peltz Weinberg

For Your Reflection:

- What is the connection between honor and “getting out of the way of the relentless critic and judge.”
- Is it a challenge for you to silence your inner critic? To silence your critique of others?

Today is the nineteenth day – two weeks and five days of the omer.
“[Ben Azzai]: ‘Don’t say, “Since I have been humiliated, let my neighbor be humiliated also.” Know it is the image of God you would be humiliating in your neighbor.’”

*Genesis Rabbah 24:7*

**For Your Reflection:**

- When we do not feel respected, we tend to act disrespectfully toward those who have hurt us. Can you think of a time when this was true for you?
- Think for a moment about how you speak of those with whom you disagree on political or social issues. Does the language you use to speak about them reflect the honor they are due as fellow humans made in the image of God?
Take a moment to reflect on this week’s focus on honor.

For Your Reflection:

- What have you learned about yourself this week?
- In what situations is the practice of honor a challenge for you? What is one concrete step you might take to grow in your ability to give honor to others?
- As we get closer to Shavuot, how will developing the quality of honor better prepare you to receive Torah?

Today is the twenty-first day – three weeks of the omer.
“The problem with impatience is that it usually takes only a split second for its first glowing embers to ignite into flames that course through us even before we’ve become aware that they have started up. Impatience snuffs out consciousness, and before I even know it’s happening, I’m leaning on my horn, or you’re going hoarse yelling at your child, or cursing the postman . . .

When you find yourself in a situation that is triggering your impatience, instead of giving all your attention and energy to finding fault with the person who is so clearly at fault, you can choose to be patient and take responsibility for your emotional response to the situation. . . . My teacher, Rabbi Perr, calls this awareness and exercise of choice ‘opening the space between the match and the fuse.’”

– Alan Morinis, Everyday Holiness

For Your Reflection:

- In what situations does your impatience typically “flare up”? What factors do you think lead to that response?
- When you feel impatience rising, what might you do to “open the space between the match and the fuse”?

Today is the twenty-second day – three weeks and one day of the omer.
Today, pay attention to moments of impatience. You do not need to change anything. Just notice.

For Your Reflection:

- What does your body feel like when you are impatient?
- What triggers did you notice?
- To what extent were you aware of the choice you have about how to react? How much space was there between the match and the flame?

Today is the twenty-third day – three weeks and two days of the omer.
“There is not a moment in which a human being is not sustained from the flow of divine abundance. There is not a wrongdoing that person does, in which, at the same moment, the divine abundance isn’t sustaining him. . . . While the human is committing this wrongdoing with this very power from God, God suffers the insult. . . . This is why Micah the prophet calls to God, ‘Who is like you, God?’ You are a God of kindness, doing good. You have the power to take vengeance, but you are patient and wait for people to return in teshuva. Behold, this is a trait that people need to acquire -- patience, to be able to withstand insult and still not withhold your goodness from the other.”

*Rabbi Moshe Cordevero, Tomer Devorah (trans. David Jaffe)*

**For Your Reflection:**

- The Hebrew word for patience is “savlanut” which is related to the word for bearing a burden. In this sense, patience (or more accurately forbearance) is the ability to bear the burden of something that causes us suffering without lashing out.
- When are you able to “withstand insult and still not withhold your goodness from the other”? When is this more difficult? What would it look like to not withhold your goodness from those with whom you strongly disagree?

*Today is the twenty-fourth day – three weeks and three days of the omer.*
“If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth and is indicative of an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything in this letter that is an understatement of the truth and is indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient with anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.”

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

For Your Reflection:

- King suggests that having too much patience can be as problematic as having too little. Impatience and righteous anger can spur us to action. What are you righteously impatient about right now?
- Which is a bigger challenge for you right now? Complacency or impatience?

Today is the twenty-fifth day – three weeks and four days of the omer.
“When I was younger, I had a sense that we needed to fix everything now. If we could just stay up all night seven days a week, we could fix everything. Now I know it is a marathon, and an election is every four years. . . . “It is not nothing -- people die in the meantime. . . . [B]ut things can always change in the other direction.”

_Rabbi Jill Jacobs_

quoted in “Changing the World from the Inside Out”

For Your Reflection:

- Is taking the “long view” with respect to our social and political aspirations helpful, or does it threaten to lull us into complacency?
- Does this “big picture” kind of patience affect your ability to be patient with individuals with whom you disagree?

Today is the twenty-sixth day – three weeks and five days of the omer.
[Ben Azzai]: “Don’t say, ‘Since I have been humiliated, let my neighbor be humiliated also.’ Know it is the image of God you would be humiliating in your neighbor.”

*Genesis Rabbah 24:7*

**For Your Reflection:**

- When we do not feel respected, we tend to act disrespectfully toward those who have hurt us. Can you think of a time when this was true for you?
- Think for a moment about how you speak of those with whom you disagree on political or social issues. Does the language you use to speak about them reflect the honor they are due as fellow humans made in the image of God?

*Today is the twenty-seventh day – three weeks and six days of the omer.*
Take a moment to reflect on this week’s focus on patience.

For Your Reflection:

- What have you learned about yourself this week?
- In what situations is the practice of patience a challenge for you? What is one concrete step you might take to grow in your ability to give patience to others?
- As we get closer to Shavuot, how will developing the quality of patience better prepare you to receive Torah?

Today is the twenty-eighth day – four weeks of the omer.
“[Teachers of Jewish ethical tradition] want us to be a calm soul who is like a surfer who rides the waves on an even inner keel, regardless of what is happening within and around him. Even as the waves are rising and falling, the calm soul rides the crest, staying upright, balanced, and moving in the direction the rider chooses. Equanimity is a quality of being centered in yourself, though at the same time being exquisitely sensitive to the forces that are at work all around, or else you will be vulnerable to being tossed around by the sorts of unexpected waves that crash in on everyday life.

[This understanding of equanimity] does not suggest that feelings are idling in neutral. It isn’t a kind of numbness. You still register the ups and downs of the feelings – those are the waves – but you stay awake to the experience from an undisturbed place.”

*Alan Morinis, Everyday Holiness*

**For Your Reflection:**

- What ups and downs have you experienced recently? How well were you able to be self-aware and effective during those times? Did the waves knock you down? If so, what, if anything, helped you get up again?
- What contributes or detracts from your ability to feel balanced amid life’s inevitable change and turmoil?

*Today is the twenty-ninth day – four weeks and one day of the omer.*
“One should not be of an angry disposition and be easily angered, not should one be like a dead person who does not feel, but one should be in the middle -- one should not get angry except over a big matter about which it is fitting to get angry, so that the person will not act similarly again.”

*Maimonides, Mishneh Torah 1:4*

**For Your Reflection:**

- Are you quick to anger?
- Are there any particular situations that tend to trigger this response?
- What counts as a “big matter about which it is fitting to get angry?"
“Who is the mighty one? He who conquers his impulse, as it says, ‘slowness to anger is better than a mighty person, and the ruler of his spirit than the conqueror of a city.’ (Proverbs 16:32). Who is the rich one? He who is happy with his lot, as it says, ‘When you eat [from] the work of your hands, you will be happy, and it will be well with you’ (Psalms 128:2). ‘You will be happy’ in this world, and ‘it will be well with you’ in the world to come.”

_Pirkei Avot 4:1_

**For Your Reflection:**

- This text considers two aspects of moderation: control over our anger, and satisfaction with what we have. Do you see any connection between the two?
- Which is a bigger challenge for you?

_Today is the thirty-first day – four weeks and three days of the omer._
Today, pay attention to situations that might throw you off balance, or trigger extreme reactions. You do not need to change anything. Just notice.

For Your Reflection:

- What did you learn? Which situations or people upset your equanimity?
- Did paying attention to the feeling of losing your equanimity cause you to act any differently?
- What are some areas where you could use more moderation?

Today is the thirty-second day – four weeks and four days of the omer.
“Equanimity is pursued for the sake of greater efficacy and peace in the world, not for ourself alone. The inner peace we create and maintain affects those around us. When we live and share from a place of calm, we create calm in others. In this regard, we can use equanimity as a profound force for peace in our communities.”

*Edith R. Brotman, Mussar Yoga*

**For Your Reflection:**

- What connection, if any do you see between equanimity on the personal level and the creation of peace in our communities?
- How does your personal reaction to the events of our life affect those around you?

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*Today is the thirty-third day – four weeks and five days of the omer.*
This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they are a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice. meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. Be grateful for whatever comes. because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

Jellaludin Rumi (trans. Coleman Barks)

For Your Reflection:

- How able are you to welcome the “unexpected visitors” Rumi mentions?
- Does his statement that all of these emotional reactions “has been sent as a guide from beyond resonate with you”?

Today is the thirty-fourth day – four weeks and six days of the omer.
Take a moment to reflect on this week’s focus on equanimity and moderation.

For Your Reflection:

- What have you learned about yourself this week?
- In what situations is maintaining equanimity or moderation a challenge for you? What is one concrete step you might take to grow in equanimity?
- As we get closer to Shavuot, how will developing the quality of equanimity or moderation better prepare you to receive Torah?

Today is the thirty-fifth day – five weeks of the omer.
“There is a time to be silent, and a time to speak.”

*Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) 3:7*

“Shimon would say: ‘All my life I have been raised among the wise, and I have found nothing better for the body than silence. The essential thing is not study, but deed. And one who speaks excessively brings on sin.’”

*Pirkei Avot 1:17*

For Your Reflection:

- How well are you able to discern when is a “time to be silent” and a “time to speak”? Does this pose a challenge for you?
- Why do you think Rabbi Shimon connects excessive speech to sin?
- What do you think Rabbi Shimon means when he says that there is nothing better than silence *for the body*? Do you experience a connection between silence and physical wellbeing?

*Today is the thirty-sixth day – five weeks and one day of the omer.*
“My God, guard my speech from evil and my lips from deception. Before those who slander me, I will hold my tongue, and I will practice humility.”

*Prayer of Mar Bar Ravina (4th c. Babylonia)*
*Based on Psalm 34:14*

**For Your Reflection:**

- Since at least the 9th century, this prayer -- which began as a personal prayer of a particular rabbi -- has been included at the end of the “Amidah” (the central set of prayers in the Jewish prayer service).
- What is the connection between “holding one’s tongue” and humility?
- What are the particular “evils” that challenge you when it comes to speech?

*Today is the thirty-seventh day – five weeks and two days of the omer.*
“Often our first responses are not the ones grounded in wisdom. When we do speak, we would do well to be aware of our objective. Is this the right moment to voice a criticism or make a suggestion? Perhaps what is called for is what Rabbi Nahman of Braslav called “divrei hizzuk” (words of encouragement). He encouraged his followers to speak only words of encouragement to one another.

And when we have the urge to speak badly of a third person (lashon hara), we should refrain. Are we doing this in order to build a rapport with our conversation partner at the expense of the third? There are more wholesome ways to build a rapport. Are we doing it out of anger? Anger will subside, but the words we’ve spoken cannot be recalled. Maimonides teaches that all three people (the speaker, the listener and the subject) are damaged by lashon hara. Better to be silent until we regain our equilibrium.”

_Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Tikkun Middot Curriculum_

For Your Reflection:

- Reflect on the past week or so. Have there been times when you have been tempted to speak badly of another person? Do you think you were motivated, as this text suggests, by a desire to “bond” with another person? Or out of anger? Some other motivation?
- What do you make of Rabbi Nahman’s suggestion that we speak “only words of encouragement” to one another? Is it realistic? Do you think you could shift the balance of your speech to include more words of encouragement?

*Today is the thirty-eighth day – five weeks and three days of the omer.*
“Seven characteristics typify the clod, and seven the wise person: Wise people do not speak in the presence of those who are wiser than they are; They do not interrupt their friend’s words; They do not reply in haste. They ask what is relevant, they answer to the point; they reply to questions in orderly sequence; of what they have not heard, they say ‘I have not heard.’ They admit to the truth. The opposite of these typify the clod.”

_Pirkei Avot 5:9_

For Your Reflection:

- Which of the behaviors of the “wise person” listed above comes most easily to you? With which do you struggle the most?
- The text suggests that “wise people do not speak in the presence of those who are wiser than they are.” How are we to know who is wiser? How does this practice relate to humility?

Today is the thirty-ninth day – five weeks and four days of the omer.
“Just as it is our duty to rebuke another when we are likely to be heeded, so it is our duty to withhold from rebuke when we are not likely to be heard.”

_Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 65b_

For Your Reflection:

- Jewish tradition holds that we have an obligation to “rebuke” or correct others for sinful behavior. This text suggests that we should only do so when we are likely to be heard. Do you agree? Or is there a value to going “on record” with our moral opinions even if they will fall on deaf ears?
- How can we judge whether we are likely to be heard?
- How often do you engage in “rebuke”? Is the question whether you will be heard a factor in your decision to speak up or stay silent?

Today is the fortieth day – five weeks and five days of the omer.
“Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”

*Proverbs 18:21*

**For Your Reflection:**

- When you read these words, what situations come to mind?
- How mindful are you of the consequences of your speech? What habits might you like to change?

*Today is the forty-first day – five weeks and six days of the omer.*
Take a moment to reflect on this week’s focus on silence and mindful speech.

**For Your Reflection:**

- What have you learned about yourself this week?
- In what situations is staying silence, or engaging in mindful speech a challenge for you? What is one concrete step you might take to become more mindful of your choices related to speech?
- As we get closer to Shavuot, how will developing the quality of silence or mindful speech better prepare you to receive Torah?

*Today is the forty-second day – six weeks of the omer.*
“One should not be ashamed to accept the truth from anyone. Even if one is the smallest of the small and completely spurned, still accept the truth from him, for a precious pearl, even in the hands of the small and despised, is still a precious pearl.”

*The Ways of the Tzadikkim, (Anonymous, 15th c., Germany)*

For Your Reflection:

- How do you decide whose “truth” to accept?
- To what extent does status serve as a stand-in for credibility in our society?
- How open are you to hearing the truth from unlikely sources?

*Today is the forty-third day – six weeks and one day of the omer.*
“We are to offer our feedback to others only in a loving manner. Love is the secret ingredient that makes it possible to deliver criticism in a way that will allow it to be heard. . . .

As for the feedback we receive, we need it, and mostly we dislike getting it. We need it because we are all masters of self-deception, and so only feedback from others gives us a more accurate reading of the state of our [ethical traits] as others experience them. And we hate getting it because we are not humble. When someone tells us about a shortcoming or a way in which we have missed the mark, the ego springs to the defense. That is no strategy for growth.”

*Alan Morinis, With Heart in Mind*

**For Your Reflection:**

- How comfortable are you receiving feedback from others? Does it matter who is providing it? Whose feedback do you resist the most? Why?
- What does it mean to offer feedback in a loving manner?

**Today is the forty-fourth day – six weeks and 2 days of the omer.**
“As the medieval philosopher Joseph Albo said about God, ‘If I knew Him, I would be Him.’ The whole truth is only an object of divine cognition; it exceeds the human grasp. Since any human perspective is limited to part of the truth, the whole truth may not be graspable without contradiction. This may be what the physicist Niels Bohr meant when he said, ‘the opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth.’”

Reuven Kimelman, “Judaism and Pluralism”

For Your Reflection:

- Engaging in dialogue with those with whom we disagree can require us to recognize multiple profound truths, which may not be reconcilable. Can you think of an issue you care about where two or more such truths are at issue?
- How able are you to listen for the profound truth that underlies your political opponent’s views? Is this something to aspire to?

Today is the forty-fifth day – six weeks and three days of the omer.
“[J]ust as the multiplicity of creatures is from God, may God be blessed, just as all creatures are separate and some are even complete opposites, nonetheless all are from [God] and in all of them there is a dimension of truth. For in its own way, water is truth in the way of its creation and fire also, which is opposite in the character of its creation, is also truth. Likewise the multiple views in themselves are all from God.”

Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (the “Maharal of Prague”)

For Your Reflection:

- What do you think of the Maharal’s argument? Does it presume a desire on both sides to seek the Truth? How do we know if this presumption is justified?
- Does conceiving of other viewpoints as coming “from God” in some way change how you think about the people who promote them?

Today is the forty-sixth day – six weeks and four days of the omer.
“A person might think 'since the house of Shammai declares [something] ritually impure and the house of Hillel declares it pure, this one prohibits and that one permits, how then can I learn Torah?' Scripture says ‘Words...the words. These are the words.’ [Deut. 1:1] All the words have been given by a single Shepherd. One God creates them, one Provider gave them, the Lord of all deeds blessed be He has spoken them. So make yourself a heart of many chambers. Bring into it the words of the house of Shammai and the words of the house of Hillel, the words of those who declare ‘impure’ and the words of those who declare ‘pure.’”

*Tosefta Sotah 7:12*

For Your Reflection:

- How do you discern the truth when confronted with opposing viewpoints?
- How might you go about making yourself a heart of many chambers?
- Has the process of reflection during the omer affected your openness to viewpoints that conflict with your own? What practices might help you continue to develop a heart with many chambers?

*Today is the forty-seventh day – six weeks and five days of the omer.*
Take a moment to reflect on this week’s focus on truth.

For Your Reflection:

- Did you learn anything new this week, about yourself or others?
- What “truths” have you discovered? Were you accepting, or resistant?
- As we get closer to Shavuot, how will developing the quality of truth better prepare you to receive Torah?

Today is the forty-eighth day – six weeks and six days of the omer.
Take a moment to reflect on the spiritual journey you have taken over the course of the past 49 days.

For Your Reflection:

- What have you learned about yourself?
- Which texts have stuck with you?
- Are there any practices you have developed that you would like to continue?
- On this eve of Shavuot, how has this process prepared you to receive Torah?

Today is the forty-ninth day – seven weeks of the omer.