

The Middot of Sefirat HaOmer

Rabbi Sara Brandes

"The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first 'omer' of your harvest to the priest. He shall elevate the 'omer' before the Lord for acceptance in your behalf; the priest shall elevate it on the day after the Shabbat....And from the day on which you bring the omer of elevation offering - the day after the Sabbath - you shall count off seven weeks. They 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. You shall bring from your settlement two loaves of bread as an elevation offering; each shall be made of two-tenths of a measure of choice flour, baked after leavening, as first fruits to the Lord....On that same day you shall hold a celebration; it shall be a sacred occasion for you; you shall not work at your occupations. This is a law for all time in all your settlements throughout the ages." (Leviticus 23:9-11,15-17,21)

What is an “Omer”?

An Omer is a unit of measurement, that represents a quantity of grain harvest. The mystical process we think of today when we talk about “Counting the Omer” is a kabbalistic overlay on a basic biblical instruction related to sacrifices and agriculture.

Mystical Counting of the Omer

R' Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi (1534 – 1572), best known as Ha'Ari (The Lion) or Arizal (the Ari, of Blessed Memory), was a leading kabbalist in Tzfat (Safed) in the Galilee and is widely regarded as the father of contemporary Kabbalah. The addition of a mystical layer to the process of counting the omer was his innovation. In his day, special siddurim began to be printed to support that mystical journey.

Perhaps the most significant contribution that the Torah made to the history of humanity was the association of the number seven with the idea of wholeness. We know this best when we feel the subtle exhale that greets us with the arrival of the weekend. So, when the Torah gave the instruction to number off seven weeks, seven sevens, on the journey from redemption (Passover) to revelation (Shavuot), the 16th century Kabbalists could not resist the temptation to craft a spiritual journey to accompany our counting. “Counting the Omer” is the perfect opportunity to try out Jewish mindfulness practice, and to feel first hand how paying attention to the lived experience of being a human being in a body can bring profound joy and meaning.

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Wisdom from RaMaK

R' Moshe ben Ya'akov Cordovero (1522 – 1570), known by the acronym Ramak, was a significant teacher of Kabbalah in 16th-century Safed (Tzfat). Or Ne'erav (The Sweet Light) is his introduction to Kaballah, while Pardes Rimmonim (Orchard of Pomegranates) is the first full integration of all existing schools of kabbalistic interpretation. What do we learn below about the Sefirot?

Pardes Rimmonim 21:8

Sometimes all the Sefirot are united, and sometimes they each in their own designated place, as can be understood from the secret of the prayer services. For the morning prayer is named for Abraham, and there the one praying “embraces her beloved” (Song of Songs 8:5) through Chesed.

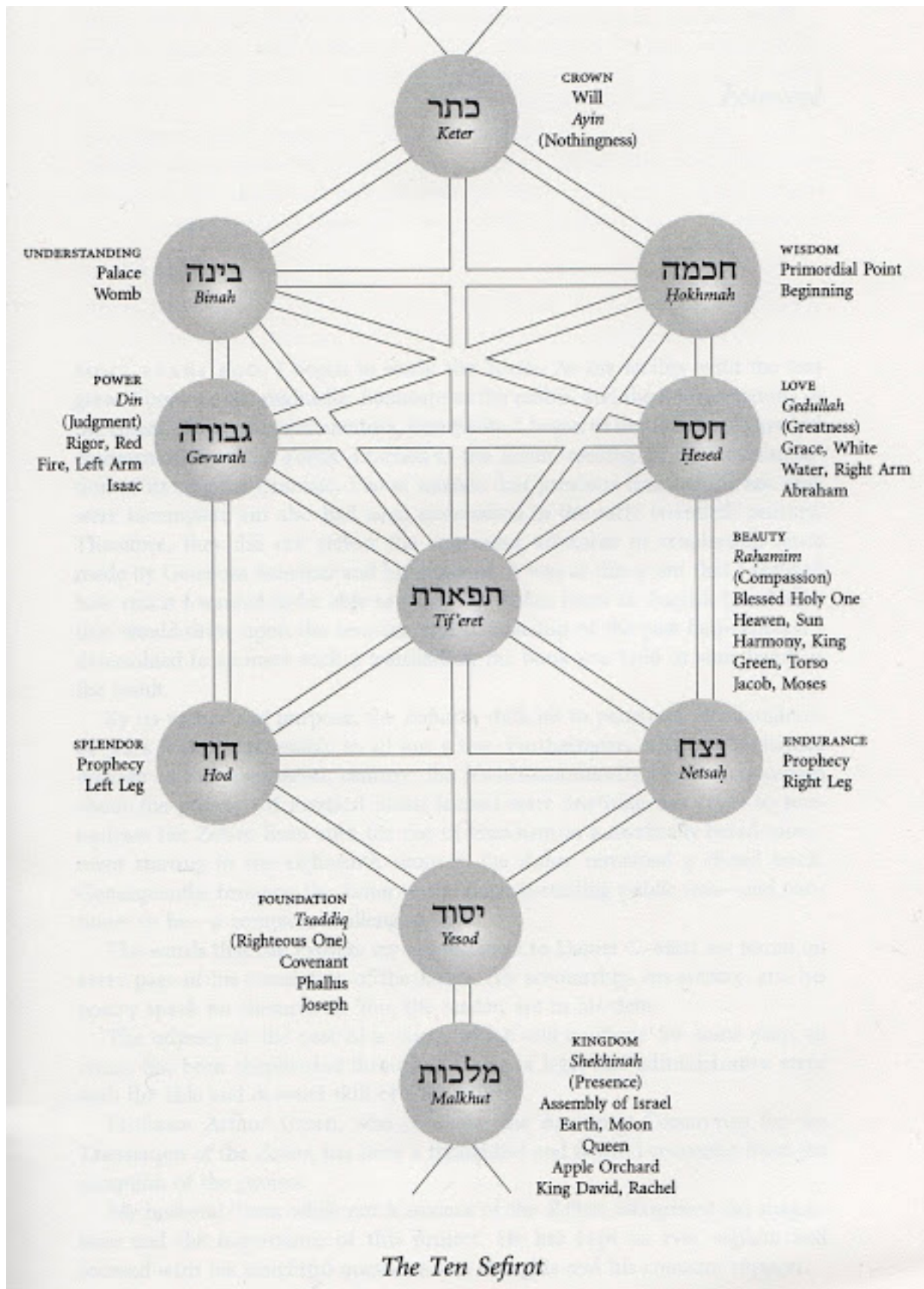
And the afternoon prayer is Isaac, and there the one praying is unified with Him through Gevurah. And the evening service Jacob, and so on.

And as with the order of the prayers, so with the order of the appointed festival times, for Pesach is Chesed, and Shavuot is Tiferet, Rosh Hashanah is Gevurah, Sukkot is Yesod and Shemini Atzeret is Malchut, and Chanukah and Purim are Netzach and Hod.

Days of the Omer							
	CHESED	GEVURAH	TIFERET	NETZACH	HOD	YESOD	MALCHUT
Week 1 CHESED	1 BERESITH 16 Nisan א	2 NOAH 17 Nisan ב	3 LECH L'CHA 18 Nisan ג	4 VAYERA 19 Nisan ד	5 CHAYE SARAH 20 Nisan ה	6 TOL'DOTH 21 Nisan ו	7 VAYETZE 22 Nisan ז
Week 2 GEVURAH	8 VAYSHLACH 23 Nisan ח	9 VAYESHEV 24 Nisan ט	10 MIKKETZ 25 Nisan י	11 VAYIGASH 26 Nisan יא	12 VAYHI 27 Nisan יב	13 SHEMOT 28 Nisan יג	14 VAERA 29 Nisan יד
Week 3 TIFERET	15 BO 30 Nisan טו	16 B'SHALACH 1 Iyar טז	17 YITRO 2 Iyar יז	18 MOSHATIM 3 Iyar יח	19 TERUMAH 4 Iyar יט	20 TETZAVEH 5 Iyar כ	21 KI TISA 6 Iyar כא
Week 4 NETZACH	22 VAYAKHEL 7 Iyar כב	23 PEKUDE 8 Iyar כג	24 VAYIKRA 9 Iyar כד	25 TZAV 10 Iyar כה	26 SHEMINI 11 Iyar כו	27 TATZIA 12 Iyar כז	28 METZORA 13 Iyar כח
Week 5 HOD	29 ACHARE MOT 14 Iyar כט	30 KEDOSHIM 15 Iyar ל	31 EMOR 16 Iyar לא	32 BEHAR 17 Iyar לב	33 BECHUKOTAI 18 Iyar לג	34 BEMIDBAR 19 Iyar לד	35 NASO 20 Iyar לה
Week 6 YESOD	36 BENAKHT'CHA 21 Iyar לו	37 SHALCH L'CHA 22 Iyar לז	38 KORAH 23 Iyar לח	39 CHUKAT 24 Iyar לט	40 BALAK 25 Iyar מ	41 PINCHAS 26 Iyar מא	42 MATOT 27 Iyar מב
Week 7 MALCHUT	43 MASSEY 28 Iyar מג	44 DEVARIM 29 Iyar מד	45 VAETCHANAN 1 Sivan מה	46 EKHIV 2 Sivan מו	47 RE-EM 3 Sivan מז	48 SHOFTIM 4 Sivan מח	49 KI TITZE 5 Sivan מט

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As the mystical counting of the Omer is an interlocking system, each day, we are meant to consider a different attribute, or *sephira*, through the lens of the *sephira* for that week.

Week 1 - Hesed - Loving Kindness

The mystical journey of Sefirat Ha'Omer begins with unconditional love. As with Mussar, this practice affirms that the very fabric of the universe and the essence of Source is unconditional, unboundaried love.

Week 2 - Gevurah - Strength or the Ability to Set Boundaries

The second week of the Omer we balance the scales of love with a holy, booming, powerful “No!” A story is told that it took the Creator many attempts to create a world that could function. The first attempt was a world created entirely from God’s capacity for loving-kindness. It was a world without limits. Nothing was ever refused in that world. Nothing was protected, and the world could not endure.

The Creator then brought into being a world governed only by judgement, and it too quickly descended into chaos. So harsh and unforgiving were its creatures that no relationships survived. It was a world of “falling short” and “not enough,” and it could not endure. Says the Midrash, it was only when God combined God’s capacities for Loving-kindness (*Hesed*) and Judgement (*Gevurah*) that God could create a world that would thrive. (see Rashi on Genesis 1:1)

In contemporary American society, we deride Judgement, but Jewish mysticism rejects this claim. Judgement is essential, we learn during this week of the Omer. Sometimes we bless by showering with love, but sometimes it is the defining of boundaries that is the greatest gift.

Week 3 - Tiferet - Splendor - The heart-center, the sacred balance of Hesed and Gevurah

The third week of the Omer, invites the practitioner into the heart of selfhood, the “I,” the ego. This is the week of *Tiferet* - Divine Splendor - the selfhood of the Divine. Kabbalists sometimes refer to this week’s *sephira* as “*Ha’Kadosh Baruch Hu*.” When we say “God”, we are referring to the face of God explored this week.

Week 4 - Netzah - Eternity

Netzah, or the eternal in the Divine and in all of us. In its many teachings about the *sefirot*, the Zohar notes that it is hardest to attain understanding of this week’s *sefirah Netzah*, and it’s sister, *Hod*, which we will explore next week, as they are “concealed within the Shekhina.” (Zohar II 164b-165a, Translation, Tishbi).

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The forces of *Netzach* and *Hod* push and pull, in balance and tension within us, to generate the lower aspects of our ego. They are the two voices forever calling out to us, as we journey the material world. *Netzach* cries: “What about me is timeless?” “How will I be remembered? Don’t I matter, always?”

We sacred beings, souls encased in bodies, are a paradox. We are, at once, fleeting and timeless. The shadow of *Netzach* is the call of the ego that dreads its own mortality. Its radiance is the persistent reminder that we are One with our Creator, timeless and immortal. *Netzach* is the ego’s shackles and the key that unlocks them.

Week 5 - Hod - Humility

To be humble is to know one’s own worth, with certainty, without question. As a result, a humble person does not impose the need to be praised on others, so self-contained is she in her knowledge of her own self-worth. A humble person walks with perfect faith in his path, such that he can sit tight with it, not thrashing around, switching from this choice to that, searching for his purpose. To be humble is to know that you are always, exactly where you belong.

Our capacity for prayer comes from this week’s sephira, from Hod. In humility, we incline the eyes heavenward, open the mouth in supplication. Through the lens of humility, we find the capacity to surrender to the challenges laid out before us. “Please God, help me to see my purpose in every moment. Help me to know that I am, always, exactly where I belong.”

Week 6 - Yesod - Passion and Sacred Sexuality

The Kabbalistic Tree of Life imagines the Divine, just like us, to be a Being who longs for union, and who holds and expresses that longing through the Divine phallus. While the gendered nature of this claim may be troubling for some, we must remember that in this system, we are all microcosms of the Divine, all radically both masculine and feminine and in that way, all possessing of a phallus.

Week 7 - Malchut/Shekhina - Honoring Mother Earth or Actualization

The central affirmation of the Zohar is “*leit atar panui minei*” or “there is no place that is devoid of God.” In the week of Malchut/Shekhina, we look deep within every nook and cranny of our lives and affirm, “this too is God.” A rigorous spiritual practice, the deep faith that both the blessings and the trials of our lives come from Source helps us to live our gifts as mandates from God and to cultivate a posture of deep surrender.