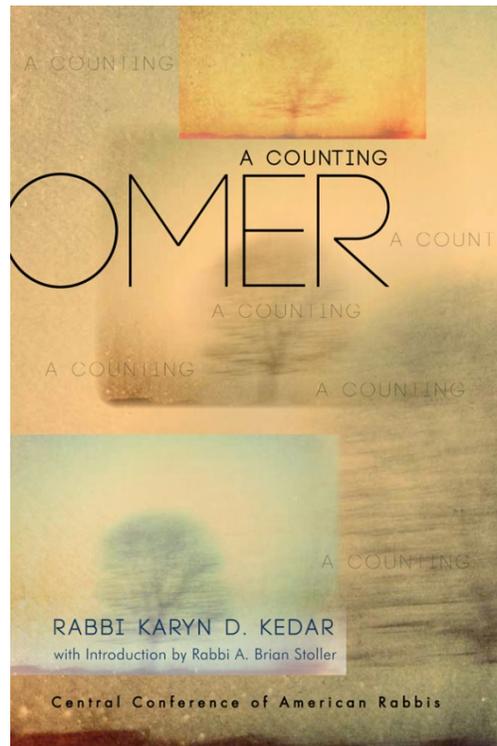


OMER: A COUNTING



By Rabbi Karyn D. Kedar

Introduction by Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Study Guide by Rabbi Jill Perlman, Rabbi Nicole Auerbach, and Benjamin Barer, in consultation with Rabbi Karyn Kedar.

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DECIDE

WHERE WILL THIS JOURNEY TAKE YOU?

CHECK-IN

OUR B'RIT (COVENANT)

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- ❖ As our Omer Groups are under the umbrella of Isaiah Together and the broader umbrella of Temple Isaiah, we will keep the values of each front and center.

COUNTING OF THE OMER

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

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

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Today is the _____ day, which is _____ weeks and _____ days of the Omer.

May I understand and make the decisions necessary to live my life with purpose.

DRAWING FROM EXODUS:

Moses asked, *Who am I that I should go?* and God said, *I will be with you.* (Exodus 3:11-12).

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. It is a celebration of newfound freedom and redemption. Shavuot marks the moment when the Torah was revealed to us at Mount Sinai. It celebrates the revelation of profound and divine Truth, on both the personal and communal levels.

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.

As we prepare to embark on our own journey toward revelation, we will be focusing on moments from the Book of Exodus, to serve as guideposts for our wandering together.

The journey begins with Moses pausing to notice a bush that is burning "unconsumed." At this moment, God calls him to an entirely different way of living, as a leader of his people.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Moses begins his journey with a moment of decision. Why does Moses hesitate? What holds us back from making important decisions in our own lives?
- (b) God answers Moses's questions, not by listing his credentials as a leader, but by assuring him that God will be with him. Why is this a powerful answer? What support might you need from this group or others as you embark on this journey?

MODERN VOICES:

On **page 12**, Rabbi Kedar shares a text by Richard Bode.¹ Please refer to this text in your book as you and your *chavruta* or group members answer the discussion questions below.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Break into pairs or small groups, and consider the following questions:

¹ Richard Bode, *First You Have to Row a Little Boat: Reflections on Life & Living*.

- (a) How does this text relate to the story of the Exodus?
- (b) Where do *you* want to go on this journey through the Omer—and beyond?

MORE ON DECISION:

On **page 16**, Rabbi Kedar cites a text by Anne Lamott² which she then comments on. Refer to both the Lamott text and Rabbi Kedar’s following comments in order to discuss the questions that follow.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Consider Lamott’s metaphor of the toolbox. What are the tools in your toolbox? Which do you reach for most often? Which do you wish were there?
- (b) Now consider Rabbi Kedar’s story about her father. What would your third principle be? If you don’t know, how would you go about searching for it?

A FINAL WORD:

*You may wish to end the discussion by reading aloud the poem/blessing on **page 30**.*

² Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*.

DISCERN

HOW DO YOU DISCERN *YOUR* TRUTH?

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Today is the _____ day, which is _____ weeks and _____ days of the Omer.

May I discern my heart's desire as I chart a course to a life of meaning and purpose.

DRAWING FROM EXODUS:

And Moses asked, *When they ask me, “What is God’s name?” what shall I say?* And God answered, *Tell them that Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, I am and I will be, sent me to you.* (Exodus 3:13-14)

On **page 33**, Rabbi Kedar expounds on the encounter. Read this passage together.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How is Rabbi Kedar defining the principle of discernment?
- (b) How do we lift up the life-affirming and let go of the life-draining?
- (c) How do we negotiate the different voices and demands of our lives to determine how we should move forward?
- (d) What might discernment look like in practice?

MODERN VOICES:

Rabbi Kedar shares the poem “Witness” by Denise Levertov on **page 38**.³ Her own poem follows. Refer to both as you discuss the questions that follow.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Break into pairs or small groups, and consider the following questions:

- (a) What does Denise Levertov’s poem suggest to us about discernment? Describe the difference between moments when the mountain is hidden from us and moments when we are hidden from the mountain.
- (b) How do inattention, apathy, and fatigue prevent us from clearly seeing the path ahead?
- (c) When in your life have you stepped forward? Stepped backward? Held your ground? How do you know which movement is needed at which time? Which action is most difficult for you: reaching, yielding, or being still?

FROM OUR TRADITION:

On **page 44**, Annie Dillard shares a story from Martin Buber.⁴ Rabbi Kedar then shares her own reflection. Refer to both to answer the discussion questions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

³ “Witness” by Denise Levertov, in *Evening Train*.

⁴ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

- (a) What does the story of Martin Buber teach us about discernment? Are there times in our lives and circumstances that make us more open or more closed to seeing what is before us?
- (b) How does one pay attention to the voice “at the center of our being” as opposed to the other voices that drive us, for instance, those of ego and fear? How do we discern which voices are the ones worth listening to?
- (c) Have you had an experience when life feels like it was yelling at you as described in the text? How easy/difficult is it to respond to a whisper rather than a yell? What are the barriers to listening to our inner urgent voice?

A FINAL WORD:

*You may wish to end the discussion by reading aloud the poem/blessing on **page 50**.*

CHOOSE

HOW WILL YOU CHOOSE TO LIVE TODAY?

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Today is the _____ day, which is _____ weeks and _____ days of the Omer.

May I become aware of the power of choice and learn to choose in accordance with my life's purpose.

DRAWING FROM EXODUS:

“And they encamped . . . at the edge of the wilderness” (Exodus 13:20).

Rabbi Kedar draws on this verse on **page 53**. Read this passage together, and then consider the following questions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) The Israelites camp at the edge of the wilderness. Are you on the “edge” of making a choice?
- (b) In some ways, the wilderness, in all its “emptiness,” is a place of infinite options. Does having infinite options feel freeing to you? Stifling?
- (c) Rabbi Kedar suggests that choice allows us to order our days. How do you become more aware of the choices you make or do not make? Do you see a pattern in your choices?

MODERN VOICES:

On **page 62**, Rabbi Kedar shares a text by Gerald Jampolsky⁵. Use this and her reflection that follows to address the following questions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you think of Jampolsky’s assertion that “you get what you expect”? To what extent do you believe that you have the power to change your expectations? And do you believe that would make a difference?
- (b) Jampolsky seems to suggest that the opposite of love is fear. Do you see love and fear in opposition in your own life? What would a “life of love” look like?
- (c) When have you decided to do something different? What prepared you to make that choice?

FROM OUR TRADITION:

On **page 64**, Rabbi Kedar includes an excerpt from the oft-told tale of Rabbi Zusya.⁶ Review the story together, and then answer the following questions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

⁵ Gerlad G. Jampolsky, MD, *Out of Darkness into the Light: A Journey of Inner Healing*.

⁶ *The Classic Tales: 4000 Years of Jewish Lore*, edited by Ellen Frankel.

- (a) The parable assumes that Zusya might have striven to be more like Moses. How do you choose which attributes or people to emulate?
- (b) How can you foster within yourself, that it is “enough” to be your best self?

FOR YOUR REFLECTION:

*Read the text on **page 64**, and then take 3 minutes to reflect on it in writing. After the 3 minutes are up, pick a partner and, if you like, share a thought, memory, or feeling this text brought up for you.*

A FINAL WORD:

*You may wish to end the discussion by reading aloud the poem/blessing on **page 72**.*

HOPE

HOW DO YOU LIVE A LIFE OF HOPE?

CHECK-IN

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Today is the _____ day, which is _____ weeks and _____ days of the Omer.

May I cultivate the practice of hope so that I may live with positivity.

DRAWING FROM EXODUS:

And God said, *I will take you out of the misery of Egypt.* (Exodus 3:17)

Take a few minutes to read together Rabbi Kedar's reflection on **page 75**.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) God's statement, "I will take you out of the misery of Egypt" is meant to be hopeful, but, in response, the Jewish people often vacillated between fear and faith. Why do you think that was? Can you relate?
- (b) What would the practice of hope look like in your life? What is the connection between hope and gratitude?

MODERN VOICES:

On **page 78**, Rabbi Kedar shares the poem "Discovery" by Ruth F. Brin.⁷ Read the poem together now, and then consider the following questions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How do you react to Ruth Brin's depiction of redemption in her poem as moving from the supernatural to the natural, from the large to the small? Is the concept of redemption expanded or diminished through this re-framing?
- (b) What are all of *your* possibilities for defining redemption? Where is redemption found, and is it near?

MORE ON HOPE:

On **page 90**, Rabbi Kedar shares "Let the Beauty We Love" by Rumi.⁸ Rabbi Kedar's reflection follows. Review both passages together, and then turn to the questions that follow.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Break into pairs or small groups, and consider the following questions:

- (a) Rumi juxtaposes intellectual learning with the melody of the musical instrument. How does the act of taking down a musical instrument in Rumi's writing symbolically relate to redemption and hope?

⁷ "Discovery" by Ruth F. Brin, in *Harvest: Collected Poems and Prayers*.

⁸ "Let the Beauty We Love," in *A Year with Rumi: Daily Readings*, translated by Coleman Barks.

- (b) Rabbi Kedar urges us to do something for someone else on those days when we feel incapable of hope, when we are unable to believe that change is possible. What is the one courageous step you can take or act of kindness you can do today?

Take a moment to write about the connection between acts of kindness and hope.

A FINAL WORD:

*You may wish to end the discussion by reading aloud the poem/blessing on **page 95**.*

IMAGINE

WHAT IS POSSIBLE?

CHECK-IN

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Today is the _____ day, which is _____ weeks and _____ days of the Omer.

May I learn to imagine myself living my life's purpose with joy.

DRAWING FROM EXODUS:

And God said, *I will take you ... to a land flowing with milk and honey. (Exodus 3:17)*

Rabbi Kedar reflects on this verse on **page 99**. Take a moment to review that passage together.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Rabbi Kedar here is stressing the need to imagine what the raw materials given to us in this world can become. Why do you think that, in *HaMotzi*, the blessing over bread, we thank God “who brings forth bread from the earth” if it is humans who transform the wheat into bread?
- (b) This verse is one of many in the Torah that names the main focus of imagination for the Israelites, namely the Promised Land. Where are you imagining that you are heading this spring? What “Egypt (understood as “Narrow Place”) have you recently left?

FROM OUR TRADITION:

On **page 112**, Rabbi Kedar shares a text by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.⁹ Refer to that text to address the discussion questions that follow.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How would you describe “the glory” that is all around us but easy to miss?
- (b) How can you become more aware of “radiance” around you? Are there particular spiritual practices that have helped you?
- (c) What “vanities of living” do you feel are blocking a more regular feeling of awe or wonder?

MORE ON IMAGINATION:

On **pages 114-115**, Rabbi Kedar discusses the cloud in the desert. Refer to her comments to answer the following questions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Do you find yourself able to pause in your life’s journey? Describe what that is like.
- (b) It can be confusing to imagine a different way of living your life. Do you “camp” when you find yourself in a cloud, or run? Explain.

⁹ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*.

A FINAL WORD:

*You may wish to end the discussion by reading Wordsworth's¹⁰ poem on **page 114**.*

Action Step: Often, this kind of counter-cultural change is hard to stay devoted to on your own. Consider whether you and your chevruta want to become "accountability buddies." What would you like to work on?

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey.

COURAGE

HOW CAN WE BE OUR MOST COURAGEOUS SELVES?

CHECK-IN

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Today is the _____ day, which is _____ weeks and _____ days of the Omer.

May I live my life with courage and resolve as I try to find my life's purpose.

DRAWING FROM EXODUS:

And Moses, afraid, pleaded, *“Please, O my God, I have never been a man of words ... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”* (Exodus 4:10)

Rabbi Kedar expands upon this verse on **page 121**. Read her reflection together, and then consider the following questions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What gifts do you offer the world? What deficiencies hinder you from fulfilling your life’s mission?
- (b) Moses’s pleading is often read as self-protection due to fear. Can we see his pleading instead as an act of courage?
- (c) Who has inspired you with her/his courage? Why? Could you emulate that person?

MODERN VOICES:

On **page 122**, Rabbi Kedar shares a text by Annie Dillard.¹¹ She then shares her own reflection on this theme. Review both texts, and then consider the following questions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you think Dillard means when she claims: “there was no formerly heroic times”?
- (b) When has “the sacred wiped you with its finger”?
- (c) Turn to the person sitting next to you and share a moment in your life that required courage.

FROM OUR TRADITION:

On **page 128**, Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg¹² offers a reflection on faith and courage. Read it together now.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What does it mean to “live life well”? To “let go of life well”?
- (b) What practices do you have in place, or could imagine putting in place, to live up to that ideal?

¹¹ Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*.

¹² Jonathan Wittenberg, *The Eternal Journey: Meditations on the Jewish Year*.

(c) Just living a life of principle takes tremendous courage. Who supports you in staying true to yourself and your calling?

MORE ON COURAGE

On **page 135**, Rabbi Kedar writes about how we live until something changes in our lives.

Take 3-5 minutes to reflect on this text in writing. We will then come back together to share a thought, memory, or feeling this text brought up for you.

A FINAL WORD:

*You may wish to end the discussion by reading aloud the poem on **page 138** by Rainer Maria Rilke¹³.*

¹³ Rainer Maria Rilke, in *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, edited and translated by Robert Bly

PRAY

WHERE HAS THIS JOURNEY TAKEN YOU?

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Today is the _____ day, which is _____ weeks and _____ days of the Omer.

May this be my prayer: That I live my life aligned with gratitude, purpose, and joy.

DRAWING FROM EXODUS:

Moses and Aaron said to Pharaoh, *Thus says the Eternal, the God of Israel: Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness.* (Exodus 5:1)

Rabbi Karyn Kedar explores the seventh principle, Pray, on **page 145**. The following questions refer to the Torah text and her reflection.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) The Israelites ask to be redeemed from Egypt in order to have freedom to celebrate the festival of God. What does this say about the nature of prayer?
- (b) Rabbi Kedar shares with us the understanding that prayer is about acknowledging both our power and our powerlessness. How does this comport with your understanding of what it means to pray?

MODERN VOICES:

On **page 150**, Rabbi Kedar shares the poem “Gods Change, Prayers are Here to Stay” by Yehuda Amichai.¹⁴ Read that poem together now.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Break into pairs or small groups, and consider the following questions:

- (a) Can discovery of the traces of the unseen be considered an act of prayer? If yes, how so?
- (b) How do you relate to Amichai’s conclusion, “That’s the way it is with God”?

FROM OUR TRADITION:

On **page 158**, Rabbi Kedar shares a text from Rabbi Arthur Green.¹⁵ Read over the text to answer the following questions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Do you understand the *Sh’ma* as a calling?
- (b) What are the sources of strength that you draw upon for making the call?

¹⁴ “Gods Change, Prayers are Here to Stay” in Yehuda Amichai, *Open Closed Open: Poems*, translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld.

¹⁵ Rabbi Arthur Green, *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology*.

(c) Are you able to hear the cry when it is uttered? What is the *Sh'ma* calling you to do in this world?

CLOSING DISCUSSION QUESTION:

The journey of these seven principles: **decide, discern, choose, hope, courage, imagine, pray** has been leading us here, to this point— though the journey never ends. Where are you right now on your journey through the Omer— and beyond?

A FINAL WORD:

*You may wish to end the discussion by reading aloud the poem/blessing on **page 165**.*