

Shavuot / Weeks: Counting the Omer / Counting the Sabbaths

Judaism and Christianity make use of liturgical religious calendars which establish certain Holy Days. While the Jewish and Christian systems are related they are also distinct. The Jewish holy days are based on Torah commands as listed in Leviticus 23 and relate directly to the events of the Creation, the Exodus and the acts of God in relationship to Israel. The Christian holy days are established in relationship to the Biblical ones and are fashioned to relate directly to the life and ministry of Jesus and the acts of God in relationship to the Church. Each uses a different calendar basis and each has adjusted the celebration and requirements of observance as established by traditional religious authority. The primary overlap between these systems is the observance of Passover and Holy Week.

One of the interesting observances is the counting of the Omer toward Shavuot in Judaism and the counting of the Sabbaths toward Pentecost in Christianity. These 50 day observances parallel in the respective religions and carry important meanings related to Passover and Holy Week. Because of the distinct calendars and emphasis of meanings, many Jews and Christians do not understand their relationship, but Messianic Jews and Judeo-Christians must understand both.

The Counting of the Omer is a fifty day period from First Fruits to Shavuot. First Fruits is the third day after Passover in Judaism. Passover is on the fourteenth of the month of Nisan, the First Day of Unleavened Bread is the fifteenth of Nisan and First Fruits is the sixteenth of Nisan. Therefore the counting begins on First Fruits (Nisan 16) and this may be any day of the week (Monday, Tuesday, etc.) because it is based on a date like Christmas which changes day from year to year.

The counting of the Sabbaths for Christianity always begins on Resurrection Sunday (Easter). This means that the fifty days includes seven full Weeks and Sabbaths plus one day ending always on a final Sunday. This Sunday is called Pentecost. Because the counting always begins on a Sunday (the first day of the week) the calendar date will change each year. As a result, these two fifty-day observances are separated because the emphasis in Judaism is Passover (Nisan 14th) and the emphasis in Christianity is the resurrection (Sunday). But each in its own way counts off a fifty day period.

The meaning of these two observances is also related but distinct. For Judaism, the fifty days are connected to the Exodus. The Israelites traveled ten days from Egypt to Mt. Sinai where Moses ascended up the mountain and during 40 days and nights and received the Ten Commandments (The Law of God). Ten plus forty equals fifty days. Among other meanings, Shavuot observes the receiving of the Commandments. For Christianity, Jesus showed Himself alive for forty days to His disciples, teaching them about the kingdom, and then ascended into heaven. Ten days later the Holy Spirit came upon the Jewish Disciples in Jerusalem on Shavuot at the time of the morning sacrifice. Forty plus ten equals fifty. Pentecost observes the Baptism of the Holy Spirit as foretold by John the Baptist and the prophets. The Jewish prophets (Jeremiah and Ezekiel) foretold that God would write His commandments on their hearts and minds by His Spirit.

So, how can Messianic Jews and Judeo-Christians observe these Holy days? Very early in Church history, before Judaism and Christianity had completely separated, the Jewish believers in Yeshua and the Gentile Believers in Jesus agreed that Jews should follow the Jewish tradition of setting the holy days and count from Passover. The Gentiles, however, would follow the emphasis of the Resurrection and count from Sunday. Later Constantine and the emerging Western Church in Rome thought that a

centralized and unified observance, distinct from Judaism, was best for Christians. This is still the case in Roman Catholic, Protestant and most Free Churches. Eastern Christians and some other Christian groups still maintain the older agreement and count from the Sunday after Passover. Most Messianic Jews Count the Omer using the system of Judaism and this is consistent with the earliest Church practice for Jews and Gentiles within their synagogues. For Judeo-Christians, Resurrection Sunday based on the date used by that group (East or West) is the start of the counting of fifty days to Pentecost. It is not so critical that we do it exactly the same, but that we recognize that God gave both the Commandments and the Spirit.

The DiscipleCenter observes the Counting of the Sabbaths in the following manner. Using the Eastern Church tradition we observe Resurrection on the Sunday following the Jewish Passover. We begin our count on that day. Our congregational services during the period from Easter Sunday to Pentecost are on Sabbath (Saturday) afternoons at 3:00pm, the time of the evening sacrifice at the Temple. We follow each service with an agape (congregational meals eaten together) into the evening which begins the first day of the week. By counting the Sabbaths we anticipate the celebration on Pentecost Sunday and the Waving of the leavened bread loaves (which was celebrated at the Temple and is used for communion in the Eastern Church). We also observe the Harvest (both physical and spiritual) as seen in the traditional synagogue reading of the Book of Ruth at Shavuot, and the giving of the Spirit at Shavout (Pentecost) to dwell in believers who wait for the Kingdom to be restored to Israel at the return of the Messiah.

However your family and congregation celebrates the “counting”, may it be meaningful and a reminder of the provision of our God - the God of Abraham and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Messiah), who gives us all good things – The Torah, the Gospel, and the Spirit.