

Shabbat shalom. My task this evening is not to wax poetic at length, but to share just a few words of Torah, in preparation for tonight's incredible Hope for our Future celebration, in which we will have the opportunity to honor the extraordinary Rabbi Noa Sattath and the transformative work of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel.

So - a bit of Torah from parshat Emor, which we read this week.

In this parsha, the Jewish calendar is mapped out for us, laying out all of the holy days that appear in Torah. We get Shabbat, of course. Then, the agricultural versions of Passover and Shavuot. We get Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Shmini Atzeret.

In fact, the Torah portion this week describes this very moment in the Jewish year. The text says: *ad mi'machorat hashabbat hashvi'it teesp'ru chamishim yom v'hikravtem mincha chadashah ladonai*. You must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to God.

This is talking about the counting of the Omer. We count, out loud and with a blessing, the 49 days between the second night of Passover and the holiday of Shavuot, a celebration of receiving Torah at Mount Sinai 50 days later.

We are in this time of counting right now - a journey in which every day signifies a moving forward, toward something, toward a goal, toward a vision, toward a dream. In this case, toward a mountain, but really, toward a new way of living and being in this world, wrapped up in Torah and Jewish peoplehood and covenant.

But there's something interesting here. The Siftei Chachamim, a 17th century commentary on Rashi, asks: "since we only count forty-nine days, why does this verse in Torah talk about fifty days? And it answers this conundrum by saying: ah, the 49 days are the counting days, and the fiftieth day is Shavuot, the day they brought an offering to God.

So, we might understand: the fiftieth day is completion. Marking an ending. By fire and by ritual. It's a conclusion.

Siftei Chachamim asked: why does it say 50 days, if we only count 49 days? But on this night, perhaps we should add on to this question: why **don't** we count the 50th day? The end of the story. Why don't we count "*hayom chamishim yom la'omer*"?

And I would offer that it is, in fact, very important that we don't count the 50th day of the Omer, a day of conclusion, of landing, of ending. We are a people shaped by our journeys more than by our arrivals. When we set forth into the wilderness, pointing ourselves toward the Promised Land, we become forged in the act of always being in motion toward redemption, toward a better place, a new horizon, toward the Israel of our dreams. From Mitzrayim to the Mountain of Sinai. From Sinai into the wilderness. From the wilderness to the edge of the Jordan River. The

Torah itself doesn't even finish our story. We are always journeying toward the land that we dream of, the land that we hope for, even when we are in it.

Our people's vision of that land is not the period at the end of a sentence, but rather it's an ellipsis that guides us forward. A land of milk and honey, of abundance, we're told. Eretz tovah u'rchavah, A good and spacious land. A land green with flowing waters. A count that stops at 49 reminds us that we **aren't** there yet, but we **are** still on our way.

To stop at the Israel that is now, with the government we have now, with the choices being made now, with the pain of now - is to be Israel stuck at a 50 count, as if the story is over. But the Israel of ACRI, the Israel of the tens of thousands of people in the streets, protesting for an end to the war, for humanitarian aid for Gaza, for a return of the hostages, for new elections, the Israel in so many of our hearts - that is an Israel still somewhere ahead of us. A land of equality for all people, where every single person is afforded their human rights and civil liberties, no matter who they are. A safe and thriving and peaceful democratic Israel that dwells next to a safe and thriving and peaceful Palestine. It is a vision, a beautiful vision, that we journey toward still - in the forward motion of day 49. Always getting closer, always working for it, always gazing out toward the Israel of our dreams and doing all that is in our power to ever be part of building it.

In so many ways that's what tonight is all about. What ACRI is all about. What hope is all about. Not getting to 50, satisfied that we've arrived. But orienting ourselves toward the journey and knowing we're not there yet. And knowing it is still possible. And knowing we are part of its creation.

Shabbat shalom.