

# Rabbi Moshe Walter



## Counting Up, not Down

**We** live in a world that obsesses over numbers. We determine success based on followers; we call them likes, views, or subscribers. We represent the value of individuals in terms of quantity; we call it net worth. We make important decisions based on a person's age; we call it the age factor. We determine our health based on an algorithm; we call it the BMI (body mass index). We shape our exercise regimen based upon digits; we call it steps.

But it doesn't even end here. Let me share a story I was recently involved in that highlights the way many in our community make decisions.

An impressive candidate was vying for an important community position that carried significant responsibilities. The candidate had outstanding qualifications for the job and matched almost all conditions of the perfect applicant. Before the interview, the insiders all assumed that they had found their leader. Then the interview

went flawlessly, and they were certain they had found their man.

Shortly before offering the position to this individual, it emerged that the contender was significantly younger than the board had assumed. Due to the candidate's impressive interview, they didn't imagine he was as young as he was. Although the group was incredibly taken by the candidate and was only one step away from offering him the position, the board backtracked because he wasn't the exact age of the candidate they were looking for.

When this was brought to my attention, I strongly challenged the group's decision and shared with them a situation that I was aware of. Another institution took a high-level risk hiring a younger candidate over other candidates who were significantly older and more experienced. The compounding factor was that the outgoing retiree was older and very accomplished. The board of this institution decided to look past the age factor and other quantitative markers. They understood that age is a *mum oveir*, a passing blemish, and that it would be wiser to make the decision that was qualitatively best for the organization. Many years later, this community couldn't be happier with the decision they made.

I often refer to this story when parents discuss their concern regarding the age of a prospective shidduch, when communal leaders are quick to dismiss a younger job applicant, and with rebbeim who debate whether to allow *talmidim* not to be graded on their exams. During these conversations, I stress to the decision makers to carefully consider quality and not quantity, value and not numbers. I then give countless examples of individuals and groups who made important decisions based upon age and quantity that did not yield the desired results.

This is exactly the message of Sefiras Ha'omer. The Jewish nation is redeemed from Egypt and is preparing to concretize their relationship with Hashem by receiving the Torah. Hashem instructs them to be prepared, as 50 days from the redemption date will be the highly anticipated wedding day. It is the destined day when Hashem will come down on Har Sinai to deliver the Torah to His chosen nation.

**WHAT WOULD BE** the best way to count these 49 days? Of course, it would be by ticking off the days — 49, 48, 47, etc. — which is what we all do when waiting

for a great event. This is what we call a countdown. It's what we do as the end of the school year approaches, as an anticipated trip draws near, as a wedding date looms. Why, then, when it comes toward the event of all events, Kabbalas HaTorah, do we count up?

The answer is that the Torah is teaching us what numbers are all about. A countdown shows that the time between now and the event is meaningless and insignificant; the focus is the event, and the calendar dates along the way are a barrier in the way of reaching the goal. The Torah, however, looks at this time qualitatively; every day counts and matters. Today is day one and I will make the most of it. Today is day 12 and I will live the day to the fullest. Today is day 37 and I won't think about day 38 or day 48.

The *avodah* of Sefiras Ha'omer is to learn how to use integers wisely. Counting the days is not the goal; rather, it is to make the days count. (See *Sefer Hachinuch*, mitzvah 306, *mitzvas Sefiras Ha'omer*.)

There are endless areas in which we quantify our everyday lives. When attending a wedding, we quickly assess the turnout. When deciding if a bochur is an appropriate match, we ask how many years he plans to learn. When advising someone wondering whether to continue pursuing a shidduch, we ask how many dates there have been. When inquiring about a couple, we often ask how many children they have.

Focus on quantity has even crept into our innermost and holy world of Torah and mitzvos. We regularly inquire: How many *masechtos* have you finished? How many hours do you learn each day? How long is davening in this shul? What time did your Seder finish? How much money should I spend on the purchase of tefillin or mezuzos? How many people did you have over for the Shabbos seudah?

These types of questions clearly indicate our fixation on quantity. This obsession needs to be addressed: Hashem measures accomplishment the very opposite way, valuing quality over quantity. The *pasuk* in Tehillim states "His understanding is beyond calculation" (147:5). This *pasuk* requires analysis; how could we think Hashem's understanding can be calculated? His insight is not a commodity that can be numbered.

In his commentary on Tehillim, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch reinterprets the *pasuk* to mean that, "No number counts before His insight." Rav Hirsch writes that "G-d's insight does not set


store by greatness of quantity. Before His insight, people or things small in number do not have any less significance. Therefore, Hashem weighs the inner value of men and nations and knows how to preserve the separate identity, even in the midst of many." Hence, the way Hashem evaluates His people is not based upon quantity, but quality.

Rav Yisrael Salanter and the foundation of the mussar movement, and the Baal Shem Tov and the foundation of *chassidus* both highlighted service of Hashem through quality of worship, meaningful engagement in mitzvos, and a deeper connection in the actions we perform. Mussar and *chassidus* teach that our *avodas Hashem* must not be measured by numbers, hours, amounts, or digits, but instead invested with love, fear, enthusiasm, and intent.

**AS WE CLIMB** toward Kabbalas HaTorah, we should focus not on the quantity of our Torah study but on the quality of our Torah study. When we are judged after 120 years, the Gemara states (*Shabbos* 31a) that we are asked several questions. Among them, "Did you set aside time to study Torah?" Hashem does not ask how many hours you learned daily. Hashem asks whether Torah study was made a primary occupation of your day. The question revolves around the effort behind your Torah study and not any algorithm.

This is emblematic of all the other questions we will be required to answer. Did we live a life of quality or quantity? Did we make decisions based upon statistics or substance? Were our choices based upon numbers or nature? Did we make determinations based upon age or action? Did we count properly?

This season of Sefiras Ha'omer, let's learn how to count. Let's daven with life and not on the clock. Let's learn Torah with energy and not by counting *blatt*. Let's base our relationships on substance and not smallness. Let's focus and not be futile.

The count is on.... Let's really live. 

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