



Week 2: Halfway There...

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In any journey of counting, whether up or down, there are usually ways of marking milestones along the way. One common milestone is the halfway point. And yet, when it comes to counting the Omer, the 25th day isn't of any exceptional significance, while the 33rd day of the 50 (*Lag Ba'Omer*) is marked and celebrated. Why might this be the case? Let's explore more about the significance of the halfway point in some of our foundational texts to understand how we should approach the journey of counting the Omer and why its milestones are structured as they are.

In the Mishna, the category of halfway appears frequently, but here, we will focus on two of those cases in particular, one from Bava Batra and one from Gittin. In [Bava Batra 2:6](#), we learn about a dove chick found between two dovecotes. If it is closer to one than the other, it belongs to the owner of the closer one. However, if it is found to be exactly equidistant between the two, the Mishna tells us that the two owners divide the value of the chick. We see a similar idea in [Mishna Gittin 8:3](#), where a creditor asks for the money he is owed to be thrown to him by the debtor. If it falls closer to the creditor, then the creditor has acquired the payment, and the debtor's debt is considered paid. This is the case, the Mishna tells us, even if someone else seizes the payment before the creditor can reach it. However, if it falls closer to the debtor, then the debtor still owes the money. If it falls equidistant between them, then they divide the money, which means the debtor now owes half the original debt. These mishnayot show that halfway can be a place where something belongs to both everyone and no one, forcing a compromise because nobody's claim is absolute.

A number of places in the Gemara build on this idea, starting with [Kiddushin 30a](#). The Gemara recounts the story of the sages who would count all the letters in the Torah to try to find the letter at the exact midpoint. They also counted the words to identify the midpoint word and so too with the verses. According to the Gemara, this exercise was also done with the book of Psalms, to try to find the midpoint letter and verse. The Gemara then raises the question how to classify these midpoints.

Are they part of the first half or of the second half? Ultimately the Rabbis conclude that they are not experts in these regards and therefore would not be able to resolve the question even if they were to count and count again to find a definite center. In this way, this Gemara reminds us that identifying the midpoint might not always be clear, and therefore, the question of how to categorize the midpoint remains opaque.

Sometimes, even when we know the midpoint, reaching it remains impossible. In Megillah [15b](#), the Gemara cites the verse from Megillat Esther (5:6) when the king tells Esther that whatever she wants, “even to half the kingdom, it shall be performed.” The Gemara notes that this limited offer of half the kingdom means that Achashverosh would not give something that would serve as a barrier to the kingdom—namely, the rebuilding of the Temple. Therefore, Achashverosh is telling Esther if that would be her wish, she should realize that it cannot and will not be fulfilled. Rashi explains that Achashverosh uses the language of “even to half the kingdom” to refer to the Temple because the building site for the Temple was the precise midpoint of the world. Therefore, this Gemara reminds us that even when we know where halfway is, that point itself can hold such an extreme tension that it still remains unattainable.

What do all of these sources, about the challenges and opportunities of marking the middle, have to do with counting the Omer? It turns out that the mitzvah of counting the Omer is a halfway point in and of itself. According to the [Sefer HaChinuch](#), counting the Omer is mitzvah number 306 out of 613. However, just as we found in the previous sources, the midpoint remains out of reach. The Sefer HaChinuch notes that at the beginning of our counting, we count up instead of down because we don't want to mention the large number of days that we have left to reach Shavuot, lest it feel unbearably long. However, once we reach the halfway point, perhaps we should switch from counting up to counting down! The Sefer HaChinuch explains that we should not change the nature of the counting in the middle. The point of counting the Omer is marking the journey from Pesach to Shavuot, but it is also about the counting itself. If we were to switch counting in the middle, it would suggest that there is no inherent value in the process, only in the outcome. While the middle can be a transformational moment on the journey, we should nonetheless continue as we were to show our belief in the importance of each day and each week.

So what do we take away from all of these sources that reflect on the significant yet ephemeral nature of the middle? If we look at the sources in the ways they unfold together, we see the importance of finding the middle, but not expecting it to be transformative on its own. The Mishna taught us about how liminal the middle can be and how it defies our clear notions of sides and ownership. The Gemara reminded us that the exact midpoint might not even be identifiable, and even if it is, it might represent limitations more than opportunities. Finally, Sefer Hachinuch showed us that even though the midpoint might feel and even *be* significant, we don't change directions when we reach it. Instead, we keep following the path that brought us to that point.

Outside of our tradition, some of us may be familiar with the song “Livin’ on a Prayer” by Jon Bon Jovi. Bon Jovi sings, “Whoa, we’re halfway there. Whoa oh, livin’ on a prayer, take my hand, we’ll make it, I swear. Whoa oh, livin’ on a prayer.” Halfway is an important marker, but it is not, in and of itself, a destination. The midpoint is both noteworthy but almost always out of our grasp, as time and space continue to move past it. Counting the Omer is an annual journey that we go on as a collective. While we might not formally mark the halfway point, my hope is that we hold on to each other and our faith in both the journey and the destination.

Luz Toff grew up in Oxford, England and has been involved in Limmud UK from a young age. Luz moved to Israel and then London and then back to Israel before pursuing her undergraduate degree in Brighton, England. She cares deeply about making Jewish text and practice meaningful, relevant, and accessible for as many people as possible. Luz has worked as an informal educator in a Jewish day school in the UK and was blessed to learn in a variety of Jewish learning institutions around the world, including Midreshet Emunah v'Omanut, Drisha, Pardes, the Susi Bradfield Educational Leadership program, and Maharat's Beit Midrash program.