

# SEFIRAT HAOMER: PROCESS & OUTCOME



**PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAS EMOR**  
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When you set a goal, do you concentrate your mental energy on the means to achieve the goal or on the aspired end of attaining the goal? In the psychological literature on goal-pursuits, these two different perspectives are called process focus and outcomes focus. A process focus is more concrete, emphasizes the how, accentuates the journey. An outcomes focus is more abstract, emphasizes the why, accentuates the destination. Researchers are trying to determine which approach is more effective in goal-fulfillment. To date, studies present conflicting evidence. Some indicate that when we focus on the process it is more rewarding and less anxiety provoking. Others demonstrate that focusing on the outcome helps promote grit and perseverance. The secret may lie in striking a balance, learning when alternating between a process focus and an outcome focus will be most helpful.

The exact purpose of the counting of the Omer is ambiguous within the verses. The Torah tells us in Parshat Emor (Vayikra 23:15-16) to count seven weeks, culminating in the various sacrifices brought on the fiftieth day. The commentators offer various suggestions, many related to the chronological placement of the Omer in between the holidays of Pesach and Shavuot. The entire goal of leaving Egypt, writes the Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim, 3:43), was to receive the Torah. Therefore, we enhance our appreciation for the end-goal of Shavuot by counting toward it. The Ohr HaChaim, on the other hand, focuses less on the end-goal in his theory as to why we count, but on the process of purification that was necessary after leaving the impurities of Egypt.

Within the same outcome-focused approach as the Rambam, the Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah 306) asks, if Sefira is about anticipation, why do we count up (Day 1, Day 2...) and not down (Day 49, Day 48...), as we often do to build excitement? He answers that if we were to start counting down with 49, we would get discouraged that we need to wait so long until we reach the goal, so we start with 1 in order to not be dissuaded. Approaching it from a process focus, Rabbi Shimshon Pinkus provides a different answer to the Sefer HaChinuch's question. Sefira is not just an exercise in mathematical abilities, but an act of self-growth. As a consequence, counting upwards represents the fact that we should be developing and building from one day to another.

Maintaining both of these approaches during Sefira can enhance our experience. Rabbi Soloveitchik, quoted by Rabbi Shmuel Goldin, argues that these two ideas are inherent within the word sefira. In contrast to the word minyan, in which counting is only essential in the attainment of an ultimate goal, sefira represents counting towards a goal (outcome) in which every individual unit becomes a goal unto itself (process). Counting highlights both the process and the outcome. Both are important to effective goal-pursuit and knowing how to keep both in mind enhances the other aspect. The process of self-growth will be more efficacious if the goal of Shavuot is underscored and the goal of Shavuot will be more meaningful if the process of self-growth is more successful.

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