



*Parshat Shmini*  
*Focus*  
**April 14, 2018 / 29 Nissan 5778**  
by Rav Hazzan Aliza Berger  
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

---

In college, I had a strange spring-time ritual. Every year, just about this time, I would start to feel overwhelmingly stressed. Every spring, I would end up crying in my advisor's office. And every spring we had the same conversation. She would patiently go through my schedule with me, class by class, assignment by assignment. We would review my extracurricular commitments. Every spring, she would sit back and say, "I think you are just doing too much."

This is still my spring-time ritual. Only now I'm on the other side of the conversation. Now I'm sitting with our teens and young adults, talking with them about what they have on their plates. Now I'm the one suggesting that if they let go of one or two activities, they'll still get into college and find a good job and succeed in life. It's a hard case to make.

We live in a world which advertises a challenging vision of success. Whereas young adults in previous generations could excel in one or two areas and feel a sense of accomplishment, as the world gets more and more competitive, that's no longer enough. Our teens feel like they have to do everything and do everything well. They feel like they have to be brilliant mathematicians, eloquent speakers, strong leaders, talented musicians, and do more acts of kindness than there are hours in the day. Our teens have to be planning for the future, doing their homework in the present, and all the while making sure that their social media presence reflects a happy, well-adjusted social butterfly.

Of course, we can relate. We face the same challenges, the same potential for springtime stress. We feel pressure to be go-getters at work, caring and present spouses, loving parents,

doting grandparents, kind friends, socially active and still able to pursue our independent hobbies. We know we can't be all things to all people at the same time, but that doesn't mean we don't try. We are constantly "on," constantly accessible by phone or email, constantly responsive to every dimension of our lives. And we find ourselves caught—because the more we do, the less present we are. The more we do, the less we are able to do the kinds of self-work that help us to self-actualize and succeed. Leaning in may be vogue, but it's inherently unstable.

So what do we do?

Baruch Hashem, Jewish tradition provides us with a spring-time ritual to manage stress and help us focus on what is within our power. Starting from the second night of Pesach until the holiday of Shavuot, we count the Omer. Originally, this was a technology designed by our ancestors to refocus their anxiety. In a time when there wasn't regular irrigation, when all our ancestors could do was plant their seeds and pray for enough rain to generate a crop, tradition provided them with a daily count to focus on the bounty that was to come instead of the worries that surrounded them.

Counting the Omer was one way our ancestors reminded themselves what was possible. They had limited capacity. They could only plant the seeds and hope for the best. But, as they counted down the weeks, they remembered that they could count on the world around them. They remembered that their efforts were enough.

Though we have the illusion that we can constantly do more, the truth is that we are no different than our ancestors. Our challenge is to accept the limitations of what we can do. Our challenge is to trust that what we are doing is enough.

In 2011, entrepreneur Kevin Livingston was working in a rough part of New York. Every day, on his walk to work, he couldn't believe how many young men were just hanging out on the streets. These were young men who had grown up surrounded by gangs and poverty. Young men who didn't have a picture of what success could look like.

Kevin could relate to these young men. There was a time when he was homeless, when he struggled to see himself as a successful entrepreneur instead of just a man down on his luck. In those days, he remembered that he used to imagine what his future would look like. What it would feel like to succeed. He knew he couldn't fix the poverty that surrounded him, he couldn't stop gangs or find all of these young men jobs, but he realized there was one thing he could do to make a difference.

He started collecting gently used suits. Then he headed out into the streets. He set up a rack of suits and offered each young man a free, fully-tailored suit. Gang bangers would pull on a suit jacket donated by a famous lawyer and Kevin would say, "I need you to understand the greatness you walk in." That suit, he would say, was donated by someone who has succeeded, you are wearing it now and you are going to succeed.

Kevin couldn't fix inequality and injustice, but he realized he could offer these young men a different vision for the future. Today, Kevin's passion has evolved into a successful non-profit called 100 Suits for 100 Men which provides underprivileged men and women with professional wear, job-training, coaching, education, after-school activities and mentorship. It turns out that one small change—in this case a different suit of clothes—can make all the difference.

The truth is, that's what counting the Omer is all about. The Omer reminds us that we will always find ourselves up against forces which are greater than we are. There will always be times that we feel not good enough, worried about the future, powerless to make a difference. While we can't always solve life's problems, we can make small, incremental changes. We can make a difference one step at a time.

On a personal level, this has felt like an important teaching for this moment. As you may know, for the past several weeks, Rabbi Gardenswartz and I have been visiting immigrants detained by ICE in the Suffolk County Jail. There's one woman who we see every week. She's just about my age, kind, and compassionate. She's a powerful advocate for social justice who was attacked for her belief that all people should be able to be themselves. She fled for her life and arrived here hoping for asylum. Instead, for the past three months, she has been trapped in jail with no resources and no way to be in touch with her loved ones.

Every time we see her, I feel overwhelmed by the injustice of it all. How is it that with all the good she has done in the world, she is locked away? How is it that with all of the resources and technology at our fingertips, the jail refuses to allow her to use a computer and an internet connection to call her wife or her mother?

But on Monday, when I visited, she gave me a piece of paper with a phone number. On Monday, I called her wife in Uganda to pass along a message of love. And on Monday, we figured out a plan to put them in touch. Since then, I've become a messenger. Her wife emails me pictures of letters from loved ones in Uganda and I print them and mail them to the jail. When I visit next week, I'll pick up letters from my friend and send them to her loved ones in Uganda.

We don't have the power to spring our new friend from jail, we don't have the power to transform the immigration system or the homophobia that exists in the world, but we can make a small difference by helping her to be in touch with her wife and family back home.

In this season of the Omer, when it's so easy to focus on all the things we can't do, our challenge is to see clearly what is within our power to change. What's one thing we can do to make a difference? Someone, somewhere is counting on each and every one of us. Who is counting on you?