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## A SECULAR SEPHIRAH

The days of Sephirah -- the counting of the Omer, beginning with the second day Passover and continuing to Shavuot -- usually brings two things to mind. One is the Biblically mandated count itself, traditionally interpreted as the sense of anticipation and high expectancy that leads from political liberation (the Exodus, commemorated on Passover) to religious elevation and spiritual exaltation (the revelation at Sinai celebrated on Shavuot).

The second is the period of semi-mourning associated with Sephirah. We refrain from marriages, joyous celebrations, hair cutting, etc. The historical reason usually given is the tragedy of the decimation of the disciples of the famed R. Akiba.

Subjectively, however, I have usually connected these two themes to each other more directly. Political freedom usually, and justifiably, brings with it the heady anticipation of greater things to come. Revolutionaries always seek to inspire us with the vision of utopia just beyond the establishment of a new order or new government. Yet this sense of excitement is so often doomed to frustration, the goal so often



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## A SECULAR SEPHIRAH -- PAGE 2

turns out to be elusive, that one can only fall into grief.

National Redemption of Passover did not proceed in a straight line to Revelation. There was backsliding, grumbling, misunderstanding -- and a golden calf.

So, the half-mourning of Sephirah is but the other side of the coin of the great expectations that characterize this period.

The relationship is, unfortunately, all too relevant to us in a secularized form. Jews of all forms of religious persuasions were almost unanimously enthusiastic about the post-war national liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and elsewhere. We identified with the various struggles for self-determination. Underneath it all, we felt that all this change of the political order would lead to the fulfillment of the dreams for a better and more humane social order. After all, Passover leads to Shavuot.

How disappointed we were! The self-same little African and Asian nations, whose independence we championed and whose support by Israel we so enthusiastically endorsed, turned into private fiefdoms, tribal autocracies, racist states - which, in addition, rejected Israel in a prolonged spasm of collective



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## A SECULAR SEPHIRAH -- PAGE 3

ingratitude occasioned by excessive ingestion of Arab oil.

We were naive. Passover led to no Shavuot. The vision was more akin to a nightmare. Not Moses was the model for modern nationalists - but Amin, le'havdil. The great anticipations turned sour: And we mourn the faded visions, the lost chances, the glory that could have been.

So this season we experience both emotions. Each one is a corrective to the other. We must be neither naive nor cynical.

We must keep counting.

NORMAN LAMM