



Sefirat Ha'omer of Someone Who Does Not Understand

לעילוי נשמת
יואל אפרים בן אברהם עוזיאל זלצמן ז"ל

Question: In our *shul*, the *chazan* leads *sefirat ha'omer*. Now, the set *chazan* is an *avel* with a very weak background, and I believe that he does not know what the words of *sefirat ha'omer* mean. Is he capable of doing the *sefira* for those who want to be *yotzei* with him?

Answer: Your concern has some basis, but we will see that it is misplaced.

The general rule is that *mitzvot* of recitation, even those that can be done in any language (see list in *mishna*, Sota 32a), require the reciter to understand the language (Mishna Berura 62:3). However, if he is reciting in *lashon hakodesh* (biblical/rabbinic Hebrew), then one does not need to understand it (*ibid.*). Although one might thus think that your concern lacks merit, the Magen Avraham (489:2) says: "If he does not understand *lashon hakodesh* and counted in *lashon hakodesh*, he did not fulfill his *mitzva*, as he did not know what he counted, and this is not counting; so it seems to me." The Mishna Berura (489:5) accepts this ruling.

Rav Yaakov Emden (Mor U'ketzia to Magen Avraham *ibid.*) disagrees, and his opinion is cited, with different levels of acceptance, by the Birkei Yosef (489:7), Sha'arei Teshuva (489:3), and Kaf Hachayim (489:20). He bases

himself on Tosafot (Sota 32a), who implies that in the list of recitations in that *mishna*, they can be done in languages other than *lashon hakodesh* only if one understands them, implying that comprehension is not needed in *lashon hakodesh*. But the Mishna Berura (Sha'ar Hatziyun 489:6) argues that this misses the point, as *sefirat ha'omer* is not on the list, and the Magen Avraham was positing that it is a unique *mitzva*, as I will explain in my words. *Sefirat ha'omer* is not fundamentally a *mitzva* of recitation, but of cognitive counting, just with an additional condition of vocalization. If one parrots the words of the *sefira*, he has not fulfilled the spirit or the letter of the law. This dovetails with the opinions that one who is unsure of the day of *omer* cannot count multiple times to cover his bases (see Living the Halachic Process II, D-18); guessing is not counting.

If our explanation of the Magen Avraham is correct, it is unlikely there should be concern in your case. It is safe to assume that the *chazan* knows what day of the *omer* it is and that he is expressing that with the words he is saying, just that he **might** not know how the words correspond to the content. In that case, he is cognitively counting and regarding the recitation requirement, it is valid in *lashon hakodesh* even without specific understanding of the words. The Maharil Diskin (Kuntras Acharon

55) indeed assumes that the Magen Avraham agrees in such a case. Admittedly, apparently not all *Acharonim* make this distinction within the Magen Avraham (see Kaf Hachayim 489:20), and it is unclear what level of coordination between words and content is required. The Maharil Diskin also says that the matter is more complicated during the period of counting weeks also, as, if there are two countings, one might need to know with which words he is accomplishing each counting.

On a practical basis, your concern is based on the assumption that people are being *yotzei* their *sefira* through the *chazan*, which is actually not advisable. There is a *machloket Acharonim* whether one can fulfill *sefirat ha'omer* by listening to someone else's count, and the *minhag* is not to rely on others (Mishna Berura 489:5). Even if one missed a day of counting and needs to rely on the "leader" due to the *beracha*, he should **count himself**, and is *yotzei* only with the other's *beracha* preceding his counting. Regarding the *beracha*, the rule that it is valid in *lashon hakodesh* without understanding applies. Even if one does rely on the *chazan* for the whole thing, halachic

logic dictates that if the listener understands the words, it should not matter that the reciter does not (beyond our scope).

So, while it is wonderful if a rabbi is able to help anyone whose lack of understanding endangers his fulfillment of *sefirat ha'omer*, it is not a specific issue if that person "leads the *tzibbur*." ■

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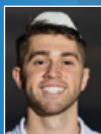
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