

SEFIRAH FAQS

These questions and answers are culled from the site www.asktherav.com under the auspices of Rabbi Braun, member of the Badatz of Crown Heights.

I. COUNTING SEFIRAH

Q1. *Oops! I forgot to count Sefirah last night, and it's only number six! If I count now, during bein hashmashos, (between sunset and nightfall) can I continue with a brachah?*

Yes, you may continue counting with a *brachah*.

Q2. *I have an app that rings to remind me to count Sefirah. Can I rely on the alarm to wash for a meal a half-hour before shkiah?*

We are usually restricted from starting a meal within a half-hour of *shkiah* before the starting time of a mitzvah so as not to be distracted and forget our obligation— unless a *shomer* (watchman, i.e., an appointee who will remind you of your obligation) is designated. An electronic reminder suffices in this case, however you must count Sefira as soon as the alarm rings

Q3. *With Standard Time in effect, my kids go to bed while it is still light out. How early can I count Sefiras Haomer with them? Does their age matter?*

The Alter Rebbe writes¹ that it is appropriate to wait until *tzeis hakochevim* (nightfall) to count Sefirah, however, he mentions that the *minhag* of the average person is to rely on the opinion that one may count Sefirah from *bein hashmashos* (after sunset, but before nightfall). Someone who counts before *bein hashmashos* should count again without a *brachah*.

If it is difficult for your kids to stay up until *tzeis hakochevim*, they may count after *bein hashmashos*.

Q4. *This is embarrassing, but.... I'm being called up to daven at the amud for Maariv, but I missed a day*

1) Siman 489:12

of counting earlier in Sefirah. Is there some heter whereby I can count tonight with a brachah?

There are *Poskim* who allow this. As a *shliach tzibbur* (literally, the messenger of the congregation) you are being *motzi* listeners with the *brachah*. Nonetheless, it would be better to suffer the embarrassment and not rely on this *heter*—although we would argue that there is no reason to be ashamed if you are following halacha.

Q5. This evening, I spoke to a group of children at a Lag B'Omer rally, I'm sure I mentioned the phrase "Today is Lag B'Omer" many times. May I still count with a brachah tonight?

Yes.

Q6. I know we don't say which day of Sefirah we will be counting so we don't invalidate the brachah. But is there also an issue with mentioning which is the sefirah of the day before counting, for example: Discussing שבתפארת תפארת after shkiah but before Maariv of Beis Iyar?

There is no halachic issue with this. However, there is a *Sicha* of the Previous Rebbe (*Sefer HaSichos* 5708 page 223) which can be interpreted to mean there was a custom by *Chassidim* not to do so (although this is far from clear).

II. SEFIRAH & MUSIC

Q1: May I listen to recordings of Chabad niggunim with musical accompaniment during Sefirah? How does our approach to music now compare to the Three Weeks?

Poskim do not permit listening to recorded music during Sefirah. This is because a recording is considered to be like an actual instrument. However, it is permitted under specific circumstances—such as when music is necessary for a person's livelihood. Another exception would be a lone driver who requires the music to stay alert on the road. (In this case, listening is not merely allowed, but an obligation in guarding our safety.)

While some authorities do permit music that does not induce feelings of *simchah*, this would not apply in the case of niggunim, as many would indeed produce such feelings.

If the niggunim are slow, sung by a baal menagen, and the intent is to provide background music, there is room for leniency.

We are generally more strict regarding listening to music during the Three Weeks than during Sefiras Haomer.

Q2: I listen to music a lot; it helps me relax. During Sefirah, it's quite difficult, especially when most acapellas are so autotuned, I can't listen to them. Is there specific music that I can maybe be more lenient about, so I don't have to sacrifice my sanity for more than a month?

We do not listen to music with instrumentals, even if it is not live during Sefirah.

However, music that is not intended to make a person happy or dance is not forbidden in specific situations, like when someone is depressed or suffering from heavy fatigue. Initially, try to avoid even this type of music in all situations. I suggest listening to tapes of Chassidim singing slow Chabad niggunim. The occasional music which accompanies it is secondary to the singing and in the background, so it isn't an issue.²

Q3: So acapella (vocal harmonies without accompaniment) is okay?

The minhag is to not listen to music (recorded or live) during Sefirah. Some are lenient for music that is just vocal (without instruments), however, many contemporary poskim say this is the same as instrumental music. Certainly, some of these recordings have very professional sound.³

2) *Minchas Yitzchak* (1:111) explains that music is forbidden during the Sefirah days, and this is the custom (although it is not mentioned in the *Shulchan Aruch*). See also *Igros Moshe Orach Chayim* 1:166 and *Leket Yosher*, in the *minhagim* of the *Baal Terumas Hadashen* and *Teshuvos U'Psokim Chachmei Ashkenaz*.

3) Although the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chayim* 493) and *Shulchan Aruch Admur Hazaken* only mention not to dance during Sefirah and does not mention anything about music, the Alter Rebbe does mention *simchos yeseiros* (other types of joyful events) and many *Poskim* clearly mention music.

Q4: What about children? Can they listen to music during Sefirah?

No, it is not allowed for children from the age of *Chinuch* (when they are mature enough to comprehend and associate the absence of music with the events of the time). Still, it's an educationally sound practice not to play music even for little kids before the formal stage of *Chinuch*.⁴

Q5: Does this mean I can't play niggunim with music during nap time to make it easier for them to fall asleep?

Assuming this is a reference to the scheduled nap of preschool children, this music is permissible for two reasons: 1) they are below the age of *Chinuch* 2) it's to put them to sleep.

It is still worthwhile for their educational development to refrain from playing the music if there are other non-musical options available so they may habituate to the practice as they grow.

Q6: May I practice piano during Sefira?

Practicing playing an instrument as a hobby during Sefirah is not allowed unless playing is your profession, and practice is needed to make a *parnassah* (livelihood), because then you are not playing for purposes of increasing *simchah*.

If a musical student is merely doing exercises, or certain movements or parts of songs, that is permitted.

Q7: May I watch my wedding video (which has background music) during Sefira?

The purpose of not listening to music is in order to conduct ourselves in a state of mourning due to the terrible tragedies that occurred to us during these days of Sefira.

This is so even if the music is recorded and not live. This is especially true in such a case where watching the video will bring extra joy. Therefore, the video should not be watched if the music will be played.

Q8: My non-Chabad cousin is getting married after

4) *Igros Moshe Orach Chayim* vol 4, 21:4

Pesach (they keep the restrictions of Sefirah from Rosh Chodesh). May I participate in the wedding meal and the dancing, which will have live music?

You are permitted to participate for the sake of the mitzvah of bringing joy to the Chosson and Kallah.

Q9: Can we listen to music during Sefira to help uplift the spirits of my family who have been homebound for over a month due to the Coronavirus?

The importance of music in terms of elevating the spirit cannot be underestimated. But Sefira should not be taken lightly either, so the prohibition against music should be observed properly regardless of the general circumstances. However, there is leniency in playing or listening to music for:

- someone suffering from anxiety
- young children
- an ill person who will be calmed, and it will promote their general well-being
- a quarantined individual (this doesn't include the general lockdown that certain states have imposed upon their residents).
- Anyone with suicidal tendencies or thoughts

There's even more room to be lenient in the above-mentioned cases prior to Rosh Chodesh Iyar.

If a situation does not fit into the above criteria, but you feel that music is an important factor in helping your family's well being, consult a Rav on an individual basis.

Additionally, while it's important to take into account the positive effect playing music has during this time, we must also be cognizant of the negative repercussions this may have in terms of the Chinuch of our children should they discover that some rules fall by the wayside due to the current outbreak. They need to understand that Halacha is as strong as always and any leniency is only based on very specific circumstances and as per the guidance of a Rav.

It must also be noted that the original prohibition against celebrations, haircuts and music etc. during the days of the

Omer was originally instituted due to a plague at the time. The *Poskim* mention many other similar tragedies that happened during these days. Indeed, many seforim explain that the days of Omer possess the aspect of *din* (severity) and the Rebbe adds that this could have been one of the triggering factors to why the plague occurred. When we're unfortunately experiencing similar occurrences in our times during the same time, we ought to be extra careful in this matter and not attempt to seek leniencies, other than those described above.

Nonetheless, the prohibition against music wasn't intended in order to cause melancholy or depression; rather to remind us of the tragedies we experienced so that we take heed and increase our mitzvos and *maasim tovim*. At a time like this it is extremely important to increase in happiness and keep as far away as possible from depression and sadness. Earlier *Poskim* mention the importance of pushing away any form of depression during a time of a plague and how a person's state of mind is an extremely important factor in battling this issue. Thus, if the lack of music isn't only inconvenient, annoying or difficult – which it is meant to be— but you are concerned that it causes your family members to lose their simcha in *avodas Hashem*, and might lead to worry, sadness or dejection *chas v'sholom*, even if not outright depression, they may listen to music during these times. We need to however assess ourselves properly whether we're just looking for an excuse to listen to music or there is a legitimate concern. If you are at all unsure, you may be lenient.

Q10: My family is going through a hard time and it's negatively affecting me emotionally. I find that music helps me a lot. Is there room for listening to music during Sefira?

The purpose of not listening to music is in order to conduct ourselves in a state of mourning due to the terrible tragedies that occurred to us during these days of Sefira. Just like we refrain from hearing music on Shabbos, regardless of the fact that it might pain us, we should do likewise during Sefira.

At the same time, refraining from music ought not to put us in "intense emotional pain." If someone feels this is happening to them, it is worthwhile to investigate the

cause. There could be a deep emotional issue which needs to be resolved.

Certainly, if someone is medically required—based on doctor’s orders or an assessment from a psychologist—to listen to music, they may do so during Sefira too.

Q11: Do the restrictions on music last for the entire Sefira?

We refrain from listening to music from the beginning of Sefira until the night of *erev Shavuos*. On Chol Hamoed, the common *minhag* is to be lenient. (See also below regarding Lag B’Omer, when mourning is suspended.)

There are *Poskim* who suggest that there is no mourning during the *Shloshes Yemei Hagbalah* (the three days prior to Shavuos when we prepare to receive the Torah). Nonetheless there is a discussion with regard to “optional dancing and instrumental music” that is not associated with a mitzvah. This means that since weddings are permissible, we may play and listen to music there, but not when we are not in that context.

Q12: When can I begin listening to music on Lag B’Omer?

The custom is to wait until *tzeis hakochovim* (nightfall) on the eve of Lag B’Omer.

III. HAIR-CUTTING

Q1. Am I allowed to trim my mustache? It’s getting in the way of the food that goes into my mouth? How about during Sefirah?

Many are lenient in such a case to trim the mustache with scissors in any place that it interferes with eating. Trimming for this purpose is permitted during Sefira also.

Q2. Speaking about scissors and Sefirah, may my wife cut a sheitel during this time?

A sheitel may be cut during Sefirah.

Q3: I got a haircut before Pesach, but it’s gotten very long over Sefirah. May I get it cut on Lag B’omer?

Many *Poskim* have choice words to say about men growing

a fringe, long hair in the front, or even long hair in the back.

A key problem mentioned by many *Poskim* is that of *chatzitzah* (separation), that long hair can interfere between the *tefilin shel rosh* and the head itself, due to the amount of hair. Even in the event where it would not be considered a *chatzitzah*, sometimes the extra hair actually does not allow the *tefillin* to be worn in the proper way.

In addition, it raises the following issues:

- 1) *Derech shachatz vega'avah*—it is considered arrogant and inappropriate,
- 2) *Chukas hagoyim*—dressing and acting in the manner of non-Jews, and
- 3) *Lo yilbash*—the prohibition for a man to dress in the way of a woman.

Therefore, a man who has let his hair grow long should hasten to cut it, so much so that halachic authorities say that he may cut it even during the days of Sefirah, the Three Weeks and the Nine Days, since having long hair is a more serious prohibition than that of cutting hair on those days.

Q4: Does the prohibition of haircutting during Sefirah apply to women as well?

The prohibition of cutting hair applies to women too. However, it is permitted to perform other hair-related tasks for self care: plucking eyebrows and eyelashes or doing electrolysis.

Q5: I am a girl in shidduchim and learned that certain restrictions during the Omer are waived. Is it permissible for a woman to trim her hair in order to feel presentable and confident on a shidduch meeting?

For shidduchim purposes, it is acceptable for a woman to trim her hair. It is even permitted to purchase, new clothing during *Sefiras Ha'omer* if needed.

IV. NEW CLOTHING - SHEHECHEYANU

Q1. Is it still a problem to buy clothing during Sefirah, since we don't say shehecheyanu anymore on these items? What about jewelry, coats, shoes or accessories?

There is a *minhag** with sources in early *Poskim* to not

buy new clothing during *Sefiras Haomer* (except on Lag B'omer). However, in a pressing situation (i.e., where there will be significant financial loss, or someone will be uncomfortable until new clothing is bought) and an individual can't wait until Shavuot, clothing may be purchased during Sefirah. However, it is best if it is first worn on Shabbos or Lag B'omer.

All this applies to clothing that are considered 'choshuv.' However, regarding clothing which are less significant, there is more room to be lenient. Regular weekday garments are not considered *choshuv*. Jewelry and shoes are not considered clothing in this context.

Q2. If my daughter does not have enough properly Tznius clothing and is therefore unable to dress perfectly modest, is she allowed to buy proper clothing during Sefirah? If her shoes are uncomfortable, can we purchase ones in a larger size?

Most certainly. There is **no** dispensation ever for wearing non-Tznius clothing. On the other hand, not wearing new clothing during Sefirah is merely a custom and is waived when done for the purpose of a mitzvah, especially such an important mitzvah that involves also many potential *issurim*.

She may purchase and wear new shoes if her old ones are not a good fit.

Q3: We are abroad since Pesach and it is much cheaper to buy clothing here than in our own country. Can I buy new clothing on sale, if I'm going to save it for Shabbos or Shavuot? What's if it's similarly priced, but much more convenient than at home?

You may buy clothing in your current location to be worn after the Omer (or on any Shabbos) in order to save money, but it is not recommended if it is just for convenience. .

Q4: I purchased some new Spring weekday clothes before Pesach. Can I try them on now to be able to wear them during Sefirah?

Trying on new clothing is insufficient to allow them to be worn during Sefirah. You may only wear them if you do not have other appropriate garments.

Q5. Can one make a Shehechyanu on the birth of a baby girl during Sefiras Haomer?

Yes.