

CROSSING

the Line

Shavuos and the International Dateline

The content of this article was reviewed and endorsed by Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Raskin, Dayan Kehilas Lubavitch, London.

On Monday night at 10:40 p.m., a flight takes off from Los Angeles International Airport bound for Sydney, Australia. The passengers settle in for the overnight flight and as they prepare for landing approximately 14 hours later, the pilot announces over the intercom: “Local time in Sydney is Wednesday 8:20 a.m.”

Everyone on the plane just missed a Tuesday of their lives.

On Monday morning at 10:20 a.m., a flight takes off from Sydney Airport bound for Los Angeles. 13 hours later, as the flight prepares for landing, the pilot announces over the intercom:

“Local time in Los Angeles is Monday 6:10 a.m.”

Everyone on the plane will experience the longest Monday of their lives. Literally.

For many passengers this anomaly is just another memento of the trans-Pacific travel experience and may cause extra jetlag, but for Yidden this can have serious halachic ramifications. So much of Yiddishkeit revolves around time, and defining time in *halacha* is a big deal.

Since our calendar is defined by days and seasons governed by the sun’s and moon’s rotations, there is no scientific way of determining where

the rotations begin. For thousands of years the issue was purely theoretical, until improved transportation methods brought people to further vistas as civilizations blossomed in newly discovered continents and trade lines formed across the globe.

At the International Meridian Conference in 1884 in Washington, D.C. with the participation of 26 countries, Greenwich, England, was chosen as the central point for time and date calculations (the prime meridian), and the International Date Line was set at exactly 180° longitude from there. By using Greenwich as the prime meridian, the International

לזכות
החייל בצבאות ה'
מנחם מענדל בן מנוחה מינדל שיחי'
נדפס ע"י
משפחתו שיחי'

Date Line falls conveniently in the Pacific Ocean. In those few areas where it should traverse a landmass, the line was slightly bent to avoid dividing countries.

The dateline is not governed by international law, and it is up to individual countries to choose which side of the line they wish to be on. To illustrate how imaginary this line is, the Samoan Islands shifted back to the west side of the dateline by removing Friday, December 30 2011 from its calendar, to better facilitate trade with nearby New Zealand, approximately 1,600 miles away.

The Kav Hataarich

At a time when most civilizations believed the earth was flat, Torah clearly taught that the earth is a sphere.¹ But before our modern age this had no practical ramifications, other than the knowledge that as the sun was rising, people living further to the east were then experiencing midday, and at an even further point of the globe to the west it was then the middle of the night.

At least two Rishonim, the Baal Hamaor² and R. Yehuda Halevi³ give definitive positions of this imaginary dateline, called the *kav hataarich* in Torah literature. But the issue had no practical halachic ramifications, and was therefore not dealt with seriously by *poskim*⁴ until over 700 years later when Yidden fleeing the Nazis during World War II found themselves in the Far East. While there most definitely is a dateline,⁵ they were unsure where the dateline is according to *halacha* and on which side of it they stood. The question was sent to Eretz Yisroel by telegram, and two major conflicting opinions emerged — opinions that severely impacted their daily lives by determining which day to keep as Shabbos and on which day to mark the fast of Yom Kippur.

Although it is a complicated issue, by now all established Jewish communities have come to a halachic consensus as to how they observe Shabbos and Yom Tov, the details of which are beyond the scope of this article. We will focus on a novel and fascinating halachic issue impacted by crossing the dateline (wherever it is) which was clarified by the Rebbe himself.

Initial Inquiry

In the spring of 5709* Reb Betzalel Wilshansky immigrated from France to Australia as per the directives of the Frierdiker Rebbe in order to strengthen the work of Lubavitch in the country. In his first letter to the Rebbe reporting on his safe arrival and the beginning of his activities, he mentioned that on the way he skipped a day, and asked for an explanation for this and specifically how he should have dealt with *sefiras haomer* in such a situation.

In a letter dated 16 Sivan 5709*⁶ the Rebbe describes in detail the realities of the international dateline, how *halacha* deals with this “quandary,” and concludes that Australia is to the west of the dateline according to most *poskim*, and Shabbos should be observed in accordance with the reckoning of the days followed by the non-Jews living there, as Yidden have been doing since they arrived there.

This only applies to *dinim* that depend on the days of the week or days of the month. The issue with *sefiras haomer* is the fact that it is the counting of the days that a person

experiences, and this leads to a very unique question.

Regarding *sefiras haomer* the Torah states (Emor 23:15):

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבֵּיאָכֶם
אֶת-עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעַת שָׁבוּעוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה:

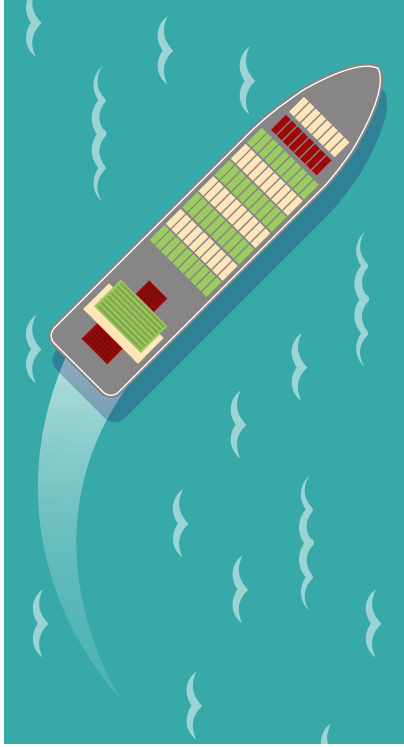
And you shall count for yourselves, from the morrow of the rest day, from the day you bring the omer as a wave offering, seven weeks; they shall be complete.

Unique to *sefiras haomer* is the necessity for the counting of seven weeks to be “*temimos*” —complete.

Imagine someone travels to Australia from the United States on Tuesday the ninth day of the *omer* and crosses the dateline at 3:30 p.m. (wherever the dateline actually is), thereby jumping ahead one day and is now following the local calendar where it is Wednesday. That night at Maariv, local Yidden will be counting 11 days to the *omer* but the traveler has not yet counted 10 days to the *omer*. Can he in good conscience make a *bracha* and declare, “Today is 11 days to the *omer*?”

Even more complex is the fact that the Yom Tov of Shavuot has no defined date on the calendar and depends solely on the completion of 49 days—seven complete weeks—of *sefiras haomer* from 16 Nissan. The traveler’s *omer* counting is one day behind the local Yidden’s and when the locals will conclude their counting of 49 days—reaching the point of “*temimos*”—and start observing the Yom Tov Shavuot, he will have not yet completed 49 days from 16 Nissan, and should begin observing Shavuot a day later, when he will have finally reached the point of “*temimos*!”

A similar issue would arise for someone traveling from Australia to the United States during *sefira*, but in reverse. He crosses the dateline on Tuesday, the ninth day of the Omer at 3:30 p.m. and now follows the local time to set his calendar back to



Monday. When the local Yidden count 9 days to the *omer* that evening, could he in good conscience make a *bracha* and declare, “Today is 9 days to the *omer*,” when he already said that last night?

Since Shavuos happens automatically after counting and experiencing 49 days—seven complete weeks—from 16 Nissan, the traveler from Australia will reach the point of “*temimos*” a day earlier than the local Yidden, and will need to observe Shavuos a day before everyone else has reached the point of “*temimos*!”

In his letter, the Rebbe writes that since he has not seen any *poskim* who deal with this specific question of *sefiras haomer* and Shavuos when crossing the dateline, he will present various perspectives on the matter and different options how to behave “*l’pilpula b’alma*”—for discussion’s sake alone—and in no way to be viewed as a *psak din*.

One of the main points the discussion boils down to is this: Is *sefiras haomer* considered a personal obligation upon every individual Yid or is it a general experience for *klal Yisroel*?

The Rebbe evaluates the different approaches and proposes different results based on them, but clarifies that the question is relevant exclusively to *sefiras haomer* and Shavuos, not to Shabbos and Yom Tov.

There is no necessity to experience six weekdays in order to have Shabbos, and conversely Shabbos does not automatically happen to a person who experienced six weekdays. Therefore, one who traveled from the United States to Australia on Monday, thereby skipping Tuesday, observes Shabbos with the rest of the Australian Jews, even though he experienced only five weekdays. And one who traveled from Australia to the United States on a Monday and now fell back to Sunday will observe Shabbos on the same day as all American Jews even though he is now experiencing seven weekdays in a row.

Regarding Yom Tov, one who travels from the United States to Australia on the first day of Chol Hamoed and skips the second day of Chol Hamoed, because when he landed in Australia it was already the third day of Chol Hamoed, will observe Shevi’i Shel Pesach together with all Australian Jews. This is because the Torah clearly designates the final day of Yom Tov to the 21st of Nissan, and the calendar date is defined by the local reality, and mainly because the idea of “*temimos*” is never used to describe the days of Pesach.

Clearly, with respect to the question of *sefiras haomer* and Shavuos the Rebbe did not arrive at a conclusion at that time.

Clear Conclusion

During the farbrengen of Shavuos 5717*,⁷ the Rebbe explained the issue at length and came to a definitive conclusion.

Here are several important details about *sefiras haomer* and Shavuos that must be emphasized.

↪ The Gemara states that there is no such thing as a communal counting of *sefiras haomer*. Every individual has the obligation to count 49 days from 16 Nissan, and this “*temimos*” triggers the Yom Tov of Shavuos on the next day.

↪ Even if one did not actually count *sefiras haomer*, Shavuos will begin for them 50 days after 16 Nissan.

Whereas many *poskim* rule that the mitzvah of *sefiras haomer* nowadays is only *mid’rabanan*, there is no question that the Yom Tov of Shavuos is *min HaTorah*! Clearly, the “*temimos*” that triggers the Yom Tov of Shavuos is determined by the fact that the individual lived through 49 days—seven complete weeks—from 16 Nissan, irrespective of the actual counting.

Consequently, a person who converts to Yiddishkeit during *sefira* will observe Shavuos 50 days after 16 Nissan, even though he or she did not have the mitzvah of counting a complete 49 days of *sefiras haomer*.

↪ The fact that the Torah does not provide a calendar date for the Yom Tov of Shavuos means that during the era when the Sanhedrin was *mekadesh hachodesh al pi hare’iya*—and Rosh Chodesh could either be on the 30th day or the 31st day—it was possible for Shavuos to be observed either on Hei, Vov or Zayin Sivan.

If both Nissan and Iyar have 30 days, Shavuos is observed on Hei Sivan. If both Nissan and Iyar have 29 days, Shavuos is observed on Zayin Sivan. When one of the months has 29 days and the other has 30 days, Shavuos is observed on Vov Sivan. Today, with our set calendar, Nissan is always 30 days and Iyar is always 29 days, so Shavuos is observed on Vov Sivan, coinciding with the anniversary of *Matan Torah* which happened on Vov Sivan 2448.

The Alter Rebbe writes in Shulchan Aruch⁸ that the only reason we say “*Zman Matan Toraseinu*” in the *tefilos* of Shavuot is that nowadays Shavuot always occurs on Vov Sivan.⁹

In the *sicha*, however, the Rebbe explains that the possibility of Shavuot occurring on Hei Sivan is very real today. If one crosses the dateline from west to east (for example: from Australia to the United States) in middle of *sefira*, he would reach seven complete weeks from when he experienced 16 Nissan in Australia on Daled Sivan in America. Hence, he would therefore need to observe the Yom Tov of Shavuot on Hei Sivan—without mentioning “*Zman Matan Toraseinu*” in davening.

“Gut Shabbos, Gut Yom Tov”

Several¹⁰ years later, in 5721*, Shavuot occurred on Sunday and Monday. The day before Shavuot was Shabbos and Reb Yoel Kahn was hosting a guest from Eretz Yisroel at his home for the three-day Yom Tov. On Friday night as they were having *seudas* Shabbos, the guest mentioned to Reb Yoel that he had come to the United States after visiting Japan.

Aware of the Rebbe’s straightforward and clear *psak* regarding one who crossed the dateline during *sefira*, Reb Yoel advised his guest to daven the Yom Tov Maariv and to make *kiddush* for Yom Tov, and they would clarify the matter with rabbonim the next morning.

Arriving in 770 the next morning, the exotic question caused quite a stir amongst the rabbonim there, but there was no consensus as to how this fellow should deal with Yom Tov.

It was the Rebbe’s common practice on Shabbos and Yom Tov to greet individuals standing along the pathway as he walked out of the main shul after davening. Reb Yoel suggested to his guest that he stand

along the pathway and as the Rebbe greets him he should tell the Rebbe simply, “I was in Japan.”

“I stood next to my guest after davening because I wanted to see how the Rebbe would react to this information,” Reb Yoel relates. “The moment my guest said to the Rebbe he was in Japan, the Rebbe stopped for a split second and said, “Gut Shabbos, Gut Yom Tov,” and as he continued walking, the Rebbe paused and then turned around to my guest saying ‘*A freilichen Kabbalas HaTorah*.’

“With these words the Rebbe gave him a clear *psak* that since he had crossed the dateline from west to east, he was observing Shavuot a day earlier than the rest of us. This all made perfect sense in light of the Rebbe’s *sicha* from Shavuot 5717*. But I had one question: Why did the Rebbe wish him ‘*A freilichen Kabbalas HaTorah*’ if Hei Sivan is not the anniversary of *Matan Torah*?

“That night, which was the first night of Shavuot in 770, Reb Leibel Groner approached me after Maariv and told me that the Rebbe wished to see me in his room. The Rebbe asked me if this man was a guest at my home and when I replied in the affirmative, the Rebbe said it is important to explain to him exactly how he should behave. Since he was from Eretz Yisroel and would only observe one day of Yom Tov, he should make *havdalah* on the night we were all observing the first night of Shavuot, and to be sure to wear tefillin the next day.

“Since the Rebbe was giving clear halachic direction with regard to this novel situation, I seized the opportunity to somehow express my wonderment at the Rebbe’s wish to him about *Kabbalas HaTorah*. I simply asked. “Was he supposed to say “*Zman Matan Toraseinu*” when it was Yom Tov for him?”

“The Rebbe smiled and said, ‘You are asking based on the Alter Rebbe’s Shulchan Aruch? Clearly he was not supposed to say that on Hei Sivan.’ The Rebbe did not elaborate further.

“During the *farbrengen* on the second day of Yom Tov, the Rebbe explained at length that there are two elements to *Matan Torah*. One is the result of *avodas ha’adam* through *birur hamidos* of *sefiras haomer*, which comes to the person as soon as he completes *sefiras haomer*. This can be termed as *Kabbalas HaTorah*, since it is triggered by the efforts of the person receiving the Torah.

“The second is a revelation from Hashem that completely transcends the efforts of man, which can only happen on Vov Sivan and is not connected to *sefiras haomer*. This can be termed as *Matan Torah* since it is truly a gift from Hashem.

“I then understood why the Rebbe wished my guest ‘*A freilichen Kabbalas HaTorah*’ even though it was Hei Sivan, since this man had already achieved the completion of *sefiras haomer* and was therefore experiencing *Kabbalas HaTorah*, even though he was not yet experiencing *Matan Torah*.”



Brilliant Simplicity

In a letter to Harav Shlomo Yosef Zevin in Sivan 5718*,¹¹ the Rebbe writes that someone had crossed the dateline that year during *sefira* and that he had instructed him to continue his own count and observe Shavuos a day earlier. The Rebbe requests Rabbi Zevin's opinion on the matter.

Apparently Rabbi Zevin suggested that Yidden in the same location celebrating Shavuos on different days would give off the impression that "there are two Torahs." That summer the Rebbe responded¹² that on the contrary: If the traveler from Australia would observe Shavuos on the same day as his American hosts, it would turn out that he is observing Shavuos 51 days after *sefiras haomer* began while his hosts are observing Shavuos after 50 days! Such a thing would lead to numerous more questions.

Rabbi Zevin also described the Rebbe's approach as a "*chiddush gadol*" to which the Rebbe replied that the real *chiddush* is how simple and obvious his approach is!

In a letter from 5744*¹³ the Rebbe elaborates even further: Clearly the Torah does not command a Yid that if he crossed the dateline from west to east (United States to Australia) he should only count 48 days of *sefiras haomer* and then observe Shavuos, while if he crossed the dateline from east to west (Australia to United States) he should count 50 days of *sefiras haomer* and only then observe Shavuos, with the rest of the *klal Yisroel* counting 49 days of *sefiras haomer* and observing Shavuos the next day.

It is also clear that the Torah does not command a Yid that crosses the dateline from east to west (United States to Australia) to **skip** a day of *sefiras haomer* and that a Yid who crosses the dateline from west to east

Rabbi Shneur Zalman Wilshansky relates:

"One of the unique things about the seforim of Likkutei Sichos was the fact that in addition to the Likkutim that had been published on a weekly basis, letters of the Rebbe associated with the parshiyos and the Yomim Tovim were published as *hosafos*."

There was no Igros Kodesh from the Rebbe in print at the time and the Rebbe agreed that these letters be published in Likkutei Sichos and even encouraged Chassidim to send Igros they had received to the Vaad Lehafotzas Sichos for publication.

"During the year of 5733*, Likkutei Sichos volume 7 was being prepared for publication. I had heard from my grandfather Reb Betzalel Wilshansky about the letter he had received from the Rebbe in Sivan 5709* in answer to his question about the *kav hataarich, sefiras haomer* and Shavuos.

"My brother Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Wilshansky was on shlichus in Australia that year and was set to return for Pesach. I wrote him a letter asking him to make a copy of the letter and bring it back with him so that it could be published in the new volume of Likkutei Sichos."

Rabbi Leibel Schapiro was intimately involved in the preparation of Likkutei Sichos volume 7 for print. He relates the following:

"When we received the letter the Rebbe sent in 5709* to Harav Wilshansky in Australia, we realized that the conclusions were different from what the Rebbe had publicly spoken in later years and had published in the *sicha* of Emor in Likkutei Sichos volume 3 based on the *sichos* of Shavuos 5717* and 5721*. On the other hand, the content of the letter was so rich and illuminating that we very much wanted to include it in the *hosafos* of volume 7.

"Unsure how to proceed we submitted the letter to the Rebbe and asked if we should include it in the new Likkutei Sichos. Shortly afterwards the Rebbe responded that we should print it, but with the following statement:

מכתב הנ"ל היא סברא ראשונה ושקרו"ט, ולאחרי זמן דן עוה"פ בנדו"ד ובא למסקנא. ולשלימות הדבר הננו מעתיקים רשימה זו אף שכבר נדפסה (בלקו"ש ח"ג ע' 995 ואילך). וז"ל:

This letter was an initial thought and shakla v'tarya.

After some time [the Rebbe] revisited the issue and came to a conclusion. For the sake of clarity we are reprinting the sicha here.

"Indeed the Rebbe's letter was published in the *hosafos* of Likkutei Sichos volume 7 on pages 285-288 followed by the abovementioned *sicha* from vol. 3 with the introductory statement the Rebbe himself penned."

(Australia to United States) should **add** another day to *sefiras haomer*!

Don't Do It

Although the Rebbe's position on this matter is crystal clear, the Rebbe was also quite clear that since this situation is very strange one should try as best as possible to avoid it.

In a letter dated 20 Shevat 5721*¹⁴ to Harav Osher Abramson of Sydney, Australia, the Rebbe writes that although he has no doubt as to the fact that one who crosses the dateline must observe Shavuot on his own schedule, he clearly does not approve of making such travel arrangements in the first place.

It should be noted however, that if one, for example, crosses the dateline from east to west (United States to Australia) during *sefiras haomer* and then crosses back from west to east (Australia to United States) before Shavuot—or vice versa—there is no problem at all. They should continue counting on their regular schedule and observe Shavuot at the same time as everyone else. ❶

1. Yerushalmi Avoda Zara 3:1.

2. Rosh Hashanah 20b.

3. Kuzari, 2:18–20.

4. See Shabbos Parshas Bechukosai 5741.

5. Likkutei Sichos vol. 3, p. 998.

6. Likkutei Sichos vol. 7, p. 285. Igros Kodesh vol. 3, p. 117–122.

7. Likkutei Sichos vol. 3 pages 995–1001.

8. Orach Chayim siman 494.

9. When Shavuot was observed on either Hei or Zayin Sivan “Zman Matan Toraseinu” was not said in davening. See Likkutei Sichos vol. 3, p. 997 fn. 15 and Likkutei Sichos vol. 8 p. 21 fn. 3. It should be noted that nowadays we recite “Zaman Matan Toraseinu” during davening on the second day of Shavuot (Zayin Sivan) because of *sfeika deyoma*.

10. JEM Living Torah #613. www.chabad.org/3346483

11. Igros Kodesh vol. 17, p. 265.

12. Ibid. page 358.

13. Likkutei Sichos vol. 27, p. 335.

14. Igros Kodesh vol. 20, p. 148.

הלכה למעשה

1. One should not travel one-way across the dateline during *sefira*.
2. If one needs to travel to a country that is typically reached by crossing the dateline during *sefira*, the trip must be done from the opposite direction. For example, if one travels from Australia to the United States during *sefira*, they should do so by traveling westward through Asia, the Middle East, or Europe.
3. If one did cross the dateline during *sefira*, every effort should be made to return to the other side before Shavuot.
4. One who does cross the dateline during *sefira* continues to count *sefiras haomer* with a *bracha* on the same schedule as their point of departure.
5. If one crosses the dateline from west to east (Australia to United States) during *sefira* and cannot return before Shavuot, he must observe Yom Tov on Hei and Vov Sivan. *Havdalah* is recited on the eve of Zayin Sivan and tefillin are worn during the day of Zayin Sivan. One should abstain from doing *melacha* in public on Zayin Sivan.
6. If one crosses the dateline from east to west (United States to Australia) during *sefira* and cannot return before Shavuot, he must observe Yom Tov on Zayin and Ches Sivan. Tefillin are worn during the day of Vov Sivan and one should abstain from doing *melacha* in public as well. Tefillin are not worn on Ches Sivan and all Yom Tov observances are kept then.
7. One does not recite “Z'man Matan Toraseinu” during davening on Hei Sivan or on Ches Sivan.
8. A Chabad Rav Moreh Horaah must be consulted.