

We are now in the middle of the Sefirat Ha-Omer period. Originally this was a happy period of anticipation of the coming festival of Shavuot and our people receiving the Torah, however after the Bar Kochba revolt against the Roman's where Rabbi Akiva was heavily involved, this period became a period of mourning.

The Talmud justifies this by referring to the death of Rabbi Akiva's students during this period by plague, although some say that they were killed fighting the Romans.

The mourning customs during the Sefirah, were derived by the sages as a lower level of those applying to one who has lost a parent and also from the restrictions before Tisha B'Av – during the three weeks and the nine days.

Originally, only weddings were prohibited, but during the 13th Century the restrictions were increased to no shaving or cutting of hair, and not wearing new clothes. This was probably due to the heavy losses suffered by Jews in Europe from attacks by the Crusaders during this period.

The period of restrictions was originally during the whole 49 days but from the 12th century, it became the custom to stop on the 33rd day. In the 14th century this was extended, saying that the deaths of the students stopped altogether then, and so we started to observe only 33 days in total.

There has been a gradual increase in authorities finding reasons to reduce or remove these restrictions. Many authorities, basing themselves on the Tisha B'Av laws, allow shaving before Shabbat. When Rosh Hodesh Iyyar falls on Shabbat, as it does this year, one is allowed haircuts as well.

Trimming the beard and moustache was allowed when they became untidy. Shaving, for those without beards, became allowed from the time the person felt uncomfortable or his friends started to comment on his appearance. This was derived from the laws of mourning.

In addition to the gradual relaxation by our sages of mourning customs during this period, I would like to suggest that Hashem also is showing his agreement to this trend. Can we believe that it is by *coincidence only* that establishment of the state of Israel, 58 years ago, took place during the Sefirah, on the 5th of Iyyar, giving us Yom Ha-Azmut - a semi-festival day; or that the freeing of the old city of Jerusalem, 39 years ago, was on the 28th of Iyyar, also during the Sefirah, and so we do not say the Penitential (Tachanun) prayers on this day.

May it be the will of Hashem that we will all be privileged to see the restoration of the Sefirah period as what it originally was, a joyful period of anticipation and looking forward to Shavuot – Matan Torah; and that we all enjoy peace and prosperity in this, our holy land of Israel.