

Cantor Josh Breitzer
HUC NY Ordination Address
Sunday, May 3, 2026 | 16 Iyyar 5786
31st Day of the Omer | “Tiferet Sheb’Hod”

I.  S’firat HaOmer Niggun (Goldman/Friedman/Feit) → Chagy A

You are here; you have accepted the invitation; you’ve made it a priority to be present, and you’ve been counting the days on multiple levels: as seminary students; as administrators, governors, faculty, staff, alumni, mentors, family and friends. Mazel tov to each of you on having gotten to today!

I, too, have been counting the days, as the first individual with the sole title Cantor, who has ever used their own words to address an HUC ordination class.¹ It is thus with profound gratitude for the invitation and with a spirit of “compassionate humility” that I offer this sheaf of words both spoken and sung, inspired by a classic cantorial setting² of a prayer which Jews traditionally recite every day during this liminal season between Passover and Shavuot, between the season of our liberation and the season of receiving our Torah, this period of *S’firat HaOmer*, of counting the Omer. I invite you to refer to the [textual resource sheet](#) as much as you’d like throughout my address – if you have a sheet, would you please wave it up high? Very nice, just like the Kohanim!

¹ 2012: Rabbi Cantor Angela Buchdahl. 2015: Rabbi Lester Bronstein and Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller. 2024: Cantor Jill Abramson, on behalf of Rabbi Dr. Norman Cohen.

² Berele Chagy, “[Ribono Shel Olam \[Upon Counting the Omer\]](#),” *Cantorial Anthology, Volume 3: Sholosh R’golim*, ed. Gershon Ephros (New York: Transcontinental Music Publications, 1948, rev. 1975).

As I prepared these remarks, I found that this “*Ribono Shel Olam Upon Counting the Omer*” touches on a number of themes which resonated for me, and I hope they will for you, too. It provides an answer to the question of why Jews count the Omer every day between Passover and Shavuot: we do so “in order to scrub off our husks and our scuffs,” complex spiritual metaphors to which I’ll soon return. But simply put, we count the Omer because it’s written in the Torah:


II. 🎵 Chagy B

When we first coalesced as a community, we were wandering farmers, still learning how to live in the wilderness, and we needed to know we had enough new barley to survive until the wheat harvest. We would bind the grain together as a “sheaf” – that’s what Omer usually means, by the way, and also by the weight, a “sheaf” of exactly mandated proportions – in all its raw, green, unthreshed, freshly reaped splendor, kind of like seminarians about to be ordained. And as I just quoted from Leviticus 23, we would bring this Omer offering to the priests, to be waved every day for seven complete weeks.

But the Torah’s first mention of Omer is not in Leviticus 23. The Torah’s first mention of Omer is back in Exodus 16:16, just a few verses after redemption. Our ancestors had scarcely begun their journey to Sinai and were scraping together food after finishing all the leftover matzah and Egyptian cold cuts. To quell their grumbling bellies, God not only provided quail, but famously caused *manna* to rain down from on high, instructing them thusly:

זֶה הַדְּבָרִי אֲשֶׁר צִוְּיָהּ יְהוָה לְקַטְוֵי מִמֶּנּוּ אִישׁ לְפִי אֶכְלוּ
 עֹמֶר לַגְּלָגֶלֶת מִסֵּפֶר נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם אִישׁ לְאִשֶׁר בְּאֹהֶלוֹ תִקְחוּ:

This is what GOD has commanded: Each household shall gather as much [of the *manna*] as it requires to eat—an *omer* to a person for as many of you as there are; each household shall fetch according to those in its tent. (*JPS 2023*)

In other words, the Omer started out as a divinely “recommended daily allowance” of *manna*, one ration each. And if we squirreled away more than was necessary, it would spoil – so much for the notion of a “food pyramid.” No, each family was to collect and to apportion by  *mispar nafshoteichem*, not merely the number of people at home, but more literally, a “counting of souls.” And we can understand the Hebrew word *nefesh* to mean the fully embodied soul, which requires sustenance to stay alive, and which is easily susceptible to earthy influences like hunger, greed, and mob rule.

So from the very outset, the Torah connects these notions of soul, Omer, counting, and consuming. And gleaning that connection led the liturgists who wrote this prayer to a deeper explanation for why we count the Omer.

III. Chagy C

Why do we scrub off our husks and our scuffs? “So that the souls of Your people Israel will be cleansed of their **contamination**.” *Zuhamatam*, a word derived from a single occurrence in the Tanach, in the Book of Job.

You remember Job, the one who had everything going for him, only to lose it all as a test of his faith in God. In the midst of Job's suffering, three of his friends attempt to offer their counsel, but his horrible ordeals continue unabated.

And then enters Elihu ben Barach-eil, a young man who has apparently been watching all this transpire, listening to the older folks speak, and patiently waiting his turn to weigh in. And weigh in he does, for six whole chapters, about God being the ultimate source of wisdom and mercy, preaching with fiery passion and making up new words to suit his meaning. In Job 33:20, Elihu describes God as having the power to remove our appetites:

וְזַהַמְתוּ חַיְתוֹ לֶחֶם וְנִפְשׁוֹ מֵאֲכֹל תַּאֲוָה:

Even bread tastes **contaminated**; the soul detests every delicacy. (*CJB*)

With *v'zihamatu*, the greenhorn Elihu gave voice to a concept which until that very moment had no language to describe it. We might call this the original instance of “Gen-Z slang,” or perhaps “Gen-zayin slang.”³

V'zihamatu, whose three-lettered root *zayin-hei-mem* gives us the modern Hebrew word meaning “contaminate,” had never before been uttered. And though its Biblical occurrence was “one and done,” the ancient rabbis remembered and repurposed it throughout the entire Jewish textual canon⁴. Elihu's linguistic innovation inspired nearly a thousand instances of legal, ritual and mystical inquiry, and it all came about because one brazen kid had the chutzpah to step up, get creative, and speak truth to power.

³ Another pun, involving “a bad Zoom connection,” was seriously considered – and then discarded.

⁴ <https://www.sefaria.org/search?q=%D7%96%D7%94%D7%9E&tab=text&tvar=1&tsort=chronological>

And the truth, as we know well in 2026, can be a hard pill to swallow — let alone swallowing multiple truths.

“So that the souls of Your people Israel will be cleansed of their **contamination.**” Which elements currently “contaminate” the souls of our people Israel? Zionism? Anti-Zionism? Antisemitism? Xenophobia? Assimilation? Ashke-normativity? Cancel culture? Wokeness? Particularism? Universalism? Tribalism? Liberalism? Conservatism? Commercialism? Social media? Too much schmaltz? Not enough schmaltz? The husks of old paradigms? The scuffs of new scandals? A.I. slop? Clergy burnout?

I could keep counting. But as to that last one, I would note that just the other day, our colleagues from the Amen Center and the Institute for Jewish Spirituality wrote that in their recent survey of 450 rabbis and 276 cantors,

Nearly 1 in 4 respondents rated their well-being in the lowest range. Nearly 1 in 5 rabbis said they had no consistent sustaining practices at all. Many reported strong relationships with lay leaders but far weaker systems for leadership development, shared responsibility and durable support. Roughly 70% of cantors reported spending less than 20% of their time on music-specific work, a striking sign of how outdated many assumptions about clergy roles have become.⁵

⁵ Rabbi Benjamin Ross and Rabbi Josh Feigelson, “The fire outside is real. So is the burnout within.” <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/the-fire-outside-is-real-so-is-the-burnout-within/>. Posted April 26, 2026.

Dear ordinands of the class of 5786: you are becoming clergy at a time when the souls of our people Israel, and perhaps even the soul of our sacred profession itself, seem to be contaminated to the core. As some of you shared with me earlier this year,⁶ our people are incredibly sensitive, and incredibly opinionated. They can be loath to grant forgiveness when we say something which offends them. Everything is on the record, whether we like it or not. And nevertheless, our people still turn to their clergy for support – but how do we offer support while walking on rotten eggshells? With such a bad taste in our mouths, how can we possibly be counted on to do our sacred work?

Well, perhaps that which may **contaminate** also can animate.

IV. 🎵 Chagy D

A few more etymological gems: I learned that the English word “contaminate” comes from the Latin meaning “with touching.” And Kabbalism teaches each day of each week of the Omer invites us to get in touch with a different spiritual attribute, or *s’firah*, which could then inform how we choose to seize that particular day. A “*s’firah* of influence,” if you will. And just to reaffirm how much our tradition savors Hebrew wordplay, *s’firah* meaning “spiritual attribute” is spelled exactly the same as *s’firah* meaning “counting.” Are you still with me?

According to the Kabbalistic calendar, which is laid out in a seven by seven matrix,

⁶ Conversation with student ordination committee, January 13, 2026.

this very day, the 31st day of the Omer which is 4 weeks and 3 days of the Omer, is ripe for recognizing the spiritual attribute of *Tiferet shebeHod*, which we might translate as “Compassion within Humility.” “Compassion within Humility” is the touching yet radical idea that even with widening schisms among us as a people, as a country, as a species, we can still reach each other on a human level – because of our husks and our scuffs. We are fragile and imperfect beings, so small and so trivial when compared to the vastness of the universe. Some of the most moving Torah I’ve ever heard came from NASA astronaut Victor Glover, streaming live from *Artemis II* while en route to the moon one month ago. He said, “Maybe the distance we are from you makes you think what we’re doing is special, but [you’re the same distance from us].”⁷

Living through Covid taught us a lot about distance. But advances in videoconferencing and inventive outdoor gatherings brought us closer than ever before. So too have our evolving approaches to facilitating inclusive Jewish experiences informed by Jewish values, especially since October 7. Over the last 4 months of my ACC presidential listening tour, I’ve visited 30 different communities all across the continent, and I can tell you with certainty: no matter how far apart we feel we may have drifted, today’s rabbis and cantors care for their people with fierceness, and with considerable sway. What they do and what they say rubs off on whom they serve — especially their own loved ones, who make their lives flavorful.

⁷<https://www.space.com/space-exploration/artemis/artemis-2-astronaut-victor-glover-delivers-inspiring-easter-message-on-the-way-to-the-moon-video>. Paraphrase of a speech delivered on April 4, 2026; accessed April 28, 2026.

With all this in mind, as much as we worry about our people’s souls being contaminated, I say they can also be animated. They can be enlivened and even made purer, through each of you, dear ordinands, and the examples you set. Find a personal spiritual practice and stick to it. Inculcate your communities with curiosity, with empathy, with humor, with music! Bring holiness to every unsuspecting household, including yours, and question every assumption. Because as we say at CBE, “The only thing you can assume, the only thing you should assume, is that every single person you meet belongs here exactly as much as you do.”⁸

And at the risk of going full cringe and causing additional blush or blemish: the learning really never ends. Each lesson could lead to another revelation – and I know you know this from your time here at HUC. One of you recently reflected as much, “There’s this shift that occurs. Suddenly, it’s not just how much I learn – but how can this change how I interact with the world itself.”⁹ And then, you begin to realize that the world itself, like your family, your class, your circle of friends, all the people in your neighborhood, can truly be 🎵 *k’ir she-chubrah lah yachdav*, “like a city bound up together.”¹⁰

So: we’re now going to conclude this prayer together, in the spirit of “Compassion within Humility,” singing along with the melody and humming around the cantorial line to create “vocal chords,” that is, chords with your voices.

⁸ Part of a welcome statement read aloud during every Shabbat service at [Congregation Beth Elohim, Brooklyn NY](#) since 2023.

⁹ Erev Rabbi Rebecca Thau, pre-recorded video for HUC staff meeting, April 2026.

¹⁰ Psalm 122:3, freely translated – and an allusion to the ordinands’ class song, “[Samachti B’omrim Li](#)” by [Charles Osborne](#), based on the same text.

Even if you're not sure what note to intone, you can allow your voice to be animated, even contaminated, by the voices around you. If [transliteration and musical notation](#) would help bolster your confidence, you could scan the QR code at the bottom of the handout, but you could also just choose to go with the "flow," the flow of an "abundant bounty" of sound. Let yourself be bound up in a harmonic harvest, not in spite of your own voice's husks and scuffs but precisely because of them: a sheaf of souls all seeking the holy and the pure in flawed, phenomenal chorus.

And at the end, when I chant the words *Amein*, *Selah*, I invite you to respond as the ancient Temple orchestra might...

...with bated breath, with a prolonged silence, with the heartfelt hope that our offering resonates in every conceivable world: in this world, in the world on high, and in the world to come.

V. 🎵 S'firat HaOmer Niggun → Chagy E

