

## Counting the Days

### *Thought for the Day*

*Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)*

*Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 26 May 2016*

Are you counting the days? Perhaps now that the weather has switched from drukit to merely a bit driech, you're looking forward to getting away to the sun. Or perhaps you're counting the days till that pesky referendum is over, and the media return to their usual diet of salacious scandal and distant disaster.

At this time of year, Jewish people are also counting the days. We start counting at the beginning of Pesach, Passover, and we count 49 days – 7 full weeks – and on the 50th day we celebrate the festival of Shavuot, which just means “weeks”. Pesach celebrates the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, and Shavuot marks the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Torah is often referred to as the constitution of the Jewish people, so connecting the two makes the point that to be a nation it's not enough just to be free. A nation needs a rule-book to prevent anarchy, or else, as the philosopher Hobbes put it, our lives would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”. I suppose one of the questions linking our past and future referenda is just where we want that rule-book to be drawn up!

Today is the 33rd day of our counting, LaG b'Omer, a day of celebration in the middle of a period of semi-mourning. The reason for this goes back to Roman times, when Jewish religious practices were forbidden, the study of Torah was prohibited, and rabbis and their students were forced into hiding, and today many people will visit the graves of the rabbis of those times in Galilee.

A nation needs a history and a memory as well as a rule-book and a constitution. For Jewish people these all come together in the annual cycle of the calendar. They remind us too that we were all once slaves and refugees. And when people remember their history, that reminds us of our responsibility not to forget those that come after.