
Our Relationship to the Land: Meaning of the Omer
A Curriculum Guide
Canfei Nesharim

Students' Course Book

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Unit: Our Relationship to the Land: Meaning of the Omer

Lesson One: Everything Comes From The Land

Let's begin this Study: As we consider the period of Sefirat HaOmer/ Counting the Omer, Jews are generally aware of the connection between the Hagim at both ends of this period. Pesah/ פסח, the time of our leaving of Egypt/ יציאת מצרים begins this “counting of the barley” which continues for seven weeks and Shavuot/ שבועות, the observance of our receiving of the Torah/ קבלת התורה completes this period of time. In thinking of these celebrations in this manner, we talk about their historical meanings. Additionally, we must also be mindful of the agricultural and land-linked meanings of these Hagim and the time in which they come. The lessons embedded in their very being and the *cycle* of which they are a part are as critical to us as G-d's protection and instruction through Torah, of which this cycle is a part, actually leading up to our celebration of this defining aspect of our identity.

To begin this lesson, your teacher will ask you:

What is the Counting of the Omer/*Sefirat HaOmer* and what does it mean to us as observant and involved Jews?

What exactly is it that we are counting during this period of time? What lessons can we learn about the land and its meaning in our lives from this season and its heightened consciousness about our land and its resources?

Write your thoughts here:

The Bracha and the Bread Basket

An adapted story

Dani came home from school as he did every day and offered to help his Ima prepare dinner for their entire family, observing the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av v'Em*. They set the table, prepared the food and when everyone was home, they sat down to eat. Before eating bread from the bread basket, all members of the family washed their hands and said the appropriate *Bracha* as they did every evening. Then, they all sat at the table and took bread from the bread basket and said together:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִלֶּךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמּוֹצֵא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

Dani's sister reported that in school that day, her second grade class visited the area's Kosher Bakery and learned about the process of how bread is made. They talked about where bread came from and how it was processed to the point where they bought and consumed it. The youngest child in the family, Rivkie explained that "Well that's simple silly. We all know where bread comes from. It comes from the grocery store, of course." All agreed that this was an absolutely appropriate answer from one so young. However, pensiveness set in as the older members of the family began to go mentally through the chain of events that brought the bread to their bread basket and table.

At this point, the family became involved in a conversation tracing the bread from its source as reflected in the *Bracha* they said to the bread basket on their table. They explained for Rivkie that the bread that we have on our table did not by any means begin its journey in the supermarket...

Unit: Our Relationship to the Land: Meaning of the Omer

Lesson One: Everything Comes From The Land
An Alternative Approach for Older Classes

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To begin this lesson, your teacher will ask you:

What is the Counting of the Omer/*Sefirat HaOmer* and what does it mean to us as observant and involved Jews?

What exactly is it that we are counting during this period of time? What lessons can we learn about the land and its meaning in our lives from this season and its heightened consciousness about our land and its resources?

Write your thoughts here:

Your Teacher Says: Let's read the following narrative and respond to the questions that follow as we consider the meaning of this season and our connection to the land from which so many of our needs are met.

We should note that as we celebrate our freedom and our profound relationship with and dependence on G-d for taking us out of Egypt on *Pesach*, this was the very time when we began the barley harvest. This represents an agricultural freedom that coincides with our historical freedom. Yet there is something that is incomplete and tentative with both.

Our physical freedom of *Pesach* is truly only fully meaningful when seen in the context of the spiritual freedom and discipline that comes with the acceptance of the Torah, which we celebrate on *Shavuot*. The former freedoms are those of hope and anticipation, much as reflected in the additional name of חג האביב indicating that this is the spring holiday, when so many visible aspects of our environment start anew. *Shavuot* celebrates our maturation, both in terms of having the blueprint for how we live in its celebration of זמן מתן תורתנו, the time of the giving of Torah and in celebrating the readiness of our harvest as חג הביקורים .

As we consider the shared theme of these different aspects of the holidays, we further note that barley is an unrefined offering. As Rav Yaakov Meden points out in his writing in The Agricultural and Historical Significance of Sefirat Ha-Omer (translated by Zev Jacobson),

Barley is used primarily as animal fodder; it is the superior wheat [offering that comes later] that will serve as food for ... [the B'nai Yisrael and their families.] Furthermore, the barley offering permits the current year's grain to be eaten only outside of the Temple; whereas the wheat offering permits it to be used in the Temple itself as part of the sacrificial service [due to its refined nature].

So, the agricultural pattern of the time of ספירת העמר is consistent with the historical theme of refinement and “processing” of our spiritual and historical selves. In the combination of these two aspects of this season, we find a great unity of the land, our mission as B'nai Yisrael and what G-d wants us to do in living our lives on the land.

Only the properly refined offering could be brought to the **בית המקדש**
What lessons do we learn from this? What care do we need to take care of
ourselves to present ourselves to G-d? What care must we take of our land
and its produce in order that this too continues to be fit for G-d?

This is a matter of consciously and purposefully living our lives in so many
different ways when it comes to interacting with the land and its resources,
applying the same element of awareness that we do when engaged in a
variety of ritual activities. Let us think about how we live today and how
this development can be connected. To be sure, we eat only that which is
Kosher and permitted according to Jewish law. Is it possible that there are
additional considerations beyond **Kashrut** in terms of the food we consume
that could be linked to the lessons indicated here?

Are there ways in which our food should be refined in the same way as the
wheat offering? Can you think of examples?

Can you think of ways in which our food is “corrupted” or ruined in ways that are not good for us? Think about what types of processing and producing of food are **not** healthy for us or for our environment. (For example, when natural foods are preserved indefinitely through the use of chemical preservatives or fruits are made to look more attractive to us, are these healthy practices for us?)

- Be sure to check in with the Science teacher and nutrition conscious members of your community in finding meaningful answers to these questions.

Let’s look at our growing awareness of how our food is produced and what it is doing to our bodies. Can you think of some of our eating habits that would **not** follow the pattern indicated here during the period of raised awareness of our being a separate and sanctified and refined people?

Unit: Our Relationship to the Land: Meaning of the Omer

Lesson Two: We Have to Maintain The Land

Your Teacher Begins: As with every Jewish season, there are lessons to be learned during the period of **Sefirat HaOmer** on various planes, including the spiritual, historical and physical ones. Clearly, as we have discussed here and elsewhere we move from the idea of physical freedom to spiritual freedom with discipline as we consider the period of our annual Jewish journey between *Pesah* and *Shavuot*.

Your Teacher Will Ask: What are you aware of in terms of the land, our environment and its changes during this period of seven weeks?

- Here is an opportunity for you and your classmates to discuss seasonal changes, the budding of trees, plants and vegetation, and so much else. The air feels different and people come outside. The changes in our daily life are palpable.
- Depending on the day, ideally your teacher may take the group for a walk outside and have this discussion there, pointing out how differently we feel as the winter changes into spring with the hopes and excitement of coming summer.

The Teacher Continues: Can you see and identify connections between these changes in our seasonal and environmental reality and our Jewish seasons?

What do you know about these two statements that we say as part of the *Amidah* daily? When are they said and what do they reflect?

משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם
מוריד הטל

What is the significance of these statements? What do they reflect about the land of Israel specifically, and its needs? Are we willing to say the appropriate **Tefillot** for these basic needs of our land?

What else are we willing to do? What ACTIONS are we willing to take to parallel these statements in insuring the well being of our land?

Your Teacher Will Continue: Notice the element of *refinement and development* in our environment during this time. We also note this process as we move from the offerings of the period of the barley offerings of *Sefirat HaOmer* to the refined wheat offerings of the end of the period we count.

When we think of these two types of offering,

ספירת העמר
שתי הלחם

We note the parallel notion of the rawness of our physical freedom of *Pesah* and our need to refine ourselves through the receiving of our Torah on *Shavuot*.

G-d has clearly done G-d's part in giving us the means to refine and be refined. In fact, we are taught that the very reason for *Mitzvot* is to do just that – refine us as human beings.

Let us think of this period of ספירת העמר in that manner; as we go through this time and *count the days while we await the giving of the Torah*, can we think of counting the days while nature becomes and gives us such beauty and color by celebrating it AND simultaneously thinking of ways we can *refine* our interaction with it.

How can we do this? What actions can we undertake to show our appreciation for our world and state our commitment to take care of and maintain its beauty and richness?

Your Teacher Will Suggest: Consider the following story of Choni HaM'agel, for which the text is found in the Talmud (Ta'anis 23b). [Here is just an easily accessible narrative.]

Choni HaM'agel seems to have been a forward thinking environmentalist who was aware of his surroundings and his interrelationship with the land. We are taught that when the world needed rain, Rabbis would send school children to him and they would grasp the corner of the garment he was wearing and plead, "Father, Father, give us rain." He would then ask G-d to send rain for the sake of the children that had come to him.

One time he prayed for rain during a drought and to make his point, he drew a circle and refused to move from within a circle until the rain came - which it finally did. We are also told this is how he received the name Choni HaM'agel, Choni the one who drew circles.

Another story that is told of Choni HaM'agel is one in which he learns an important lesson about our land and its trees. One day he was journeying

far, and eventually, he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him, "How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?" The man replied: "Seventy years." To this reply, Choni asked him: "So, how can you be certain that you will live another seventy years and see the fruit that this tree will produce?" The man replied, "See, I found already grown carob trees in the world. Obviously those who came before me planted these for me so I too must plant these for my children and the generations that follow."

Choni then sat down to eat and once he was satisfied, he fell asleep. We are taught that as he slept, a cave formed around him and hid him. He stayed asleep for 70 years. Finally, he awoke and came outside of the cave. He noted that there was an elderly gentleman gathering and eating carobs. Choni asked the man, "Excuse me, sir, did you plant this tree from which you are now eating?" The man replied, "No, my grandfather planted it for me so I could eat and now I will do the same for my grandchildren."

What important lessons about how we care for the land on which we live and its resources are found in this story?

What lessons are here in the first story about Choni related to the connection of *Tefillah* to the ongoing relationship between the land, G-d and us as the inhabitants and stewards of the land on which we live and depend?

What do we learn here both about the need to *pray* and *work* towards maintaining the balance and sustainability of our environment?

Choni teaches us about the footprint we inherit and leave on the earth from which we take and on which we depend. What are the implications of this lesson in our lives?

Now Try This: Go home and try to find out about the trees and vegetation planted on your property (or in the area in which you live). When were they planted? How old are they? How many trees have been planted in the last five years?

For help and support with this activity, check out the following website for information on trees or another one that you find:

http://forestry.about.com/cs/treeid/f/Tree_ID_Start.htm

Find some pictures of the area in which you live from fifty and twenty five years ago; you can use other (smaller) increments of time if you wish. Try to look for profound differences in the environmental balance in these pictures.

- What land has been developed?
- What trees and forests have been destroyed?
- What changes are there in natural resources in the area?

- How well cared for is the area?
- Is there open space?
- What other changes can you note in the passage of time?
- What do you think this area will look like in another twenty or twenty five years?

As suggested follow-up activities, you and your class could:

- Read Shel Silverstein's The Giving Tree and discuss its message
- Read Dr. Seuss' The Lorax or view the movie version and discuss its message
- Share their findings and even learn about the general area in which their community is located, its vegetation, trees, and resources,
- Plant trees and vegetation and care for it, even growing flowers to enhance the celebration and observance of *Shavuot*,
- Adopt-A-Space and care for an identified parcel of land in your community, and
- Talk about what we must do to work and care for the land (*Le'ovda U'Le'shomra*) and what benefits we get from doing so
- Check out other relevant websites, for example regarding ordinances and regulations for land development and preservation of resources
- So many other things..... think about it!

Unit One: Our Relationship to the Land: Meaning of the Omer

Lesson Three: Lessons of Sefirat HaOmer In Working Towards Izzun

Let's begin this study:

Think about the purpose of counting the Omer in our lives. Clearly, it is difficult to feel as connected to the land on an ongoing basis, given the reality of our lives and how different it is from that of our ancestors. So, in terms of our own lives, let's focus on taking account of our resources and what it takes to produce them as a potential applied lesson from this season and its activities.

Look at the following text from VaYikra, chapter 23, verses 15 and 16:

טו וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאְכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה
שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָתוֹת תְּמִימַת תְּהֵי יָנָה : טז עַד מַמְחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ
חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה

- Count for yourselves from the day after Shabbat when you bring an *omer*/measure of the wave offering seven weeks; they must be complete weeks. You must count until the day after the seventh week, fifty days; and then you will come close to offer to G-d a new grain offering.

Note that this reading comes from *Parshat Emor*, which is one of the weekly Torah portions during this period of time.

Think About This:

1. What effect does “counting the measures of wave offering” have on the *B'nai Yisrael*? Does counting what comes from the land make us more conscious of it?

2. What types of counting can we do in our own lives that are meaningful as we think about the coming season of receiving the Torah and the types of behaviors that our Torah wants us to take on in our lives?

3. If the offerings that the *B'nai Yisrael* kept them simultaneously connected to G-d and to the land that G-d gave them on an ongoing basis, how can we do that for ourselves in our lives today?

So, if we find it very challenging to relate completely to the meaning of the *Sefirat HaOmer* given that we are not living with our *Beit HaMikdash* or generally not in a land based economy, what can we think of that does remind us daily and throughout the day about our connection to and responsibility for proper use of the land and the resources?

Consider the following examples:

בְּרָכָה עַל הַפֶּת :
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִלֶּדֶת הָעוֹלָם, הַמּוֹצֵא לָחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

עַל תְּבַשִּׁיל מִחֲמִשֶּׁת מֵיַי דָּגָן :
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִלֶּדֶת הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מֵיַי מְזוֹנוֹת.

על היין :

ברוך אתה ה', אל-נוּ מְלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגֶּפֶן.

על פְּרֵי הָעֵץ :

ברוך אתה ה', אל-נוּ מְלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָעֵץ.

על היִרְקוֹת :

ברוך אתה ה', אל-נוּ מְלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה.

על דְּבַר שְׂאִין גְּדוּלוֹ מִן הָאָרֶץ :

ברוך אתה ה', אל-נוּ מְלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַכֹּל נִהְיָה בְּדַבְּרוֹ.

על ריח טוב שבפירות :

ברוך אתה ה' אל-נוּ מְלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַנוֹתֵן רִיחַ טוֹב בְּפִירוֹת.

על ריח טוב שבעצים ושיחים :

ברוך אתה ה' אל-נוּ מְלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא עֵצִי בְּשָׂמִים.

על ריח טוב שבעשבים :

ברוך אתה ה' אל-נוּ מְלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא עֲשָׂבֵי בְּשָׂמִים.

על ריח טוב שאינו מן הצומח :

ברוך אתה ה' אל-נוּ מְלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מִיַּי בְּשָׂמִים.

We learn from our sages, *Chazal*, that we MUST say the appropriate *Beracha* before enjoying and/or partaking of any parts of the land's produce and resources. If we fail to do so, it is as if we are stealing from G-d. According to *Berachot 35a* in the *Talmud*, before we say a *Beracha* the item we are holding belongs to G-d. Only after we say the *Beracha* is it ours to enjoy and use. Do you understand this notion? Why are we taught this importance of *Berachot*?

How/can saying the appropriate *Beracha* for each thing that we use and enjoy increase our awareness of our environment and its elements that G-d has given us as part of the land on which we live and depend?

Let's think about this together: What purpose can these *Berachot* serve in reminding us of the many different things that are part of the land and resources that G-d created? How can this practice serve to connect us to the land and our need for it as well as our responsibility to care for it in a daily and ongoing manner much the same as *Sefirat HaOmer* reminded the community so long ago of everything that G-d has given us and of the most delicate balance and relationship between G-d, us and the land that G-d has created for us?

Consider the following statement:

The biodiversity of planet earth is severely endangered. Edward O. Wilson, a Harvard University zoologist, estimates that “If we continue at the current rate of deforestation and destruction of major ecosystems like rainforest and coral reefs, where most of the biodiversity is concentrated, we will surely lose more than half of all the species of plants and animals on earth by the end of the 21st century.

Quoted from “Our Relationship to Other Creatures” by Ora Sheinson, in **Etz Chayim Hee: A Torah Commentary for Environmental Learning and Action**, Canfei Nesharim Publication, sponsored by the Gaia Fund, 2008., p. 105 (*Parshat Emor*).

What are the main ideas in this quote?

Where have we seen these ideas in our Torah based texts that we have studied?

Let's think about this together:

Why is it important for us to work to maintain and protect the balance in our environment and ecosystems?

What have we learned in these lessons about what G-d wants us to do in terms of this balance in our environment and ecosystems?

How is this a specific Jewish responsibility?

Moving Forward From Teaching to Actions: Taking Initiative and Putting Learned Lessons into Action: Now what can we do to act in a manner that is coherent with the texts we have just explored?

So what can we do to achieve this *Izzun* in our environment? Let's consider the following possibilities:

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Alternate Lesson Plan for More Text Oriented Groups

Note: This is a great option for those classes/ groups who wish to use the ongoing rhythm of *Parshat HaShavuah* learning as a means of introducing Environmental Education components.

Suggested Preparation: The readings below may have already been assigned and given to you and your class to prepare as a homework assignment before you meet as a group. They should be read along with the actual Parsha for which each *Dvar Torah* is indicated. In this case, you may use the group time to process the material, using the organizers provided and take the initiative to do some searches for follow up materials. This would be a wonderful opportunity to use the site of <http://www.greenflagschools.org> to locate additional follow up information and activities.

Let's think about this together: G-d is the ultimate strategic planner. G-d sets everything in place and gives us continual reminders about how we are to “keep it all going,” constantly balancing our role of working and using the land with our role of maintaining and guarding the land, as we discussed in earlier lessons. Now, as we move through the season of *Sefirat HaOmer*, we see these reminders in our cycle of readings in *Parshat Hashavuah*. In this activity, the teacher will divide the class into smaller learning groups, and give each student the appropriate material from the *Parshiot* that we read during this season.

For the purposes of this lesson, we will be using the following materials from: **Etz Chayim Hee: A Torah Commentary for Environmental Learning and Action**, Canfei Nesharim Publication, sponsored by the Gaia Fund, 2008.

To locate these materials: Note that the link for these materials is <http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/parshas.php> Go to this website and scroll down the Parshat HaShavuah list until you get to each of these texts.

Additional web connections suggested are as follows:

<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/torah.php?id=11794&page=11794> (omer)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php?id=14184&page=14184> (shmittah and relationship to land)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/torah.php?id=16285&page=16285> (omer)
http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/make_difference.php?id=15627&page=15627 (land and food related action suggestions)
http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/make_difference.php?id=11483&page=11483 (connecting to your own land/backyard)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/parshas.php?id=13168&page=13168> (Avraham and Lot sharing the land)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/parshas.php?id=14564&page=14564> (includes some deep sources on our relationship/responsibility to our land)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/parshas.php?id=16895&page=16895> (on the fruits of the land of Israel)

Alternatively, each group in your class can be given one of the following texts from the hard copy of these materials (copies can be made for the purpose of this lesson and experience):

- Parshat Shemini, “An Abundance of Fish,” by Candace Nachman, pp. 87 – 89.
- Parshat Tazria, “Healing Ourselves, Healing Our Planet,” by Rabbi Natan Greenberg, pp. 90 – 93.
- Parshat Metzorah, “Natural Healing,” by Ramona Rubin, pp. 94 – 96.
- Parshat Acherei Mot, “Raising up the Physical Sustainably: Lessons of the Ketoret,” by Baruch Herschkopff, pp. 97 – 100.
- Parshat Kedoshim, “Corporate and Consumer Responsibility,” by Rabbi Carmi Wisemon, pp. 101 – 104.
- Parshat Emor, “Our Relationship to Other Creatures,” by Ora Sheinson, pp. 105 – 108.
- Parshat Behar, “The Mitzva of Shemittah/The Sabbatical Year,” by Noam Yehuda Sendor, pp. 109 – 112.
- Parshat Bechukotai, “The Blessing of Rain,” by Jonathan Neril, pp. 113 – 116.

Your teacher will instruct you how to use these materials.

Possible Follow-up Actions to Take:

1. Students can be encouraged to transport this lesson to their family and share it with them at an appropriate moment, perhaps around the Shabbat dinner table, during the appropriate weeks. Educating others and sharing learning information with family and friends is an important action that all of us can take.
2. The class can make a composite list of all of the actions that can be taken and commit themselves to actual implementation of agreed upon actions to work consciously and purposefully towards attaining Environmental Sustainability.
3. The class can take the list in #2 and put it in a public place in the school to monitor changes in behaviors amongst the students, faculty and other members of the academic community. The focus here is AWARENESS of what we can do to work towards Environmental Sustainability and Health of our larger community. You could even monitor expenses for disposable products in the school and any changes in expenses for that, use of electricity, etc. in the school community. Get everyone involved and show how its to the collective benefit to be aware of these practices and watch them.
4. The class can look at the various activity links and choose a few actions to actually take on for the school, as suggested here in #3 and in the various materials indicated.

Information Organizer

Text and Intentions/Instructions in *Parshat* _____:

What Has Gone Wrong in our Reality/ Problems We Confront:

Possible Actions Suggested That Could Bring Healing and *Izzun*:

Information Organizer

Text and Intentions/Instructions in *Parshat* _____:

What Has Gone Wrong in our Reality/ Problems We Confront:

Possible Actions Suggested That Could Bring Healing and *Izzun*:

Information Organizer

Text and Intentions/Instructions in *Parshat* _____:

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Possible Actions Suggested That Could Bring Healing and *Izzun*:
