



## Counting the Omer, Refining Ourselves

By Jonathan Neril

Our actions are deeply connected to the environment that we see around us. Our current period of “counting the Omer” offers an opportunity for strengthening and refining our character. As we will explore, this process also contains within it meaningful ways to address, from a spiritual place, some of the pressing issues of our time.

Rabbi Sampson Rafael Hirsch teaches, “Nature does not stand between you and Me, but you stand between Nature and Me. It is according to your behavior towards Me that everything that flourishes and breathes for you in your sphere, lives or dies, flourishes or withers, dies off or endures.”<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Hirsch explains that if we act according to the Divine will, God blesses nature with bounty. If not, nature itself suffers because of our actions.

One manifestation of our relationship with nature can be seen from G-d’s judgment of the world’s grain harvest. The Mishna teaches that on Pesach the world is judged for the grain.<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Yehudah, in the name of Rabbi Akiva, links the judgment of grain to the barley Omer offering brought on Pesach:

*“Why did the Torah enjoin on us to offer an ‘Omer on Passover? Because Passover is the season of produce. Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, said, Bring before Me an ‘Omer’ on Passover so that your produce in the fields may be blessed.”<sup>3</sup>*

Jewish festivals, in addition to their spiritual meanings, are described in the Torah and Mishna as agricultural festivals.<sup>4</sup> When we were primarily an agricultural people, we were able to appreciate the natural cycles God put in the world and connect to G-d by offering some of the produce of our harvests on Pesach, during the counting of the Omer, and on Shavuot. The Mishna describes how the barley Omer offering, made on Pesach, and the two wheat loaves, offered on Shavuot, had to be brought from the choicest grain of the new harvests of the land of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

For the Omer, the Beit Din (Court) in Jerusalem would send emissaries to reap barley from moist, standing grain from farmland outside of Jerusalem, enough to yield about five liters of flour. On the evening after the first day of Pesach the local townspeople would gather around at night and excitedly watch. The emissaries would proceed to harvest, parch, refine, grind, and sift the barley into fine flour.<sup>6</sup> Then the Cohen (priest) would wave it in the Temple “to gain favor for you”<sup>7</sup> [the Jewish people].

For each of the remaining 49 days the Cohen in Jerusalem would bring the Omer offering and Jews throughout the land would count the day of the Omer. Why did they count? The 14th century Spanish sage Rabbi David Abudraham provides one explanation: “The reason God commanded to count the Omer was because each Jew was busy with their harvest and spread out in their threshing floor, so God commanded them to count, so that they would not forget the time to go up [to Jerusalem] for the festival.”<sup>8</sup> Thus the counting of the Omer was originally a method of unifying the Jewish farmers to know when to leave their individual harvesting to unite in the Shavuot harvest festival.

The Torah calls Shavuot "Chag Habikkurim," the festival of the first fruits, because it centered on the



Israelites bringing to the Temple offerings of the first fruits of their harvest. The Rambam teaches that Shavuot initiated the time period—which stretched until Chanuka-- in which first-fruit offerings could be brought.<sup>9</sup> In fulfillment of a separate mitzva, the Cohanim would prepare two loaves of wheat bread from the new wheat harvest. In a public acknowledgment of God's goodness for providing the wheat harvest, the Cohen waved the two loaves of wheat bread, which according to Rabbi Yochanan is “[in acknowledgment of] Him to Whom are Heaven and Earth.”<sup>10</sup>

As we've seen, the cycle of offering barley on Pesach, counting the Omer, and offering wheat loaves on Shavuot was a spiritual cycle which directly related to our agricultural needs. We have not been able to observe these commands in almost 2,000 years. This separation has had deep consequences for our relationship to the land. Most of us reading this are post-industrial, technology-savvy Jews living outside of Israel. We know the difference between a Pdf and a Jpeg but may not know how to distinguish between a sheave of barley and a sheave of wheat. But these traditions, and the practices that do exist today can help us remember the connections between dew and Divinity, grain and G-d.

Every year during Pesach, we pray for the health of the grain crop during the prayer for dew: “Dew—give it to favor Your land;...with abundant grain and wine may you strengthen us...Dew and plenty, may they fill our granaries.”<sup>11</sup> In saying and hearing this, we can focus on Hashem accepting our prayers for beneficial dew and healthy harvests, especially when we realize that major droughts in northern China and Australia have significantly impacted wheat harvests in recent years.<sup>12</sup>

The counting of the Omer also offers an opportunity for character refinement to improve our relation to other people, our land, and our food. The Omer period in Temple times transitioned from offering barley flour (the unbaked product of a grain often fed to animals) to bringing loaves of wheat bread (a refined product of the choicest grain). The refinement of *ourselves* during the Omer precisely parallels this process.

Rabbi David Abudraham (cited earlier) links this to the Omer and the global grain harvest: “Because the world is in danger from Pesach until Shavuot in regard to the grains and in regard to the trees... therefore G-d commanded us to count these days in order that we remember the trauma of the world, so that we return to G-d with a full heart and offer supplications before G-d, that G-d will be merciful toward us and on the Creation and on the Land -- that the grain will be properly apportioned.”<sup>13</sup> The teaching of Rabbi Hirsch can now be more clearly understood. We stand between God and nature. How we act toward people and creatures is part and parcel of our behavior toward God, which impacts what happens on this planet.

Rabbi Simon Jacobson, in his book *A Spiritual Guide to the Counting of the Omer: Forty-Nine Steps to Personal Refinement According to the Jewish Tradition*, examines the relation between the Omer period and the seven emotions and qualities known as the sefirot. He translates them as benevolence, restraint, compassion, endurance, humility, bonding, and nobility. Each of the seven sefirot subdivides into seven, making forty-nine different character traits. Many of the activities he describes concern improving one's relationships with other people. In our day this relates deeply to the environment.

The 49 days of self-refinement address the spiritual roots of environmental damages that affect others: indifference, narcissism, desire for self-gratification, and others. During the Omer one works on



cultivating greater sensitivity, awareness, humility, self-control, and spiritual discipline—the building blocks of a Jewish environmental ethic. Indeed, the Torah's command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” teaches Rav Meir HaLevi Abulafia, forms a basis for the Talmud's myriad laws concerning environmental damages between neighbors, such as pollution of air and water.<sup>14</sup>

In our times the period of counting the Omer abounds with potential for transformation. To connect to some of the rich spiritual meaning of the ripening barley, wheat, and the first fruits during this period, we can grow backyard gardens and purchase seasonal produce through Farmer's Markets and Community Supported Agriculture coops.<sup>15</sup> We also possess a precious opportunity to refine ourselves by considering for how our actions affect others and the planet. Try setting aside time every day during the counting of the Omer to work on the character trait of that day. Visualize your life after having perfected that trait, and how this will positively affect others. Continue throughout the Omer period, and by Shavuot you will have changed yourself and the world.

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1 Commentary to *Shemot 34:19 The Pentateuch, translated and explained by Samson Raphael Hirsch*, vol. II, rendered into English by Isaac Levy, Judaica Press: Gateshead, 1982.

2 Mishna Rosh Hashana 1b, Artscroll translation

3 Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashana 16a

4 See, for example, Vayikra 23:9-14, Mishna Menachot chapter ten, and Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sukkot 37b.

5 The Mishna in Menachot 8:1 even lists the regions where the choicest wheat was grown, including the Judean Plain.

6 Mishna Menachot, 6:6-7, 10:1-3, 9 and commentary of Rabbi Pinechas Kehati, based on the Talmud.

7 Vayikra 23:11, Artscroll translation.

8 Sefer Abudraham Hashalem, p. 267, section on Sefirat HaOmer, translation by Ellen Cohn

9 Mishna Torah, Seder Zrayim, Hilchot Bikurim, 2:6

10 Talmud Sukkot 37b, Artscroll translation

11 Translation from Artscroll siddur

12 “Worst Drought in Half Century Shrivels Wheat Belt of China,” Michael Wines, *The New York Times*, 2-25-09;

“Australia's food bowl lies empty,” Nick Bryant, *BBC*, 3-11-08, online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7289194.stm>

13 Sefer Abudraham, op. Cit, p. 267

14 Sefer Yad Rama to tractate Bava Batra. Rabbi Abulafia was born in Spain in 1180 CE. Cited by R' Chaim Soloveitchik in *The Environment in Jewish Law and Thought*, Sviva Israel: Jerusalem, 2008, p. 11. The second chapter of Bava Batra concerns halakha on air, water, soil, noise, and other forms of pollution between neighbors and involving industry.

15 [Read more on these topics](http://canfeinesharim.org/learning/make_difference.php?page=15627), see [http://canfeinesharim.org/learning/make\\_difference.php?page=15627](http://canfeinesharim.org/learning/make_difference.php?page=15627)