

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 ויספרתם לָכֶם מִמִּתְחַרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת־עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעַת שָׁבוּעוֹת
תְּמִילֹת תְּהֵינָה: טז עַד מִמִּתְחַרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמֵשִׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם
מִנְתָּה 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 Jewish people? 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 the Torah encourages?

3. If the offerings that the Jewish people made 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, today it can be quite challenging to relate to the meaning of *Sefirat HaOmer* given that we are not living in the times of the Temple and 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:

Blessing on bread: **בְּרָכָה עַל הַפֶּת:**
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹ-הֵנוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמוֹצֵיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.

Blessing on non-bread grain products: **עַל תְּבִשִּׁיל מִחֲמִשָּׁת מִיַּי דָּגָן:**
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹ-הֵנוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מִיַּי מְזֻנּוֹת.

Blessed are you Lord our G-d, King of the Universe, Who creates various kinds of sustenance.

עַל הַיַּיִן: On wine

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹ-נוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגֶּפֶן.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, Who creates the fruit of the vine.

עַל פְּרֵי הָעֵץ: On fruit of trees

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹ-נוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָעֵץ.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the tree.

עַל הַיִּרְקוֹת: On vegetables

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹ-נוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe who creates the fruit of the earth.

עַל דְּבַר שְׂאִין גְּדוּלוֹ מִן הָאָרֶץ: On foods that do not grow from the ground (i.e. water, (animal products

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹ-נוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׁהַכֵּל נִהְיָה בְּדְבָרוֹ.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, by Whose word all things came to be.

עַל רִיחַ טוֹב שֶׁבְּפִירוֹת: On a pleasant smell from fruit

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹ-נוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַנּוֹתֵן רִיחַ טוֹב בְּפִירוֹת.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, Who places a good aroma into fruits.

עַל רִיחַ טוֹב שֶׁבְּעֵצִים וְשִׁיחִים: On a pleasant smell from trees and bushes

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹ-נוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא עֵצִי בְּשִׁמִּים.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, Who creates fragrant trees.

עַל רִיחַ טוֹב שֶׁבְּעֵשְׂבִים: On a pleasant smell from herbs or grasses

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹ-נוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא עֵשְׂבִי בְּשִׁמִּים.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, Who creates fragrant vegetation.

על ריח טוב שאינו מן הצומח: On a pleasant smell from items not from vegetation
(like ground spices)
כְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מִיַּי בְּשָׂמִים.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe Who creates various kinds of spices.

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 consistent with the texts we have just explored?

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

1. Participate in an *Adopt-a-Space* program in your community. You can also do this in your school where every class and group within the school is charged with keeping the assigned space clean and
2. What are we doing to conserve and responsibly use the resources in our area as we relate to the land?
3. Produce a *Sefirat HaOmer* calendar for your community with daily bits of information and actions one can take to work towards Environmental Sustainability. This could be done as an Art project and could even be produced as a fund raiser for the school for the following year (make sure you use the right calendar and days).
4. Make a list of *doable* actions for the members of your class to do in the coming months and deeds of *Izzun Olam* (planetary balance) that our students can and will commit to doing as part of their own lives.
5. Use the theme of counting in this season and count for your own lives how many resources we use during the course of our day. Can we try to reduce the use of waste and try to use as many biodegradable materials and reusable resources as possible?
6. Write an article for the school and/or community Jewish press indicating these actions and your collective efforts to make our Jewish and general lives "more green" in an authentic Jewish way! You could even connect each of these actions to various Mitzvot and Jewish teachings and make attractive posters or a display to be publicized.
