

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

Lesson Three: Lessons of Sefirat HaOmer In Working Towards Izzun

Estimated Time: One - two 40 minute sessions (this lesson will take more time if all elements are used.)

Suggested for Upper Elementary and Middle School Grades

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.

Note to Teacher: There are several small texts here and discussions to be included in this lesson. Allow the students, if your group is able to do so, to move in and out of *chevrutot* as this lesson progresses. Remember that the idea is for the students to *internalize and own* the lessons of the texts and discussions so that they understand in a natural and comfortable manner that there are actions they can take to work for a more sustainable environment and that this is a message of the Jewish tradition.

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

טו ויספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת מיום הביאכם את־עמר התנופה שבע שבתות
תמימת תהיינה: טז עד ממחרת השבת השביעת תספרו חמשים יום והקרבתם
מנחה חדשה לה':

- 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 (see alternative lesson plan for more text-oriented groups).

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 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?

[Time frame: 15 – 20 minutes]

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?

- The teacher should give the students a few moments to think about this and brainstorm answers. After a while, lead the students to the meaning and purpose of the *Berachot* (blessings) that are said on bread, wine, and fruit.

Consider the following examples:

בְּרָכָה עַל הַפֶּת: Blessing on bread:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹ-הֵנוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמּוֹצֵיא לָחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

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

עַל תְּבַשְׂיִל מִחֲמִשֶּׁת מִיַּי דָּגָן: Blessing on non-bread grain products:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹ-הֵנוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מִיַּי מְזוֹנוֹת.

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-הֵנוּ 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-הֵנוּ 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-הֵנוּ 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 נְשָׂאִין גְּדוּלוֹ מִן הָאָרֶץ: On foods that do not grow from the ground (i.e. water, animal products)

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹ-הֵנוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, נְשֵׂהכֹל 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-הֵנוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַנּוֹתֵן רֵיחַ טוֹב בַּפְּרוֹת.

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

עַל רֵיחַ טוֹב שֶׁבַעֲצִים וְשִׁיחִים: On a pleasant smell from trees and bushes
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹ-הֵנוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא עֲצֵי בְשָׂמִים.

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

עַל רֵיחַ טוֹב שֶׁבַעֲשָׂבִים: On a pleasant smell from herbs or grasses
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹ-הֵנוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא עֲשָׂבֵי בְשָׂמִים.

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

עַל רֵיחַ טוֹב שֶׁאִינּוּ מִן הַצּוּמָח: On a pleasant smell from items not from vegetation
(like ground spices)
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹ-הֵנוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מִיְנֵי בְשָׂמִים.

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? During the times of the Temple, **Sefirat HaOmer** and the bringing of the daily barley offering reminded the Jewish community about the

agricultural bounty that G-d gave us in the land of Israel. It also reminded us of the delicate balance and relationship between G-d, us and the land. In our times, how can the practice of saying *Berachot* before enjoying the bounty of the land serve to connect us to the land and our need for it? How can it remind us about our responsibility to care for the land every day?

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 rainforests 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 the Jewish teachings 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?

[Time frame: approximately 25 - 30 minutes; your class may want to take longer, which would make this a two session lesson.]

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?

Note to the Teacher: Note that students should take out their initial lists of actions that can be taken (from lesson plan on Bereishit) and consider what EACH PERSON can realistically take on to help change how we collectively relate to the land which G-d gave us to tend, work and maintain. Remember that we have spoken about actions that can be taken by individuals, families, school groupings and the larger communities.

As this unit draws to a close or a pause, take this opportunity to have students commit themselves to actions that they can do. This may include actions that were taken on at earlier points, hopefully with one or two added components. Students should take this opportunity to write the actions they are presently committed to following and/or beginning and indicate whether each action is based on personal efforts (p), family actions (f), class involvement (cl) or community effort(c).

Note should be taken of suggested actions in the various resources indicated, especially after each of the Parshiot material studied during these lessons.

Additionally, 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 actions that will lead to *Izzun* 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.

[Time frame creation of **To Do List** – approximately 15 minutes]