

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

Lesson Two: We Have to Maintain The Land

Estimated Time: One class session, approximately 40 - 45 minutes
Suggested for Upper Elementary and Middle School Grades

The 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. As we have discussed, 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*.

The Teacher Asks the Students: 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 students 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 the 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.

[Time Frame: Approximately ten - fifteen minutes]

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

- Students should be encouraged to point out that we move from one seasonal statement about our aspirations in our **Tefillot** (prayers) to another one:

In the winter we insert in our prayers:

משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם Who brings the wind and causes the rain to descent

Whereas once Pesach begins, throughout the summer, and into Sukkot we say instead:

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?

The Teacher Continues: Consider the following story of Choni HaM'agel, for which the text is found in the Talmud (Tractate Ta'anis 23b).

תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף כג עמוד א

אמר רבי יוחנן: כל ימיו של אותו צדיק היה מצטער על מקרא זה +תהלים קכ"ו+ שיר המעלות בשוב ה' את שיבת ציון היינו כחולמים. אמר: מי איכא דניים שבעין שנין בחלמא? יומא חד הוה אזל באורחא, חזייה לההוא גברא דהוה נטע חרובא, אמר ליה: האי, עד כמה שנין טעין? - אמר ליה: עד שבעין שנין. - אמר ליה: פשיטא לך דחיית שבעין שנין? - אמר ליה: האי [גברא] עלמא בחרובא אשכחתי, כי היכי דשתלי לי אבהתי - שתלי נמי לבראי. יתיב, קא כריך ריפתא, אתא ליה שינתא, נים. אהדרא ליה משוניתא, איכסי מעינא, ונים שבעין שנין. כי קם חזייה לההוא גברא דהוה קא מלקט מינייהו. אמר ליה: את הוא דשתלתי? - אמר ליה: בר בריה אנא. אמר ליה: שמע מינה דניימי שבעין שנין. חזא לחמריה דאתיילידא ליה רמכי רמכי. אזל לביתיה, אמר להו: בריה דחוני המעגל מי קיים? - אמרו ליה: בריה ליתא, בר בריה איתא. אמר להו: אנא חוני המעגל. לא הימנוהו. אזל לבית המדרש, שמעינהו לרבנן דקאמרי: נהירן שמעתתין כבשני חוני המעגל, דכי הוי עייל לבית מדרשא, כל קושיא דהוה להו לרבנן הוה מפרק להו. אמר להו: אנא ניהו, ולא הימנוהו, ולא עבדי ליה יקרא כדמבעי ליה, חלש דעתיה, בעי רחמי ומית. אמר רבא, היינו דאמרי אינשי: או חברותא או מיתותא.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Taanis p. 23a, Soncino translation

R. Yohanan said: This righteous man [Honi] was throughout the whole of his life troubled about the meaning of the verse, "A Song of Ascents, When the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like unto them that dream." (Psalm 126:1) Is it possible for a man to dream continuously for seventy years?

One day he was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him, How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit? The man replied: Seventy years. He then further asked him: Are you certain that you will live another seventy years? The man replied: I found [ready grown] carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted these for me so I too plant these for my children.

Honi sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept a rocky formation enclosed him which hid him from sight and he continued to sleep for seventy years. When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and he asked him, "Are you the man who planted this tree?" The man replied: I am his grandson. Thereupon he exclaimed: It is clear that I slept for seventy years. He then caught sight of his donkey who had given birth to several generations of mules and he returned home. He there inquired, "Is the son of Honi the Circle-Drawer still alive?" The people answered him, "His son is no more, but his grandson is still living." Thereupon he said to them: "I am Honi the Circle Drawer," but no one would believe him. He then went to the House of Study and there he overheard the scholars say, "The law is as clear to us as in the days of Honi the Circle Drawer for whenever he came to the Temple he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had." Whereupon he called out, "I am he." But the scholars would not believe him nor did they give him the honor due to him. This hurt him greatly and he prayed [for death] and he died. Raba said: Hence the saying, "Either companionship or death."

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 inhibitors 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, the 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!

[Time Frame: Twenty five minutes]