

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

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

Let's begin this Study: As we consider the period of Sefirat HaOmer/ Counting the Omer, we may be aware of the connection between the holidays at both ends of this period. Peasch/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 holidays 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 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 receiving of the Torah, which we celebrate on *Shavuot*. The former freedoms are those of hope and anticipation, much as reflected in the additional name for *Pesach* of **הג האביב**, the festival of spring, 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 **הג הביקורים**

As we consider the shared theme of these different aspects of the holidays, we further note that barley is an unrefined offering. As Rabbi 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 Jewish people 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 Jewish people 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**, the Temple in Jerusalem. 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 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. How do the commandments (*mitzvot*) from the times of Temple with the barley offering relate to how we consume food today?

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

It's Time To Think About Our Actions: Think about what we have learned here. There are so many ways we are to prepare for the observance of **זמן מתן ספירת העמר** during the period of **תורתינו**

- What are some of the ways we can commit ourselves to proper refinement of ourselves and our interacting with our food and the land and resources from which it comes?
- How can our raised consciousness as we await the giving of our Torah and what it demands of us be applied to our thinking about the system of interdependence of our environment and the safety and continued care of all of its resources?

What did you and your classmates think of? Did you include:

- Checking for organically grown food
- Ensuring that our use of resources does not needlessly or excessively hurt our environment and lead to diminished resources
- Trying to consume products that come in less packaging
- Watching for the wasteful use of resources in producing what we buy
- Proper disposal of waste and composting when possible
- Supporting the growth and production of local products

- Watching and guarding endangered species and elements in our system of interdependence of which we are a part
- Using natural resources as much as possible instead of chemical substitutes
- And so much else...

You might want to check these websites for more information:

www.localharvest.org

<http://www.greenflagschools.org>

What if we each choose two or three of these actions that we can realistically begin to do in our lives to make a difference and try to work to refine our world continually? What actions do you want to commit to doing in your life?

Suggested Follow Up Activity: Watch and discuss *The Story of Stuff*. This is a twenty minute film about our use, misuse and abuse of resources and the negative impact of this cycle. Clearly, this is related to the Jewish requirement to not be wasteful, בל תשחית. It points to the need for refinement and conscious understanding of the *limited resources* we are working with in our daily lives. Go to www.storyofstuff.org for more information and the video.

