
Our Relationship to the Land: Meaning of the Omer
A Curriculum Guide
Canfei Nesharim

Teacher's Guide

By Dr. Sandra Sterling Epstein

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Introduction and Rationale: Introduction and Rationale: Canfei Nesharim (“the wings of eagles”) provides traditional Jewish teachings about the importance of protecting the environment, and empowers educators and community leaders across the Jewish community to provide those resources to their students and synagogue members. In so doing, the relationship between the teachings and dictates found in traditional instructional Jewish sources and modern environmental issues is stressed and developed. Within that mission, Canfei Nesharim is dedicated to producing and providing needed resources to our Orthodox Jewish Day Schools and other communities to support them in Torah-based environmental education.

To further these goals, Canfei Nesharim is producing one introductory and three learning units that will be developed during the calendar year of 2009 and piloted during the school season of 2009 - 2010. Each of the learning units will include approximately three lessons plans with various suggested modifications.

These three units will be

- linked to seasonal cycles in our lives and in the Jewish calendar,
- connected to the Parshiot HaShavuah and other Torah readings of the stated season,
- indicative of ways to interface our lives as Torah observant Jews and concerned and responsible community members who are dedicated to the protection and maintenance of our environment, and
- include suggested actual actions and behaviors that will bring healing and “fixing” to our environment within the context of our Jewish and Torah-based mindset.

These will be self-standing units, though schools and communities can certainly and are encouraged to expand upon them, taking the opportunity to connect them to existing units and courses of study as they are presently available in your schools. Further, please feel free to contact us at shulisrose@aol.com or evonne@canfeinesharim.org and share your experiences with the use of these materials and suggestions indicated in them as well as let us know about other successful programs and experiences in your school that are related to these stated goals and objectives.

The learning units are:

- Introduction to Environmental Awareness as a Jewish Responsibility (developed in March, 2009)
- Precious Water: Lessons of Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret (to be developed by September, 2009)
- Saving Energy: The Oil and Lights of Hannukah (to be developed by November, 2009)
- Our Relationship to the Land: Meaning of the Omer (developed in March, 2009)

It is being suggested that in considering our connection and responsibility both to Jewish teachings and our environment and their interaction, there are timely links that can be used to make such connections natural and useful in the packed school calendar.

Rationale for Unit:

Students in our schools have learned or are at some point going to look at the intrinsic connection that a people should have to the land on which they depend and which provides for them. To be sure, this is a basic element of so many peoples and civilizations that we study in Social Studies and History.

Clearly, there is an established *system of interdependence* that is basic to the Torah and the world view that it provides for Torah observant Jews in terms

of the ongoing relationship between G-d as the Creator of all that is, the land that G-d has created and fashioned, and the people that live on and off that land. Specifically, within the *chukim* and *mishpatim* as well as the narrative of the Torah and through the rest of the Tanach and the Talmud and so many other critical texts, there is ongoing expression given to the importance and critical nature of this relationship.

Simply put, we are commanded to maintain an ongoing awareness of the land and its resources as well as responsibly maintain and guard it carefully. ***This is clearly a Torah based concern for us as observant Jews and it is ever-present throughout our texts and the laws that dictate our way of life.*** Therefore, it is our responsibility to teach about this and to encourage our students and the members of our community to work responsibly to be aware of, protect and guard our land and resources – in other words to actively promote and try to do our part to achieve Environmental Sustainability. During the season of *Sefirat HaOmer*, as we move between the periods of our physical freedom from slavery in commemorating our Exodus from Egypt on *Pesach* and our spiritual acceptance of responsibility as we recall our acceptance of Torah on *Shavuot*, let us learn and accept our *hiyuv* to work and protect our land and resources in a Torah observant manner with the same *Kavannah* we would apply to so many other *Mitzvot*.

Big Ideas: *In this unit*, we will present materials and lessons that will address several BIG IDEAS that will run through all of the units and their lessons. These are:

1. Caring for the environment and active preservation of its elements and balance is a specific and important Jewish responsibility as indicated in our source texts (e.g. Torah, Talmud, etc.) and Halacha/instructed practices of our lives as Jews.
2. Awareness of and caring for the environment in a responsible manner reinforces our relationship to both the land that G-d created and the Creator of that land.
3. There are many precedents in our texts and history of awareness, need for, and practice of this responsibility.

4. Commitment to Environmental Sustainability is critical in insuring the safety and well being of future generations of mankind and the Jewish nation as part of that massive family.

Critical Themes: In exploring these BIG IDEAS, we will emphasize the following CRITICAL THEMES throughout these lessons as organizing principles:

Izzun/Balance – G-d created the world with an inherent balance and then gave us both the responsibility and instructions needed to maintain that balance. How do we mindfully and purposefully maintain this balance as a specific Jewish responsibility? While the world was originally created with this balance (see earlier text lesson on **Bereshit/Noah**), it quickly fell into imbalance and disrepair due to the thinking and desires of human beings. How do we commit ourselves to and craft an ongoing program of maintaining this ***Izzun***, whereby we actively work to repair the world that G-d has given us and work towards reclaiming the originally intended balance that G-d had ordained in a way that is true to and informed by Torah teachings and text?

Bal Tashchit/Not Wasting Resources – We must remember that we have an infinite amount of desires and possible uses for the products of our environment and earth but only a finite amount of resources and must use the land and its products appropriately and judiciously. This is a basic teaching in developing a Jewish approach to the environment.

Le'ovda U'Leshomra/Working and Caring for the Land – We are instructed to work and guard/maintain the land, with the goal of protecting it and its balance. This is truly a challenge and specifically demands that we balance a sense of self-interest with an understanding of and commitment to the greater collective good while purposely insuring the sustainability of our environment, while still recognizing our need to use it. How do we do this?

Critical Questions: In exploring and developing these BIG IDEAS, we will continually ask the following CRITICAL QUESTIONS, while confronting the challenges they present along with our students:

1. What does it mean for us to be aware of the land, care for the land and take responsibility for its welfare and health according to Jewish teachings?
2. How will observing these teachings and the practices they indicate lead to Environmental Sustainability for all of us as B'nai Adam – citizens of the world and as members of B'nai Yisrael – the Jewish people?
3. How can I come to accept the responsibility and commit myself to a series of ongoing practices in increasing my awareness of the land and caring for the land that G-d has given us in a meaningful manner that is reflective of the Jewish teachings and dictates to which I hold myself accountable?

Learning Objectives: Our goals for the students who participate in these lessons are as follows:

1. Learn Torah-based texts that support and promote the Jewish responsibility to care for and nurture as well as interact meaningfully with the environment and its elements;
2. Identify Environmental Sustainability and its various components as a specific Halacha-ordained Jewish responsibility and connect this responsibility and its elements to Hagim and Jewish seasons, which provide opportunities for heightened awareness of this responsibility; and
3. Engage in related activities that illustrate how our actions and raised consciousness can contribute to Environmental Sustainability; and commit to an ongoing plan of action for continued engagement.

Suggested Sources and Background Reading: It is highly recommended that the teacher and facilitator of these sessions do some background reading about the importance of Environmental Sustainability and the continual and collective need to protect the land on which we all depend as presented in a Torah based perspective.

Suggested resources include but are clearly not limited to the following:

Compendium of Sources in Halacha and the Environment, Ora Sheinson and Shai Spetgang, editors, Jerusalem: Canfei Nesharim Publication, 2005.

Etz Chayim Hee: A Torah Commentary for Environmental Learning and Action, Canfei Nesharim Publication, sponsored by the Gaia Fund, 2008. For this unit, it is specifically recommended to use the Parsha lessons for the following Parshiot: Shemini, Tazria, Metzora, Acharei Mot, Kedoshim, Emor, Behar, and Behchukotai (pp. 87 – 116). These are the Torah portions that are read during this period of *Sefirat HaOmer*. Note the use of this material in the lessons below.

In addition, please note that the website for Canfei Nesharim is www.canfeinesharim.org .

Additional websites that may be consulted and are indicated throughout this unit are:

<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/torah.php?id=11794&page=11794> (omer)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php?id=14184&page=14184> (shmittah and relationship to land)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php?page=11531> (Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz on barley offering)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/torah.php?id=16285&page=16285> (omer)
http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/make_difference.php?id=15627&page=15627 (land and food related action suggestions)
http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/make_difference.php?id=11483&page=11483 (connecting to your own land/backyard)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/parshas.php?id=13168&page=13168> (Avraham and Lot sharing the land)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/parshas.php?id=14564&page=14564> (includes some deep sources on our relationship/responsibility to our land)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/parshas.php?id=16895&page=16895> (on the fruits of the land of Israel)
<http://www.greenflagschools.org>
<http://www.epa.gov/teachers/teachresources.htm>
<http://www.epa.gov/epahome/school.htm>
<http://www.localharvest.org>
http://forestry.about.com/cs/treeid/f/Tree_ID_Start.htm

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

Lesson One: Everything Comes From The Land

Estimated Time: One to two class sessions, approximately 40 – 45 minutes, depending on which options are used

Suggested for Upper Elementary and Middle School Grades

Let's begin this Study: As we consider the period of Sefirat HaOmer/ Counting the Omer, Jews are generally aware of the connection between the Hagim at both ends of this period. Pesah/ 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 Hagim 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, the teacher asks students:

What is the Counting of the Omer/*Sefirat HaOmer* and what does it mean to us as observant and involved 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?

- Students brainstorm for a few moments about each question in turn and then the class composes a list of answers that should be kept to be reconsidered later. The teacher and class can revisit this list briefly at the end of this lesson, or preferably at the end of the three lessons indicated here.

Examples of ideas that can come from this exercise are:

- We are waiting for the giving of the Torah.
- We are waiting for the season of weddings and other *simchas*.
- We are remembering the barley and wheat harvest of our past and thinking of the farmers who still depend on it; after all we depend on their work.
- We are waiting for and observing the budding of trees and plants.
- We are waiting for the world to be in full glorious bloom.
- We are waiting for the delicious fruits we eat in the summer.
- We are waiting for the daily warmth of the sun and the longer days.
- We are waiting for

[Time Frame: 10 – 15 minutes]

The Teacher Says: So, we have been looking at aspects of our lives as Jews and as human beings that we may not generally be as attentive to given the daily rhythm of our lives. In thinking about this new awareness, we come closer to the land that produces all that we need as well as G-d and the notion that G-d brings all of this to us. Lets think about this as we read the following story together.

The Bracha and the Bread Basket

An adapted story

Dani came home from school as he did every day and offered to help his Ima prepare dinner for their entire family, observing the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av v'Em*. They set the table, prepared the food and when everyone was home, they sat down to eat. Before eating bread from the bread basket, all members of the family washed their hands and said the appropriate *Bracha* as they did every evening. Then, they all sat at the table and took bread from the bread basket and said together:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמוֹצֵיא לָחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

Dani's sister reported that in school that day, her second grade class visited the area's Kosher Bakery and learned about the process of how bread is made. They talked about where bread came from and how it was processed to the point where they bought and consumed it. The youngest child in the family, Rivkie explained that "Well that's simple silly. We all know where bread comes from. It comes from the grocery store, of course." All agreed that this was an absolutely appropriate answer from one so young. However, pensiveness set in as the older members of the family began to go mentally through the chain of events that brought the bread to their bread basket and table.

At this point, the family became involved in a conversation tracing the bread from its source as reflected in the *Bracha* they said to the bread basket on their table. They explained for Rivkie that the bread that we have on our table did not by any means begin its journey in the supermarket...

YOU TRY THIS FIRST With one or two of your classmates, try to trace the steps that the bread goes through before it gets to you. Be sure to include all of the steps involved.

In processing what you have just seen, go back to your lists that your group has created and see what actions you are already committed to that will increase our responsible stewardship of our environment and its elements and work towards the intended goal of maintaining a healthy and sustainable *system of interdependence*.

[Time Frame: Thirty five minutes, this would be an additional lesson]

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

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

Estimated Time: One to two class sessions, approximately 40 – 45 minutes, depending on which options are used
Suggested for Middle School Grades

Let's begin this Study: As we consider the period of Sefirat HaOmer/ Counting the Omer, Jews are generally aware of the connection between the Hagim at both ends of this period. Pesah/ 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 Hagim 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, the teacher asks students:

What is the Counting of the Omer/*Sefirat HaOmer* and what does it mean to us as observant and involved 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?

- Students brainstorm for a few moments about each question in turn and then the class composes a list of answers that should be kept to be reconsidered later. The teacher and class can revisit this list briefly at the end of this lesson, or preferably at the end of the three lessons indicated here.

[Time Frame: 10 – 15 minutes]

The 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.

- The text can be read and questions answered in *chevrutot* or as a whole group. It is highly recommended that the use of *chevrutot* allows the students to *own* the material and lessons discovered to a greater degree.

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 acceptance of the Torah, which we celebrate on *Shavuot*. The former freedoms are those of hope and anticipation, much as reflected in the additional name of חג האביב indicating that this is the spring holiday, 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 חג הביקורים .

As we consider the shared theme of these different aspects of the holidays, we further note that barley is an unrefined offering. As Rav 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 B'nai Yisrael 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 B'nai Yisrael 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**
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?

- Students should be given time and space to consider these questions as we proceed through this discussion. The teacher should take this opportunity as well to think of these known elements in new and expansive ways that are wholly informed by the text and the practices we recall.

Note to the Teacher: As an addition reference and source, you might want to refer to <http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php?page=11531> (Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz on barley offering)

This is a matter of consciously and purposefully living our lives in so many different ways 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. Let us think about how we live today and how this development can be connected. To be sure, we eat only that which is **Kosher** and permitted according to Jewish law. Is it possible that there are additional considerations beyond **Kashrut** in terms of the food we consume that could be linked to the lessons indicated here?

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

Can you think of ways in which our food is “corrupted” or ruined in ways that are not good for us? Think about what types of processing and producing of food are **not** healthy for us or for our environment. (For example, when natural foods are preserved indefinitely through the use of chemical preservatives or fruits are made to look more attractive to us, are these healthy practices for us?)

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- Try to involve the Science teacher and nutrition conscious members of your community in finding meaningful answers to these questions.

Let’s look at our growing awareness of how our food is produced and what it is doing to our bodies. Can you think of some of our eating habits that would **not** follow the pattern indicated here during the period of raised awareness of our being a sanctified and refined people?

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

- Checking for organically grown food
- Insuring that our use of resources does not needlessly or excessively hurt our environment and lead to diminished resources
- Checking for how products are packaged
- 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...

Be sure to check some of the websites indicated here including:

www.localharvest.org

http://www.greenflagschools.org/mshs/project_areas/

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?

[Time Frame: About twenty five minutes]

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. Clearly, as we have discussed here and elsewhere 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** to another one.

משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם
מוריד הטל

What is the significance of these statements? What do they reflect about the land of Israel specifically, and its needs? Are we willing to say the appropriate **Tefillot** for these basic needs of our land?

What else are we willing to do? What **ACTIONS** are we willing to take to parallel these statements in insuring the well being of our land?

The Teacher Continues: Notice the element of *refinement and development* in our environment during this time. We also note this process as we move from the offerings of the period of the barley offerings of *Sefirat HaOmer* to the refined wheat offerings of the end of the period we count.

When we think of these two types of offering,

ספירת העמר
שתי הלחם

We note the parallel notion of the rawness of our physical freedom of *Pesah* and our need to refine ourselves through the receiving of our Torah on *Shavuot*.

G-d has clearly done G-d's part in giving us the means to refine and be refined. In fact, we are taught that the very reason for *Mitzvot* is to do just that – refine us as human beings.

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 (Ta'anis 23b). [Here is just an easily accessible narrative.]

Choni HaM'agel seems to have been a forward thinking environmentalist who was aware of his surroundings and his interrelationship with the land. We are taught that when the world needed rain, Rabbis would send school children to him and they would grasp the corner of the garment he was wearing and plead, "Father, Father, give us rain." He would then ask G-d to send rain for the sake of the children that had come to him.

One time he prayed for rain during a drought and to make his point, he drew a circle and refused to move from within a circle until the rain came - which it finally did. We are also told this is how he received the name Choni HaM'agel, Choni the one who drew circles.

Another story that is told of Choni HaM'agel is one in which he learns an important lesson about our land and its trees. One day he was journeying

far, and eventually, he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him, "How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?" The man replied: "Seventy years." To this reply, Choni asked him: "So, how can you be certain that you will live another seventy years and see the fruit that this tree will produce?" The man replied, "See, I found already grown carob trees in the world. Obviously those who came before me planted these for me so I too must plant these for my children and the generations that follow."

Choni then sat down to eat and once he was satisfied, he fell asleep. We are taught that as he slept, a cave formed around him and hid him. He stayed asleep for 70 years. Finally, he awoke and came outside of the cave. He noted that there was an elderly gentleman gathering and eating carobs. Choni asked the man, "Excuse me, sir, did you plant this tree from which you are now eating?" The man replied, "No, my grandfather planted it for me so I could eat and now I will do the same for my grandchildren."

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 inhabitants 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]

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 Torah based imperative.

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

טו וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבְּיָאֲכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה
שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָתוֹת תְּמַיִמַת תִּהְיֶינָה : טז עַד מַמְחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׂבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ
חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה 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 (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 *B’nai Yisrael*? 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 our Torah wants us to take on in our lives?

3. If the offerings that the *B’nai Yisrael* 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, if we find it very challenging to relate completely to the meaning of the *Sefirat HaOmer* given that we are not living with our *Beit HaMikdash* or 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* that we say throughout the day.

Consider the following examples:

בְּרָכָה עַל הַפֶּת :

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמּוֹצִיא לַחֵם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

עַל תְּבֻשִׁיל מִחֲמִשֶׁת מֵיַי דָּגָן :

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מֵיַי מְזוֹנוֹת.

עַל הַיַּיִן :

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגֶּפֶן.

עַל פְּרֵי הָעֵץ :

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָעֵץ.

עַל הַיְרָקוֹת :

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה.

עַל דָּבָר שֶׁאֵין גְּדוּלוֹ מִן הָאָרֶץ :

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַכֹּל נִהְיָה בְּדָבָרוֹ.

עַל רֵיחַ טוֹב שֶׁבִּפְרוֹת :

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַנוֹתֵן רֵיחַ טוֹב בְּפְרוֹת.

עַל רֵיחַ טוֹב שֶׁבְּעֵצִים וּשְׂחִיחִים :

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא עֵצִי בְּשָׂמִים.

עַל רֵיחַ טוֹב שֶׁבְּעֵשְׂבִים :

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא עֵשְׂבִי בְּשָׂמִים.

על ריח טוב שאינו מן הצומח :
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מִיַּי בְּשָׂמִים.

We learn from our sages, *Chazal*, that we MUST say the appropriate *Beracha* before enjoying and/or partaking of any parts of the land's produce and resources. If we fail to do so, it is as if we are stealing from G-d. According to *Berachot 35a* in the *Talmud*, before we say a *Beracha* the item we are holding belongs to G-d. Only after we say the *Beracha* is it ours to enjoy and use. Do you understand this notion? Why are we taught this importance of *Berachot*?

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?

[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 coherent 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 earlier in the year) 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]

Our Relationship to the Land: Meaning of the Omer

Alternate Lesson Plan for More Text Oriented Groups

Estimated Time: Three class sessions, approximately 45 minutes
Suggested for Middle School Grades

Note: This is a great option for those classes/ groups who wish to use the ongoing rhythm of Parshat HaShavuah learning as a means of introducing Environmental Education components.

Suggested Preparation: The readings below may have already been assigned, and given to students to prepare before they meet as groups as a homework assignment. They should be read along with the actual Parsha for which each *Dvar Torah* is indicated. In this case, they may use the group time to process the material, using the organizer and taking the initiative to do some searches for follow up materials. This would be a wonderful opportunity to use the site of <http://www.greenflagschools.org> to locate additional follow up information and activities.

Let's think about this together: G-d is the ultimate strategic planner. G-d sets everything in place and gives us continual reminders about how we are to “keep it all going,” constantly balancing our role of working and using the land with our role of maintaining and guarding the land, as we discussed in earlier lessons. Now, as we move through the season of *Sefirat HaOmer*, we see these reminders in our cycle of readings in *Parshat Hashavuah*. In this activity, the teacher will divide the class into smaller learning groups, and give each student the appropriate material from the *Parshiot* that we read during this season.

For the purposes of this lesson, we will be using the following materials from: **Etz Chayim Hee: A Torah Commentary for Environmental Learning and Action**, Canfei Nesharim Publication, sponsored by the Gaia Fund, 2008.

To locate these materials: Note that the link for these materials is <http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/parshas.php> Go to this website

and scroll down the Parshat HaShavuah list until you get to each of these texts.

Additional web connections suggested are as follows:

<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/torah.php?id=11794&page=11794> (omer)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php?id=14184&page=14184> (shmittah and relationship to land)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/torah.php?id=16285&page=16285> (omer)
http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/make_difference.php?id=15627&page=15627 (land and food related action suggestions)
http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/make_difference.php?id=11483&page=11483 (connecting to your own land/backyard)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/parshas.php?id=13168&page=13168> (Avraham and Lot sharing the land)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/parshas.php?id=14564&page=14564> (includes some deep sources on our relationship/responsibility to our land)
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/parshas.php?id=16895&page=16895> (on the fruits of the land of Israel)

Alternatively, each group can be given one of the following texts from the hard copy of these materials (copies can be made for the purpose of this lesson and experience):

1. Parshat Shemini, “An Abundance of Fish,” by Candace Nachman, pp. 87 – 89.
2. Parshat Tazria, “Healing Ourselves, Healing Our Planet,” by Rabbi Natan Greenberg, pp. 90 – 93.
3. Parshat Metzorah, “Natural Healing,” by Ramona Rubin, pp. 94 – 96.
4. Parshat Acherei Mot, “Raising up the Physical Sustainably: Lessons of the Ketoret,” by Baruch Herschkopff, pp. 97 – 100.
5. Parshat Kedoshim, “Corporate and Consumer Responsibility,” by Rabbi Carmi Wisemon, pp. 101 – 104.
6. Parshat Emor, “Our Relationship to Other Creatures,” by Ora Sheinson, pp. 105 – 108.
7. Parshat Behar, “The Mitzva of Shemittah/The Sabbatical Year,” by Noam Yehuda Sendor, pp. 109 – 112.
8. Parshat Bechukotai, “The Blessing of Rain,” by Jonathan Neril, pp. 113 – 116.

Note to Teacher: There are many ways in which this material can be used. What is being suggested here is to divide capable classes into eight groups of two to three students each (or less groups, combining Parshiot that are

combined in non-leap years) and have smaller learning groups (*Chevrutot*) go through the indicated reading, fill in the worksheets provided and then have groups report to the class about their findings. The members of the class can then take notes on each presentation (if the teacher feels that the group is capable) and additional copies of the indicated texts can be distributed to the students.

- Students should have been given the assigned material to read prior to this lesson and spend fifteen to twenty minutes in groups discussing the most critical points (using the provided Information Organizer) and then ten minute presentations should be made, ideally by all groups to the entire class. If time is tight, the teacher can condense this by choosing one lesson per text.
- Teachers should be familiar with all materials and through reading the material prior to these lessons, can and should focus on elements that fit well into the ongoing involvements of the class and environmental issues that are of particular importance to you and your students. There is a great deal of material and related discussions that are possible; obviously, as in any educational learning unit, decisions will and should be made about the directions you wish to take your class. This should be balanced with the overall purpose of these lessons in *stressing that environmental awareness and sustainability is clearly a Jewish and Torah mandated responsibility about which our students and community members should learn and take action.*

Alternative Options:

1. The class can do one of these Parshiot texts together as a model, with the teacher guiding the group through the process and then divide into groups for the remainder of the texts.
2. The class can go through the material together for chosen Parshiot with the teacher and then in small groups work through the Information Organizer. If this option is chosen, each text should be done separately and the teacher may need to make additional copies of the **Information Organizer**.
3. Regardless of when these lessons are actually implemented, the teacher and class can use this as their Parshat HaShavuah class for the appropriate weeks.

Obviously, there are other options depending on the level, group personality and other factors in your class. Use the option that works best in your reality. Regardless of which choice is utilized, it is estimated that this activity will take about one hour, thus the need for two classes.

Possible Follow-up Actions to Take:

1. Students can be encouraged to transport this lesson to their family and share it with them at an appropriate moment, perhaps around the Shabbat dinner table, during the appropriate weeks. Educating others and sharing learning information with family and friends is an important action that all of us can take.
2. The class can make a composite list of all of the actions that can be taken and commit themselves to actual implementation of agreed upon actions to work consciously and purposefully towards attaining Environmental Sustainability.
3. The class can take the list in #2 and put it in a public place in the school to monitor changes in behaviors amongst the students, faculty and other members of the academic community. The focus here is AWARENESS of what we can do to work towards Environmental Sustainability and Health of our larger community. You could even monitor expenses for disposable products in the school and any changes in expenses for that, use of electricity, etc. in the school community. Get everyone involved and show how its to the collective benefit to be aware of these practices and watch them.
4. The class can look at the various activity links and choose a few actions to actually take on for the school, as suggested here in #3 and in the various materials indicated.

[Time frame: approximately 25 - 30 minutes in group work and 60 - 80 minutes in sharing group findings – about 10 minutes per group; the teacher will use various options above in processing this material. Further, the last class can be focused on engaging in an activity connected to Environmental Awareness and Sustainability as suggested above.]

Information Organizer

Text and Intentions/Instructions in *Parshat* _____:

What Has Gone Wrong in our Reality/ Problems We Confront:

Possible Actions Suggested That Could Bring Healing and *Izzun*:

Information Organizer

Text and Intentions/Instructions in *Parshat* _____:

What Has Gone Wrong in our Reality/ Problems We Confront:

Possible Actions Suggested That Could Bring Healing and *Izzun*:

Information Organizer

Text and Intentions/Instructions in *Parshat* _____:

What Has Gone Wrong in our Reality/ Problems We Confront:

Possible Actions Suggested That Could Bring Healing and *Izzun*:
