



## 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.

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*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?

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- 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?

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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.localharvest.org)  
[http://www.greenflagschools.org/mshs/project\\_areas/](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?

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[Time Frame: About twenty five minutes]