



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]