



## Where Does Bread Come From? Sefirat HaOmer and the Connection to the Land: A Program for School-Aged Children

### **Introduction:**

The time between Pesach and Shavuot, when we count the Omer, is a time not only for spiritual reflection and refinement of our middot, but an opportunity to connect to the land of Israel and our responsibility for the earth.

Most of us are familiar with the spiritual implications of the holidays of Pesach as the time of our freedom and leaving Egypt, and Shavuot, the time of receiving the Torah. The time of “Counting the Omer” between these two holidays is a time for spiritual refinement, elevating our freedom to a level at which we are prepared to receive the Torah. Less well-known are the agricultural aspects to the Pesach and Shavuot holidays, which mirror and inform the spiritual aspects.

These agricultural aspects make the time of “Counting the Omer” a time to look toward our Jewish sources for greater understanding of our connection to the Land of Israel and the earth, as well as our responsibility to protect that land and the environment as a whole.

In ancient Israel, Jewish society was primarily agrarian (farm-based) and most Jews were farmers. The Shalosh Regalim (Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot) had deep agricultural connections along with the spiritual significance. On Pesach, in the Beit HaMikdash (Temple in Jerusalem), the kohanim (priests) would begin bringing the Omer of barley flour mixed with oil in the Temple. This Omer offering was brought every day in the Temple until Shavuot, when two loaves of wheat bread were offered.

Thus, during the time of Sefirat HaOmer, we refine ourselves (as wheat bread is more refined than barley). As we refine ourselves, we pray for the land of Israel and ask Hashem for a good wheat harvest. In ancient times, this would be followed by making the finest bread out of the choicest wheat crop to present to Hashem as an offering.

On Pesach, we change our prayers for rain in our tefilah, in hopes that the harsh rain will cease to provide us with a healthy and plentiful wheat crop. We pray instead for moisture in the form of more gentle “dew.” In effect, we are praying for the welfare of our land. Also during the “Counting of the Omer,” our spiritual refinement is understood as strengthening our relationship with Hashem and thereby increasing the fertility of the land (see 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph of Shema). In our time, part of our spiritual refinement might include improving our relationship to the land of Israel – and the land upon which we live.

The aim of the following program is to help children better understand this connection to the land during Sefirat HaOmer and our responsibility to take care of our Earth, especially the Land of Israel.

(See “Counting the Omer: A Tool for Nature Consciousness” by Ellen Cohn at [www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/torah.php?page=11794](http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/torah.php?page=11794) for sources on the connection between Sefirat HaOmer and the land.)

### **Activity:**

1. Tell the children that after the first day of Pesach (beginning on April 8) and before Shavuot (beginning on May 28) we will be counting the Omer for 49 days (seven weeks). (See [www.torahtots.com/holidays/pesach/sefirathaomer.htm](http://www.torahtots.com/holidays/pesach/sefirathaomer.htm) for more information on Sefirat HaOmer.) Explain

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how on Pesach we bring the barley offering and on Shavuot we bring the two loaves of bread to the Temple. In between, during the “Omer period,” we should pray for a good wheat harvest, increase our good deeds and adherence to the mitzvot, and protect the environment, all of which will in turn affect the quality of the wheat crop in the Land of Israel.

2. Ask the children where we get bread from. Some may say from the supermarket. Others may have experience making challah or watching their parents make bread. Ask them to think about how bread is actually produced.
3. In pairs or small groups, have children brainstorm all of the steps that the bread goes through before it gets to us (including planting the wheat, harvesting the crop, baking the bread, transporting it to the store, etc.) One option is to have the children make a diagram or a poster reflecting all of the parts of the bread-making process.

The following YouTube link from the Discovery Channel goes through the process of producing bread and may help the children think of more steps:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UjUWfwWAC4>

The following resources may help you add ideas to the children’s suggestions:

<http://www.beyondbread.com/html/breadMakingII.htm>

<http://www.breadinfo.com/flour.shtml>

4. Have the children bake bread and/or visit a kosher (if possible) bakery to watch the process of baking bread.

A good bread-making lesson plan with recipe is available at [http://www.michigan.gov/mda/0,1607,7-125-2961\\_2971-67074--,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/mda/0,1607,7-125-2961_2971-67074--,00.html) (Note that you should replace milk with soy or rice milk so that the bread will be pareve.)

### **Discussion:**

1. Ask the children what surprised them most about the process of making bread. Was it more complicated than they expected? What do they think it was like for the kohanim (priests) making bread after offering the unleavened Omer offering for 49 days?
2. Ask the children what they learned about the connection of the land to Sefirat HaOmer. Why it is our responsibility to protect the Land of Israel? Elicit answers such as “we have the power to help the grain crop be better,” “we can make a difference to the land in Israel,” etc.
3. Ask, “What can we do to protect the Land of Israel?” Encourage answers such as pray for the land and the rain, plant trees in Israel through JNF, give tzedaka to other environmental organizations that help Israel, etc.
4. Ask, “What can we do to protect the land we live in?” Encourage answers such as buying more local food, turn off the water when we’re brushing our teeth, save energy by turning off the lights when we leave a room, recycle, reuse items, throw trash away, never throw things in the gutters, etc.

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