



Counting the Omer, Connecting to Our Land

"Nature does not stand between you and Me, but you stand between Nature and Me. It is according to your behavior towards Me that everything that flourishes and breathes for you in your sphere, lives or dies, flourishes or withers, dies off or endures."

— Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch to Shemot 34:19

The period of counting the Omer abounds with potential for transformation. To connect to some of the rich spiritual meaning of this season, we can take this precious opportunity to reawaken our relationship to the land of Israel. We can also take this opportunity to refine ourselves by considering how our actions affect others, the land of Israel, and our own land where we live.

Jewish festivals, in addition to their spiritual meanings, are described in the Torah and Mishna as agricultural festivals. When we were primarily an agricultural people, we were able to appreciate the natural cycles God put in the world and connect to G-d by offering some of the produce of the land of Israel on Pesach, during the counting of the Omer, and on Shavuot.

If we act according to the Divine will, God blesses nature with bounty. If not, nature itself suffers because of our actions. One manifestation of our relationship with nature can be seen from G-d's judgment of the grain harvest. The Mishna teaches that on Pesach the world is judged for the grain. Rabbi Yehudah, in the name of Rabbi Akiva, teaches that we offer an "Omer" on Passover so that the produce in the fields will be blessed.

The barley Omer offering, made on Pesach, and the two wheat loaves, offered on Shavuot, had to be brought from the choicest grain of the new harvests of the land of Israel. For the Omer, the Beit Din (Court) in Jerusalem would send emissaries to reap barley from moist, standing grain from farmland outside of Jerusalem, enough to yield about five liters of flour. On the evening after the first day of Pesach the local townspeople would gather around at night and excitedly watch. The emissaries would proceed to harvest, parch, refine, grind, and sift the barley into fine flour. Then the Cohen (priest) would wave it in the Temple "to gain favor for you" [the Jewish people].

For each of the remaining 49 days the Cohen in Jerusalem would bring the Omer offering and Jews throughout the land would count the day of the Omer until Shavuot, the 50th day. On Shavuot, in a public acknowledgment of God's goodness for providing the wheat harvest, the Cohen waved the two loaves of wheat bread, which according to Rabbi Yochanan is "[in acknowledgment of] Him to Whom are Heaven and Earth."

In ancient times, the spiritual cycle of Pesach, Omer and Shavuot directly related to our agricultural needs. We have not observed these commands in almost 2,000 years. This separation has had deep consequences for our relationship to the land. Today, we know the difference between a PDF and a jpeg but may not know how to distinguish between a sheave of barley and a sheave of wheat. But these traditions, and the practices that do exist today can help us remember the connections between land, dew, grain, and G-d.

Every year during Pesach, we pray for the health of the grain crop during the prayer for dew: "Dew and plenty, may they fill our granaries." In saying this, we can focus on Hashem accepting our prayers for beneficial dew and healthy harvests. This is true especially when we realize that major droughts in northern China and Australia have significantly impacted global wheat harvests in recent years.

The Omer period in Temple times transitioned from offering barley flour (the unbaked product of a grain often fed to animals) to bringing loaves of wheat bread (a refined product of the choicest grain). The refinement of ourselves during the Omer precisely parallels this process. Each day corresponds to a different character trait, improving our relationships with other people, with Hashem, and with ourselves. During the Omer one can cultivate greater sensitivity, awareness, humility, self-control, and spiritual discipline — the building blocks needed to care for other people and the land.

The process of "counting the Omer" offers an opportunity for strengthening and "refining" our character, which is, in turn, deeply connected to the environment that we see around us. To connect to the rich spiritual meaning of this season, we can connect to the land where we live by growing vegetable gardens and purchasing local food. We can learn more about the state of the land in Israel (see reverse side) and what we can do to protect it. We can refine ourselves by considering for how our actions affect others, the land of Israel, and the planet. Continue throughout the Omer period, and by Shavuot you will have changed yourself — and the world.

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