



Partners In Torah
San Diego-Los Angeles-Venutra
Take home Dvar Torah

Emor
תשפ"ד

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Hello, Welcome!

Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

Partners in Torah has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Thank you for joining us!

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.

This week's portion Emor contains the five mitzvot relating to the קרבן העומר - *the Omer Sacrifice*.

The first mitzvah is to bring an *omer* of barley (**omer** is the name of a unit measurement equal to, according to various opinions, between 3½ and 5 pounds) as a sacrifice on the second day of Passover (Mitzva #302 of the 613 commandments). As is says in (Leviticus 23:10):

(י) דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי תֵבֵאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וּקְצַרְתֶּם אֶת קְצִירָהּ וְהֵבֵאתֶם אֶת עֹמֶר רֵאשִׁית קְצִירְכֶם אֶל הַכֹּהֵן

10) Speak to the Israelites and tell them, "When you come to the land that I am going to give you, and you reap its harvest, you must bring an omer of your first reaping to the priest."

On the second day of Pesach, the 16th day of Nissan, a special sacrifice called the קרבן העומר - *the Omer sacrifice* - was added to the daily sacrifice routine. It consisted of a one-year-old sheep, and an *omer* of barley flour, sifted 13 times, mixed with oil and a small measure of incense. A Kohen would wave the flour offering in four directions, touch it to the southwest corner of the outside altar, and then take a small amount of the mixture and burn it in the fire on the altar. The Kohanim divided the remainder of the mixture among themselves and ate it.

The next three mitzvot of the *Omer* forbid eating any bread, roasted kernels, or plump kernels from the new crop of grain until the *Omer* offering is brought (Mitzvot ##303, 304, & 305). As it says (ibid):

(יד) וְלֶחֶם וְקֹלֵי וְכֶרֶם לֹא תֹאכְלוּ עַד עֵצָם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה עַד הֵבִיאְכֶם אֶת קֶרְבֶּן אֱלֹהֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם בְּכֹל מִשְׁבְּתֵיכֶם

14) *You shall not eat (1) **bread** or (2) **roasted kernels** or (3) **plump kernels** until this very day, until you bring the offering of your G-d; it is an eternal decree for your generations in all your dwelling places.*

When there is no Holy Temple, beginning the day after the 16th day of Nissan they may partake of the new grain.

The last of the five Omer-mitzvot is to count each of the 49 days from the day the *Omer* Sacrifice was brought until the festival of Shavuot, which is the 50th day, as it says (Leviticus 23;15,16):

טו) וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָתְכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָּתוֹת
תְּמִימָה תִּהְיֶינָה
טז) עַד מַמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה
לִידָוָד:

15) *You shall count for yourselves – from the morrow of the rest day, (the first day of Passover) from the day when you bring the Omer of the waiving – **seven weeks, they shall be complete.** 16) *Until the morrow of the seventh week you shall count, **fifty days**; and you shall offer a new meal-offering to Hashem.**

Notice that the Torah mandates counting seven complete weeks as well as a counting of 49 days. This is why, when counting the *Omer*, we are careful to mention both the weeks and the days.

To fulfill this mitzvah, while standing, we make a blessing at the beginning of each day of the *Omer* (which is after the stars come out), stating that Hashem has commanded us to count the *Omer*. For example, on the 29th day we would say: “Today is the 29th day, which is four weeks and one day to the *Omer*.”

It seems logical to say that these five mitzvot relating to the *Omer Sacrifice*, comprise a unit and are connected to one another. But how do we connect the dots between a sacrifice, the prohibition to eat of the new grains, and a daily counting exercise from Pesach to Shavuot?

Rabbi Yaakov Zvi Mecklenbeurg (1785 - 1865) in his work *הכתב והקבלה* provides the following insightful explanation.

The Torah says (ibid):

(יא) וְהִנִּיף אֶת הָעֹמֶר לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לְרִצְוֹנְכֶם מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת יְנִיפְנּוּ הַכֹּהֵן

11) *He shall wave the Omer before Hashem to gain favor for you; on the morrow of the rest day (Pesach) the Kohen shall wave it.*

The Omer was waved up and down and to and fro - all four directions of the earth. Here we stand when the winter crop is complete and ready for harvest.

Nothing lifts a man's heart and brings him to sin more than wealth. When a person feels that he has everything that he needs, he thinks that he is "set" and that he no longer needs Hashem. Therefore, before we taste even one kernel of the new crop, we are enjoined to wave the first *omer* of barley before Hashem to demonstrate that we acknowledge that Hashem, Who dwells in every corner of the world, is the One Who has bestowed this bounty upon us. Although we have plowed and planted and have done all the necessary preparations, ultimately it is Hashem who brings forth the success of our endeavors. Without Hashem's blessing, all is for naught.

This is how the *Sefer Hachinuch* (attributed by some to Rav Aharon Halevi of Barcelona of the 13th century) enlightens us about the meaning of the mitzvah of the *Omer Sacrifice* in Mitzvah #302, the Mitzvah to bring the *Omer Sacrifice*.

מִשְׂרָשֵׁי הַמִּצְוָה, כְּדֵי שְׁנֵתְבוֹנֵן מִתּוֹךְ הַמַּעֲשֵׂה הַחֲסֵד הַגְּדוֹל שֶׁעוֹשֶׂה הַשֵּׁם בְּרוּךְ הוּא
עִם בְּרִיּוֹתָיו לַחֲדָשׁ לְהֵם שְׁנָה שְׁנָה תְּבוּאָה לְמַחִיָּה, לִכֵּן רָאוּי לָנוּ שְׁנִקְרִיב לוֹ בְּרוּךְ הוּא
מִמְנָה, לְמַעַן נִזְכּוֹר חֲסֵדוֹ וְטוֹבוֹ הַגְּדוֹל טָרֵם נִהְנֶה מִמְנָה וּמִתּוֹךְ שְׁנֵהִיָּה רָאוּיִן לְבִרְכָה
בְּהַכְשֵׁר מַעֲשֵׂינוּ לִפְנֵי תִּתְבָּרֵךְ תְּבוּאָתֵינוּ וְיוֹשֵׁלֵם חֲפֵץ הַשֵּׁם בְּנוּ, שְׁחַפֵּץ מְרֹב טוֹבוֹ
בְּבִרְכַת בְּרִיּוֹתָיו

The understanding of this mitzvah is that through this act, prior to partaking of the new crop of grain, we acknowledge and remember the great kindness and goodness of Hashem that He provides grain and sustenance for his creatures each and every year. And through doing this worthy deed, we make ourselves worthy of Hashem's blessing, and He will bless our grain and thus fulfill His desire to bestow blessing upon his creatures.

This is very much like the concept of reciting a blessing on food or a beverage before partaking of it. The short blessing acknowledges Hashem as the source of our blessing, and, in turn, because we have correctly connected the gift to Hashem, He bestows more blessings upon us.

The Midrash adds an additional insight into the matter.

מדרש רבה ויקרא - פרשה כח פסקה א

א"ר ינאי : בנוהג שבעולם אדם לוקח ליטרא אחת של בשר מן השוק כמה יגיעות הוא יגע, כמה צער הוא מצטער עד שבישלה. והבריות ישנין על מטותיהן והקדוש ברוך הוא משיב רוחות ומעלה עננים ומגדל צמחים ומדשן את הפירות ואין נותנים לו אלא שכר העומר הה"ד והבאתם את עומר ראשית קצירכם אל הכהן

Rabbi Yanai said: When a person buys a pound of meat from the store, how much work and toil must he put into preparing it before it is ready to eat. And while people are sleeping in their beds, Hashem makes the winds blow that bring the clouds that irrigate the earth to bring forth delicious fruits and vegetables for us to eat, and all we give Him in return is one omer of barley.

The offering of a few pounds of barley flour, the *Omer Sacrifice*, shows that we understand that crops do not grow by themselves. They cannot grow without Hashem's love and care to create the proper climate and conditions for their growth. Although it all occurs while we are asleep, we know that Hashem's great kindness is what allows it all to happen.

A different Midrash adds yet another dimension to the Omer sacrifice.

מדרש רבה ויקרא - פרשה כח פסקה ג
אמר רבי ברכיה אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה : לך אמור להם לישראל כשהייתי
נותן לכם את המן הייתי נותן עומר לכל אחד ואחד מכם הה"ד (שמות טו) עומר
לגלגולת ועכשיו שאתם נותנים לי את העומר אין לי אלא עומר אחד מכלכם

Rabbi Brachia said: Hashem told Moshe. Tell the Jewish people that when I gave them the mana, I would give a full omer of mana for each one of you, but now, when you give me an omer, I ask only one omer from all of you.

The Midrash connects the *Omer Sacrifice* that the Jewish people brought after entering Israel, to the *omer* (measure) of mana that Hashem gave per person during the 40 years that the Jewish people travelled through the wilderness. The measure of grain that we are offering to Hashem as a sacrifice is our way of expressing to Hashem that we understand that our daily bread, is exactly like the ration of mana that He gave to the Jewish people in the wilderness, one omer per person. And although this omer is not an open miracle as the mana was, we know that Hashem is behind the scenes manipulating nature such, that we receive our daily bread.

This lesson was only necessary once the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel, where the miraculous sustenance that they enjoyed for 40 years would no longer be the norm. Hashem used this *open-miracle policy* only when He was in the mode of establishing the foundational beliefs of the Jewish nation. Once and for all, through the ten plagues, and through the constant miracles that accompanied the Jewish people throughout their 40-year journey in the wilderness, Hashem established the fundamental tenets of our Torah, viz, that He created the world, that He controls the world, and that He is involved with each individual in the Jewish nation. Over the 40 years, these

foundations were ingrained in our grandparents while they were in Hashem's loving, miraculous cocoon.

Once they would enter the land of Israel, however, these miracles would stop, and the people would have to return to the conventional ways of procuring their food. They would plant, they would water, they would weed, etc., thinking, "it sure looks like it's me who is doing everything around here!" The danger of forgetting Hashem and thinking that "It's all me!" would be very great. Hence came the lesson of the Omer to set us straight and prevent us from losing sight of the reality that Hashem is behind the scenes making everything work perfectly so that we have our daily food, just like the mana. The same is true as far as all of our other blessings are concerned.

Imagine the scene in a typical Jewish home after the Jewish people have entered the land of Israel. The child wakes up in the morning and excitedly tells his mother.

"Ma, I'll go out and get the mana this morning!"

His mother says, "Son, we are now in the land of Israel and there is no more mana."

"What? No mana? What will we eat?" he asks incredulously.

His mother answers. "Here's what we are going to do. We are going to take a kernel of wheat and place it into the ground where it will disintegrate. After a few weeks, a sprout will begin growing out of it, and soon that sprout will turn into a strong stalk with many kernels of wheat. We will take those kernels, shell them, grind them into flour, mix that flour with water and make a dough, let the dough rise, and shape it into loaves. We will then place them into the oven and bake them. A short time later we will have delicious bread to eat!"

"WOW!" exclaims the child. "That's a miracle!"

This explains well the connection between the Omer offering and the prohibition to eat any of the new crop until after the Omer is brought. But why the counting of 49 days until Shavuot? What's the connection there?

The answer emerges from a deeper understanding of the word “עומר” – *omer*.

The above-referenced sefer *והקבלה* has a unique take on this word's meaning. Rav Mecklenbeurg explains its etymology as deriving from the word “והתעמר בו,” which means, “and he **subjugated** him to work for him” (Deuteronomy 24:7). This second meaning of the word *omer* (“to subjugate”) expresses that the purpose of Hashem's blessing to us is not to be taken as an end unto itself, to be used to fulfill our own selfish desires. Rather, it is the tool that Hashem gives us to free us to serve Him.

Understanding the word “omer” in this way gives a whole new meaning to the mitzvah of “counting the omer” from Pesach to Shavuot.

The purpose of the Exodus from Egypt was for the Jewish people to receive the Torah, Hashem's prescription for leading a healthy wholesome life. With this, they would become Hashem's servants and ambassadors of good to the world. Just as when they left Egypt, they began preparing themselves to be receptacles worthy of receiving the Holy Torah, so, too, each year, we too must prepare ourselves and make ourselves worthy of receiving the Torah.

How do we prepare ourselves to receive the Torah? By accepting to be Hashem's loyal servants. This is a very difficult task. It is very hard for one to forego his independence and subjugate himself to the will of

another. That is what it means, though, to be a servant of Hashem. We must bend our personal desires to Hashem's. And that is the daunting task that we must accomplish before we can fully accept the Torah. To the degree that we wish to retain our autonomy, to that very degree we are *not* servants of Hashem.

In this light, the days from Pesach to Shavuot are days that we are working on to become better servants to Hashem. That is the meaning of counting the "Omer." With each day I am trying to become a better servant to Hashem. Today is the 21st day of the Omer, how am I doing? Have I used each day to the fullest? Have I grown with each day?

With this understanding, we can answer another interesting question.

The *Sefer HaChinuch* (mentioned above) in Mitzvah #306 (the Mitzvah to Count the Omer), explains:

משרשי המצוה על צד הפשט, לפי שכל עיקרן של ישראל אינו אלא התורה, ומפני התורה נבראו שמים וארץ וישראל, וכמו שכתוב [ירמיהו ל"ג, כ"ה] אם לא בריתי יומם ולילה וגו'. והיא העיקר והסיבה שנגאלו ויצאו ממצרים כדי שיקבלו התורה בסיני ויקיימוה, וכמו שאמר השם למשה [שמות ג', י"ב] וזה לך האות כי אנכי שלחתיך בהוציאך את העם ממצרים תעבדון את האלהים על ההר הזה ... נצטוינו למנות ממחרת יום טוב של פסח עד יום נתינת התורה, להראות בנפשנו החפץ הגדול אל היום הנכבד הנכסף ללבנו

The simple understanding of this mitzvah is that since the main focus of the Jewish people is the Torah and it was for the sake of the Torah that Hashem created the heavens, the earth, and the Jewish people, ... and that was the purpose for which they were freed from Egypt, to receive the Torah on Sinai and fulfill it... , we were commanded to count from the day after Pesach until the giving of the Torah, to show in our souls the tremendous desire and yearning for that great day.

Just as we naturally count the days to an event that we are very excited about and can't wait for, so, too, the Jewish people counted the days until they would receive the Torah.

The question is that when we *can't* wait for something, we usually count *down*; only 40 days left until my vacation, now it's only 35 days, etc. Why here are we counting *up*?

When we count down the days to a vacation, what we are really telling ourselves is that we want the day of our vacation be here now. The problem is that the date of my departure is 40 days from now, and those 40 days are blocking me from fulfilling my desire. As the days go by, the interruption becomes smaller, and my dream comes closer. The numbers reflect how big the interruption is and how close the fulfillment of my dream is to me.

However, in the case of counting the Omer, since the days preceding the receiving of the Torah were days of preparation, each day represented another step in their growth and their worthiness to accept the Torah.

Just before leaving Egypt, the Jewish people were at the very lowest level possible. Our Sages teach us that there are 49 levels of unholiness in the world, and 50 levels of holiness. Just before leaving Egypt, the Jewish people were at unholy level #49. Had they slipped into the 50th, it would have been too late, and they would never have been able to leave Egypt. This is the reason that the Jewish people had to leave Egypt in such a haste. Had they stayed there any longer, they would have descended to the point of no return and would no longer have been able to leave.

With each day that the Jews travelled from Egypt, they dramatically rose from an unholy level to a level of exalted holiness,

such that, when the 49th day came, they were ready to accept the Torah, which is the 50th level of Holiness.

Hence, because the days between Pesach and Shavuot are days of growth and preparation, we count *up*, charting and assessing our growth. Each passing day should represent a step forward in our growth and new level of closeness to Hashem.

This is what we mean when we say, “today is 21st day of the *Omer*.” “I have put in 21 days of work trying to subjugate my will to Hashem’s will. With each day, I am trying to become a better servant to Hashem.”

Following is a complete picture of the five mitzvot connected to the Omer.

We take the very first *omer* (measure) of barley and bring it as a sacrifice to Hashem. Until then, we cannot eat even one kernel of the new grain. The Kohen waves the *omer* in all directions, expressing that we acknowledge that the blessing of our new crop is from Hashem and not the result of our own acumen and work. We further acknowledge that the reason that Hashem bestows this blessing upon us is so that we should be free to serve Him.

We now stand at the beginning of our preparation for Shavuot when we will receive the Torah. a time to take the other meaning of the word *omer* (“servitude”) seriously and to prepare ourselves to be the ultimate servants of Hashem when Shavuot comes. We must use the coming days to prepare ourselves, and we are going to pay close attention to how we use our time to prepare. We will count each day and assess our progress as we do so.

Growth is a tricky process. Our Sages teach us that we cannot take large steps and take on difficult challenges because, ultimately, they will become too burdensome, and we will cast off the entire yoke. The effective method for growth is to take baby steps, something very small but indeed a real step forward. So, for example, if a person doesn't recite a blessing on everything that he eats, instead of accepting upon himself to make all the blessings on everything, he should start slowly by making one blessing a day. Nothing too daunting, but, nevertheless, something very meaningful and real. Once he becomes accustomed to that, he can add another. And another...

This is just one idea, and every person should think for himself what small mitzvah he can begin to do to that will make him a better servant of Hashem. With that, as we go through this time of counting the omer, we will truly fulfill the purpose of the *omer*.