

Emor, the Omer, and Shavuot

When you enter the land that I am giving you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first sheaf of your harvest to the priest. He shall elevate the sheaf before Adonai for acceptance on your behalf. . . And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—the day after the Sabbath—you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: you must count until the day after the 7th week—fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to Adonai.
(Leviticus 23:10-16)

From the Midrash

Thus is it written: [*Vanity of vanities, said Kohelet; all is vanity/futility/emptiness!*] *What profit/benefit is there for a person in all his labor that he labors under the sun?* (Kohelet 1:2-3)

Rabbi Samuel bar Nachmani said: They sought to hide away the book of Kohelet, for they found in it things that inclined towards heresy. They said: Should Solomon have said the following: *What benefit is there for a person in all his labor*—is it possible that even in the labor of Torah was included?? But they said: If Solomon had said, “*in all labor*” and left it at that, we might have said that even the labor of [studying] Torah is included, but he does not say this, rather, “*in all his labor*”—that is, in his own labor there is no profit [it accomplishes nothing], but in the labor of Torah there is profit [accomplishment]. Said Rabbi Yudan: “*Under the sun*” he has none, but above the sun he does.

Rabbi Levi and our Rabbis discussed this. Said R. Levi: For all that people do a great number of mitzvot and good deeds in this world, it is enough for them that the Blessed Holy One makes the sun shine for them, as it says: *The sun rises and the sun sets* (Kohelet 1:5). Our rabbis said: For all that the righteous ones do a great number of mitzvot and good deeds in this world, it is enough for them that the Blessed Holy One renews them like the orb of the sun, as it says: *And they that love God are like the sun that goes out in its strength* (Judges 5:31). Rabbi Yannai said: In the ordinary way, when a man buys a pound of meat in the market, how much painstaking labor he goes through, how much trouble he suffers until he cooks it. Yet while people are asleep in their beds, the Blessed Holy One causes the wind to blow and causes the clouds to rise and the plants to grow and the fruits to ripen, and they give God no reward but the *omer*, as it is written: *You shall bring the omer (sheaf) of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest.*

(Leviticus Rabbah 28:1)

What is the Meaning of the Omer?

1) The root of this *mitzvah* is in order that we should reflect, through this act, on the great *chesed* (lovingkindness) that the Blessed Holy One does for us, making anew each year food for our sustenance. It is therefore fitting that we offer some of that produce back to God, in order to remember God’s love and goodness before we enjoy any benefit from it. (*Sefer HaChinukh*, 16th century Spain)

2) The verse *When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest*” (Lev. 23:10) corresponds to the promise (in Deuteronomy): *For Adonai your God is bringing you into a good land...a land of wheat of barley...a land in which you may eat bread without*

scarcity...When you have eaten your fill, you shall bless Adonai your God...Beware that you do not forget Adonai your God (Deut. 8:7-11). The land was given to the people of Israel as a means to an end, as a necessary tool to achieve the ultimate goal and satisfaction (that is, putting Torah into practice). The *omer* of the first fruits reflects this idea. Hence the prohibition to eat from the new produce before the offering of the *omer*. The priest is to wave it before God in order that the offering of the people may be accepted and their awareness deepened that all this [food] is at our disposal—not for its own sake, as fools might think, but to enable us to serve God. (*Akedat Yitzchak*, Rabbi Isaac Arama, 15th c. Spain)

3) Affluence has the most negative effect on a person's character, causing us to be haughty and arrogant...This can be avoided if we acknowledge the Divine source of all wealth instead of boasting that "*my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth*" (Deut. 8:17)...Lest we succumb to pride, the Torah commands us to offer up the earliest product of the Israelite harvest, presenting the priest one *omer* as a token of our gratitude, of our acknowledgment that God is the Creator of the land and all it produces. (*Moshe Alshikh*, 16th c. Eretz Yisrael)

4) The *Kli Yakar*, Rabbi Ephraim Lunshitz - a Polish commentator of the sixteenth century - comments on another related aspect of our verses. He is intrigued by the term "*minha hadasha*" or new grain offering and why the term "new" is used. After all, you cannot offer a used sacrifice. In a sense, they are all new. Naturally, the reference here is to the new grain that has been grown during our countdown. He sees in this terminology, a subtle reference to the giving of the Torah itself. In his words, "The Torah must be new to humanity each and every day, as if it were the very day on which one accepted it at Mount Sinai." He mentions that for this reason we are not given an exact day on which to mark the giving of the Torah. Since it is a time that we have to re-live and a commitment that we have to renew each year, it is upon us to create the day through our own countdown. (Erica Brown)

5) Some people have remarked on an interesting change from the beginning of the *omer* period to its end. We begin with the most elaborate and sumptuous meal of the year—the Pesach seder—and move gradually to the simple meals of Shavuot, which are traditionally dairy...Some people believe that our meals during the *omer* should reflect this shift from the very physical joy of Passover to the oncoming spiritual joy of the revelation of Shavuot. Meals could emphasize grains as a reflection of the wheat harvest and, in general, be simpler during the *omer*...

Even more broadly, some people have begun to use this period as a time to reflect on how we use food and on the world food situation. This is appropriate not only because of the shift from meat to dairy described above, but also because of the symbolism of the manna that began to fall during this period in the desert. This concern for world hunger has involved the avoidance of wasteful food products (processed foods) during the *omer*, the study of both Jewish and general materials on food and related issues, and the supporting of groups involved with world hunger relief. The goal is to bring about a time when, just as God sustained all Israel with manna, so we will be able to sustain all the people of this planet with enough food so that, as in the desert, on that messianic Shabbat, no one will have to go out and search for manna/food. (Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays*)