

# A Taste of Torah - Nourishment in the Parasha

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## Parashat Emor: The Boundaries of the Barley Offering How Does the Inner Meaning of the Omer Offering Guide Us to Refinement?

### What Is the Omer Offering Really About?

At this time of year, as we journey from our physical freedom on Pesach toward our spiritual freedom on Shavuot, it is especially meaningful to align ourselves with the progression of the sefirot. Each day of the Omer invites a deeper level of refinement, guiding us step by step toward becoming worthy of receiving the Torah. While I have always connected to this inner process of growth, I found myself wondering about the Omer offering itself. What was its purpose, and why does the Torah place such emphasis on this particular sacrifice?

Sacrifices, in general, can feel distant and difficult to relate to. It has been more than two thousand years since we experienced them as a living reality, and without the Beit HaMikdash, their meaning can remain abstract. Yet perhaps precisely for this reason, it is so important to learn about them and to delve into their inner significance. Our sages teach that in the absence of the actual offerings, our study and recitation take their place, allowing us to connect, in some measure, to what once was and what will, with Hashem's help, be restored.

Living in the Land of Israel has deepened this awareness for me. Here, the rhythm of the seasons, the growth of the land, and the act of harvesting are not merely physical processes, but part of a larger spiritual reality. The Omer offering, brought from the very first of the harvest, reveals that nourishment itself is bound up with our relationship to Hashem. It is not only about what we eat, but about how we receive, how we elevate, and how we return what we are given.

### How Does Entering the Land Redefine Our Nourishment?

**סַפֵּר וּיקְרָא פֶּרֶק כַּג פְּסוּקָה דְבַר אֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וּקְצַרְתֶּם אֶת קְצִירָהּ וְהֵבֵאתֶם אֶת עֹמֶר רִאשִׁית קְצִירְכֶם אֶל הַכֹּהֵן:**

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When you come into the Land that I give you, and you reap its harvest, you shall bring an Omer of the first of your harvest to the Kohen” (*Vayikra* 23:10).

The mitzvah of the Omer begins specifically with entering the Land of Israel. This is not incidental. In the desert outside the Land, nourishment descended from Heaven, as manna. But in the Land of Israel, nourishment emerges through human effort from within the earth itself. This creates a subtle spiritual danger. The act of reaping could easily draw us into complete identification with the physical world. We may come to feel that “my strength and the might of my hand” produced this abundance (*Devarim* 8:17).

Therefore, the Torah commands that the very first act of harvesting must be an act of return. The first grain is not eaten. It is brought. Rabbi Mordechai HaKohen explains that the mitzvah to bring the first of the harvest reminds us that we are not true owners of the land, but rather like sharecroppers before Hashem, Who continually “gives” the land anew. At the moment of harvest, the very first encounter with the produce of the Land must become an act of surrender, which naturally leads to humility, making us receptive rather than self-assertive and allowing us to enter an intimate relationship with the Land, in which its blessing responds directly to our inner state. Eating is no longer separate from our relationship with Hashem but becomes a direct expression of it.

### Why is Barley the Beginning of Nourishment?

“You shall bring an Omer of the first of your harvest” (*Vayikra* 23:10). The Omer is brought from barley, which is the earliest crop yet also the least refined. Barley is associated with animal fodder, unlike wheat, which nourishes humans. It is not accidental that the Torah begins the process of sanctified nourishment not at the level of human refinement, but precisely at the level of the animal soul, the realm of instinct, desire, and survival. Before we can reach refined human nourishment, we must confront and elevate the raw drive to devour.

Barley corresponds to *Gevurah*, the attribute of restraint and boundary (*Arizal, Sefer HaLikutim, Parashat Ekev*, chapter 8). It is strong, enclosed, and structured, due to its resilient hull, which forms a natural boundary around each barley seed. This outer husk remains intact even during threshing (See Chana Bracha Siegelbaum, *The Seven Fruits of the Land of Israel with their Mystical & Medicinal Properties*, p.102). The offering of barley acknowledges that our initial relationship to nourishment is instinctual, driven by desire, hunger, and survival itself. Rather than rejecting this level, the Torah asks us to offer and elevate it. The beginning of nourishment is not expansion but contraction. Not taking but holding back. True refinement begins not by escaping the animal within us, but by offering it.

### How is Barley Connected to Measurement and Judgment?

The Omer is not merely an agricultural offering. Rabbi Avraham Saba explains that the barley offering prepares us to receive the Torah. Since all the words of Torah are fire and it was given through fire, it therefore says, “you shall reap its harvest,” and the harvest is from barley, which corresponds to a harsh, fiery quality of judgment, symbolized by *שַׁעַר/se'arah* – a turbulent stormy wind. This reflects the turbulent inner movements of the soul when desire is not yet refined. The Omer takes this *שַׁעַר/se'arah* and lifts it upward, transforming agitation into alignment (Tzror HaMor, *Vayikra* 23:10).

The very word *שַׁעַר/se'arah* is linked to *שִׁיור/shiur* – ‘measure.’ Barley represents limitation, definition, and exact boundaries, teaching that nourishment must be measured and contained. Although measurement is a fixed portion that restrains overflow, the Omer of barley is not only about restriction. It is the *כֵּל/kli* – ‘vessel’ that directs raw energy toward holiness. The Omer is brought specifically from barley to calm and sweeten this force into a balanced measure, channeling the raw power of judgment into a structured act of service.

Pesach is the time when the world is judged for its produce (*Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah* 16a). At the very moment when judgment is active, we bring the Omer as an act of sweetening. The judgment inherent in the barley is not denied. It is elevated and calmed through the offering. Thus, nourishment contains forces of judgment and intensity. The role of the Omer is to take that power and direct it upward, transforming judgment into goodwill and favor before Hashem.

### How Does the Omer Rectify the Sotah's Breach of Boundary?

The Omer offering parallels the barley offering of the *sotah* (suspected adulteress) (*Bamidbar* 5:15). “Just as her actions were animalistic, so does her sacrifice consist of animal food” (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah* 14a). Through her breakdown of restraint, she descends into the instinctual realm, where there is no capacity to say ‘no.’ In doing so, she fails to uphold the boundary of her marriage. Therefore, the *sotah* brings a barley offering – representing restraint and boundary – to rectify and realign her sexuality within marriage. What was expressed as a lack of boundary is now directed through the food that embodies boundary. The same barley that reflects the potential for boundary breach becomes the means through which that breach is repaired.

The Omer offering acknowledges our instinct and unrefined desire – which can easily lead to a breach of boundaries – and redirects them toward holiness (Sifteï Kohen, *Vayikra* 23:10). In this way, the Omer

offering serves to restore love and proper alignment: "This offering is entirely in a state of connection above and below... Israel brings this Omer in their purity, and this offering, from barley, is brought to bring love between husband and wife" (*Zohar* III 97a). Thus, the Omer does not merely address individual failure but removes admixture and distortion. It reflects a testing and clarification of the relationship between Israel and Hashem, similar to the sotah process, leading to restored marital fidelity. As the Zohar explains, this offering causes the negative force to flee, leaving Israel pure and without admixture, aligned with the secret of emunah (Ibid.). The Omer, therefore, transforms a state of potential disintegration into renewed gevurah, restoring clarity, separation, and ultimately a deeper connection with Hashem.

The relationship between Israel and Hashem is expressed through the Land and its produce. When entering the Land, there is a danger of attributing nourishment to the physical world itself. This is a subtle form of betrayal within the covenant. During the Omer period - a time of testing of faithfulness between Israel and Hashem - the barley offering transforms the potential separation into renewed closeness. Just as the sotah, when cleared, returns to a deeper connection with her husband, so too Israel returns to Hashem through the offering of the Omer.

### **Inheriting the Land of Israel Through the Merit of the Omer Offering**

The Omer reveals that in Eretz Yisrael, nourishment is never merely physical. From the very beginning of the harvest, what emerges from the land is not ours to consume freely, but must first be returned, measured, and elevated. The barley offering, with its association with measure and restraint, establishes the boundaries through which blessing can flow. In this way, even the most instinctual drives are not rejected, but brought into alignment and directed toward their Source.

To eat from the Land is to live within a covenant, where the produce itself reflects the relationship between Israel and Hashem. The Omer stands at the threshold of this relationship, transforming the first expression of physical sustenance into an act of return and fidelity. It was through the mitzvah of the Omer that Avraham merited to inherit the Land. Likewise, Israel inherited the Land in the merit of the Omer. Therefore, Moshe warned Israel, saying, "When you come into the Land and reap its harvest, you shall bring the Omer" (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 28:6).

The Omer is more than a personal refinement - it is a force that protects and sustains our people in times of danger and harsh decrees. Even when the offering cannot be brought, its merit endures through the service of our lips in its place, protecting and sustaining Israel in security and peace (*Chemdat Yamim, Omer* 1). Thus, the Omer teaches that the very place of potential distortion becomes the place of deepest connection. When the first stirrings of desire are measured, restrained, and returned to Hashem, nourishment itself becomes a pathway to protection, blessing, and covenant.

*Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin: Holistic Torah for Women on the Land is for women who seek to delve deeply into their souls through intensive textual study and creative expression. We engage women of all ages and nationalities in intense Torah study and sustainable living. Drawing on creativity and life experience, students participate in art & drama workshops, authentic movement, and organic gardening, and take turns cooking wholesome meals for each other. Our Holistic Torah involves connecting to Torah of the land, to our Creator, and to personal growth. Dormitory facilities are available in the peaceful, rural setting of Bat Ayin, nestled in the Judean Hills and located just 20 minutes south of Jerusalem.*