

Date: 12 Iyar 5786 (April 29, 2026)

Torah Portion: Emor

Topic: Above and Beneath the Sun, Part 1

The mitzvah of the Omer thus returns us to the very question with which the Midrash began: “What profit does man have from all his labor that he toils beneath the sun?” At first encounter, this question appears to undermine the entire structure of human endeavor. If all labor is bound within the closed system of the natural world—subject to decay, limitation, and eventual disappearance—then no effort, however great, can yield lasting gain. This was the concern of the Sages when they initially considered concealing the words of King Solomon, for it seemed that he had reduced even the highest forms of human striving to futility. Yet their ultimate conclusion reveals that Kohelet’s words are not a negation of meaning, but a precise diagnosis of misplaced meaning.

The critical phrase is not simply “labor,” but “labor beneath the sun.” As the Midrash emphasizes, the verse does not speak of all effort indiscriminately, but of a particular category of effort—labor that is confined within the natural order and directed solely toward temporal ends. Such labor, no matter how productive it may appear, cannot generate enduring profit because it never transcends the boundaries of the system in which it operates. It is circular rather than elevating; it sustains life, but does not transform it.

It is here that the insight of Rashi becomes decisive. Rashi explains that “profit” (*yitron*) refers to that which remains after all processes have run their course—to that which endures beyond loss and change. Understood in this way, the question of Kohelet is not whether labor produces results in the immediate sense, but whether those results possess permanence. Material acquisition, social standing, and even intellectual accomplishment, insofar as they remain bound to the individual and his temporal existence, cannot satisfy this criterion. They belong to the realm “beneath the sun,” and therefore share in its limitations.

Yet the Midrash does not leave the matter there. By introducing the distinction between what is “beneath the sun” and what is “above the sun,” it opens a pathway beyond the apparent futility. Labor is not inherently empty; rather, it becomes empty when it is severed from its higher orientation. When aligned with that which transcends nature—namely, the Will of YHWH—it acquires a different quality altogether. It is no longer merely an exertion within the world, but a participation in that which stands beyond it.

The mitzvah of the Omer serves as a concrete embodiment of this transformation. The farmer’s labor is, in every respect, a paradigmatic example of toil “beneath the sun.” It involves physical exertion, interaction with the soil, and dependence on natural cycles of growth and harvest. Left to itself, such labor would remain within the closed system described by Kohelet. Yet the Torah interrupts this process at its very beginning and commands that the first yield be brought to the Kohen as an offering. This act is not an addition to the labor, but its redefinition. By dedicating the ראשית—the first and most significant portion—to YHWH, the farmer acknowledges that his work is not self-originating, nor self-sustaining. It is received, directed, and ultimately returned.

Through this gesture, the entire harvest is reframed. What might have been understood as the product of human effort becomes recognized as part of a larger divine economy. The labor itself is elevated, not because its physical nature has changed, but because its orientation has been altered. It is no longer merely “beneath the sun,” but connected to that which is “above the sun.” In this sense, the Omer offering does not negate material labor, but redeems it.

A similar dynamic emerges in the domain of Torah study, as articulated by Beis HaLevi. One might assume that Torah, by its very nature, belongs entirely to the realm above the sun. Yet the Beis HaLevi, drawing on the teaching of the Gemara, introduces a crucial distinction: the status of Torah is not determined solely by its content, but also by the intention of the one who engages with it. When Torah is studied for ulterior motives—whether for honor, recognition, or material benefit—it assumes certain characteristics of labor “beneath the sun.” It becomes, in part, integrated into the same system of self-directed striving that governs ordinary pursuits.

Shalom.