

Lag Ba'omer

Mourning and Celebration

During sefirat ha'omer, there are several customs of mourning that we observe; we don't listen to music, cut hair, make weddings, men don't shave, etc. Lag Ba'omer, the 33rd day of the omer, is when the mourning period comes to a halt, and many Jews have the custom to refrain from any mourning for the rest of the omer period. However, if one delves beneath the surface, one reaches a seemingly slight difficulty with the joy of the day. The Pri Chadash, quoted by the Mishna Berurah¹, explains that the reason we stop the mourning process is because during the first 32 days of the omer, the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva all died; on the 33rd day of the omer, they stopped dying. If one thinks about this idea for a little longer, one will realize that there is very little to be happy about on Lag Ba'omer. Of course they stopped dying by the 33rd day of the omer—as they had *all* already died! There weren't any students left to have *not* died!

The question can be illustrated through a mashal: a man's house is burning down—when it finally burns down to a crisp and there is nothing left but a pile of ashes, he begins to celebrate. Why? Because the house ceased from burning. We would call this man a fool, as the only reason his house stopped burning is because it had already burned down. Obviously, there must be a deeper source of the simcha that we are celebrating on Lag Ba'omer.

To answer this question, we have to understand what exactly we are mourning during sefirat ha'omer. Rabbi Akiva is the source of all the Torah Shebe'al Peh that we have today. Each of his 24,000 students illuminated up the world with their Torah, uncovering layer upon layer of the depths of each nuance of the Torah. During the omer period, we are mourning over the loss of Torah, as with each individual who passed away, we lost another chelek, part, in Torah. The Gemara brings down that on the 33rd day of the omer, after there was not one student who survived, Rabbi Akiva picked himself up and ordained five new students and made them his new talmidim. One of these five new students was Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. All of the Torah Shebe'al Peh that we possess now essentially stems from those five students. During the omer, we observe customs of mourning because of the intense loss of Torah that Klal Yisrael experienced, but on Lag Ba'omer, we are involved in deep simcha and real celebration because the loss of Torah ceased, and instead Rabbi Akiva continued to disseminate the Torah. The Ben Ish Chai and the Chida both bring down the custom of visiting the kevarim of all five students that Rabbi Akiva taught on this day, and not just Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. This day is a rejuvenation of Torah, and a continuation of the transmittance of Torah.

With this explanation at hand, we might be tempted to question further; if the loss of Torah halted and Rabbi Akiva taught over the Torah to five new talmidim, why do we still continue to mourn over the 24,000 students year after year?

Each of the 24,000 talmidim individually comprised of 24,000 areas of the Torah, each student revealing another entire section of Torah. These were not just ordinary people, as we are not just mourning over the loss of individuals, but rather, each talmid represented a whole new layer of depth in Torah—while Rabbi Akiva transmitted over

¹ Mishna Brurah 493:MB8

the Torah to five new talmidim, we lost tens of thousands of parts of the Torah that we have yet to rediscover. We can only imagine how great was each individual student, and how great was the loss of each individual student. Even though we regained *some* of the Torah through Rabbi Akiva's new talmidim, there is still so much Torah that we have not yet revealed. It is because of this tragic loss of Torah that the sages instituted the 33 day mourning period.

Bonfires

Lag Baomer is said to be the yahrtzeit for Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, one of Rabbi Akiva's five students. While it is not absolutely confirmed or recorded that this is the day he died, we have a tradition stating that Lag Ba'omer is indeed the day Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai was *nifter*. There is an age-old custom of celebrating Lag Ba'omer with bonfires. While the connection between Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and fire may initially seem unclear, there is great significance to this puzzling mode of celebration. How so?

A bonfire is generally fueled by wood. When one looks at the piece of wood, it looks lifeless and dead. It is chopped from a tree, and it appears on the surface as though it cannot create anything. However, when a small flame catches hold of this "dead" piece of wood, it begins to create a large, seemingly unstoppable, fire that could continue to burn until the piece of wood is entirely consumed. We can of course replace this piece of wood with nearly anything we find in this world that on the surface looks as though it is lifeless, but when used as fuel for a fire, it can create an awesome spectacle and a powerful force.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai looked at the world through a different lens than most others in his generations. When looking at the world, one sees nature and physicality. Rabbi Shimon exposed a deeper, more enduring part of this world—the mystical and the metaphysical. When one looks at nature and reality, it is hard to see the spiritual depth behind it, yet through the Zohar, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai brought an extra spark, an extra force to this world, creating a vibrant flame, exposing the true depth behind what seems to be a "lifeless" and a "completely physical" world. It is because of this powerful force that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai brought to the world that we demonstrate his greatness through a flame. The way to fuel a flame is to take an object, nearly any object, and burn it—and only when a spark is put against it, does its true nature show; that piece of wood is very much alive, and has the ability to create if we only knew how to look at it.

There is another reason given for celebrating Lag Ba'omer with bonfires. Before a person leaves this world, he is given a certain spark, a certain energy he can use to create greatness in the world one last time. An example is found in Neviim, in sefer Melachim. Before Eliyahu Hanavi was taken from this world, he was with his most prominent student, Elisha. Elisha became great, and to an extent even greater than his teacher, Eliyahu, because of the fact that he was with him at Eliyahu's ascent to Heaven. It is recorded that Elisha had double Eliyahu's power. Additionally, Yitzchak Avinu, Yaakov Avinu, and Moshe Rabbeinu waited until right before their deaths to give berachot to their children and klal Yisrael due to the special energy they are imbued with at the time of their deaths.

Before Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's death, he revealed some of the deepest secrets in Judaism, answering many questions and lighting up the dark world of doubt and

confusion. To celebrate this, we light bonfires at night to light up the darkness, commemorating the spiritual light that Rabbi Shimon revealed to this world on the day of his passing.