

למודי משה

אמר / פסח שני / ל"ג בעומר - גליון ק"ע

Insights Into Halachah

All There Is to Know in Halachah About Lag B'Omer

The second half of this week's *parsha* is known as *Parshas HaMo'adim*, for the simple reason that it talks about all the different Yomim Tovim that we celebrate throughout the year. One Yom Tov¹, however, which is not mentioned is the Yom Tov of Lag B'Omer. I have looked around to find a *remez* to it, but unfortunately haven't been able to find one. Being as this is the last sheet I plan to bring out before Lag B'Omer, we will dedicate this week's sheet to discussing Lag B'Omer, what this special day is all about, and various *halachic* aspects to do with this special day.

Although the Yom Tov of Lag B'Omer applies everywhere, it is more widely celebrated in Eretz Yisroel, with over half-a million² people converging on, to visit, *daven*, and dance at the *kever* [grave] of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, thus lending an electrified atmosphere to the sleepy mountaintop town of Meron in the Galil.

Indeed, due to the tremendous influx of *Chutznikum* to visit Rabi Shimon on 'his day', some opine that in Eretz Yisroel, Lag B'Omer has recently become the new 'third *regel*', far overshadowing the amount of visitors for Shavuos.

Day of Rejoicing

Lag B'Omer is a day of rejoicing. If one has a *yahrtzeit* which falls out on Lag B'Omer, one isn't supposed to fast. Similarly, if one is *niftar* on Lag B'Omer we don't give any *hespedim* [eulogies]. There is a *machlokes* [dispute] if a *choson* and *kallah* getting married on Lag B'Omer should fast (see *Mishnah Berurah* 573:7). *Tachanun* is omitted on this special day and some even say that one should eat a special *seudah* (*Darkei Moshe* 493:1, *Aruch HaShulchan* 493:5).

Why Is Lag B'Omer Such An Auspicious Day?

There are several reasons mentioned by the *poskim*:

- 1) It is the day when Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 *talmidim* stopped dying. (This reason is very difficult and we will expand on it below.)
- 2) According to one opinion in the Medrash, the *matzah* that Bnei Yisroel took out of Mitzrayim lasted for thirty days until the fifteenth of Iyar. They then went for three days without bread, and on the eighteenth of Iyar (Lag B'Omer), the *man* started to fall. In order to remember this great miracle, this day is celebrated as a Yom Tov (*Shu"t Chasam Sofer, Yoreh Deah* 233).
- 3) It is the day when Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son, Rabbi Elazar came out of the cave they hid in for thirteen years (*Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chaim* 493:7).

¹ Although most people don't refer to Lag B'Omer as a Yom Tov, see R' Yaakov Emden's *Siddur Beis Yaakov* (pg. 273, *Seder Chodesh Iyar*) where he writes: עכשיו המנהג פשוט שעושים יום זה יו"ט – "The excepted custom is to now make this day into a Yom Tov". See also *Teshuvos Chasam Sofer (Yoreh Deah* 233) which will bring below, who also refers to Lag B'Omer as a Yom Tov, although, he is not so happy about it.

² Sadly, due to the events of 5781, this number may have slightly decreased. We hope things are arranged in a safe and secure manner which will allow this number to be reached again very soon.

4) It is Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's *yahrtzeit*, however, it is important to note that this understanding might actually be based on a simple printing mistake, and many authorities, including the Chida and Ben Ish Chai, maintain that Lag B'Omer is not truly his *yahrtzeit*. (We will expand on this below.)

5) It is the day when Rabbi Akiva gave *semicha* to his five new *talmidim* (including Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai) after his 24,000 *talmidim* died, allowing the Torah's *mesorah* to perpetuate (See *Yalkut Me'am Loez (Parshas Emor), Sdei Chemed (Maareches Eretz Yisroel 6)* and the *Pri Chodosh* which we will quote below).

6) It is the day when Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's hidden Torah, the *Zohar*, became revealed to the world.³

7) The *sifrei kabballah* explain that while the entire time period of *sefirah* is one of *din* [strict judgment], Lag B'Omer is day of total *rachamim* [mercy], and is therefore worthy of being celebrated (*Sha'ar Hakavanos, Sefiras Ha'omer 12*).

Why Talmidim Stopping to Die is a Reason for Increased *Simcha*?

The Gemara in *Yevamos* (62b) relates that Rabbi Akiva had 24,000 *talmidim* and they all died during one time period – between Pesach and Shavuos – because they did not honor each other. This caused a tremendous loss of Torah in the world, until Rabbi Akiva taught five new *talmidim*, namely, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yosi, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamu'a. Those five *talmidim* succeeded in reestablishing Torah learning at that time.

The Tur (*Orach Chaim 493*) writes that the custom is not to hold weddings between Pesach and Shavuos. The reason for this is in order not to have too much *simcha* due to the fact that the *talmidim* of Rabbi Akiva died at that time. In some places the custom is not to take haircuts, and there are those that do take haircuts from Lag B'Omer and onwards, because they say that the *talmidim* stopped dying then.

The *Beis Yosef* cites a Medrash that they stopped dying fifteen days before Shavuos, the thirty-fourth day of the *omer*. Accordingly, it comes out, they died on the 33rd and on the 34th. For this reason, the *Shulchan Aruch* rules that one may not take a haircut until the 34th day of the *omer*. This in fact is the custom of many Sephardic communities. However, the *Rema* comments on the *Shulchan Aruch*: "In our countries we do not follow his opinion. Rather, we take haircuts on the 33rd and we increase *simcha* slightly and we do not recite *tachanun*." The source of this opinion is the *Maharil* who maintains that the *talmidim* of Rabbi Akiva stopped dying on the thirty-third day of the *omer*.

This concept of "increasing *simcha*" on Lag B'Omer is very difficult to understand. The fact that Rabbi Akiva's *talmidim* stopped dying is not a cause for *simcha*, rather it is only sufficient cause to cease the customary forms of mourning practiced during the *sefirah* period. Additionally, a more basic difficulty is that there is no consolation in the fact that they stopped dying – there was no one left to die! It is the equivalent, Rav Asher Weiss writes, of a person who has seven sons. They die one after the other until all seven are dead. Would anybody think of making a Yom Tov because now his sons stopped dying?

A simple approach to this problem can be found in *Biur HaGra* (493), who cites a source in the Gemara for such a "*simcha*." The Gemara states that the 15th of Av is considered to be a Yom Tov because Bnei Yisroel stopped dying on that day after forty years in the desert. We see from here that when people stop dying there is a cause for *simcha*, even though people have in fact died.

The New Replace the Old

The *Pri Chodosh* (493:2) explains that the basis for *simcha* on Lag B'Omer is that Rabbi Akiva's new *talmidim*, who he started teaching later, did not die. This concept has its foundations in the writings of the *Arizal*, who contends

³ See *Zohar (Parshas Ha'azinu, Idra Zutra 241)*, that on the day of Rav Shimon's *petirah*, he revealed his hidden Torah which was '*nismalei ohr gadol shel simcha*'. Additionally, the sun did not set until Rav Shimon finished, after which he passed away.

that it was on Lag B'Omer itself that Rabbi Akiva gave *semicha* to his new *talmidim*, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yosi, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamu'a. It is for this reason that Lag B'Omer is also referred to as "*yom simchaso shel* Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai," "the day of Rabbi Shimon's rejoicing" (*Sha'ar Hakavanos* pp 86-87; *Eid Hagal Hazeh* [Rav Yaakov Moshe Hillel, *shlita*] pp. 4-5).

In Eretz Yisroel, there is a very common *minhag* to go to Meron on Lag B'Omer. A lesser-known custom is to go to the *kevorim* of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Meir in Teveria on that day as well. The reason for this is based on what we just mentioned, that Rabbi Akiva gave *semicha* to his new *talmidim* on Lag B'Omer, thereby assuring the continuity of the Torah. Therefore, Lag B'Omer is not only a day of *simcha* for Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, but it is also a day of *simcha* for his teacher, Rabbi Akiva and for Rabbi Meir, another of the five *talmidim* (*Sefer Hillula Rabbah; Eid Hagal Hazeh*, pg. 6).

Whilst discussing visiting *kevorim* on Lag B'Omer, it is interesting to note that Rav Chaim Kreisworth *zt"l*, the Rav of Antwerp, related that the *minhag* in Europe was to travel to the *kever* of the *Rema* in Krakow on Lag B'Omer, whose *yahrtzeit* is also on that day. Additionally, the *Rema* (*Orach Chaim* 493:2) is the first *halachic* authority who cites the concept of Lag B'Omer being a day of *simcha* as practical halachah (*Hilchos Chag b'Chag, Sefiras Ha'omer*, pg. 97).

R' Shimon's Yahrtzeit?

There are several sources that indicate that Lag B'Omer is the day when Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai passed away⁴. Some of these base themselves on various versions of the writings of the *Arizal* and his *talmidim* who wrote that Lag B'Omer is "*yom shemeis Rashbi*" (acronym for Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai), the day that he died. However, the Ben Ish Chai and R' Yaakov Hillel both maintain that the first mention of Lag B'Omer being Rabi Shimon bar Yochai's *yahrtzeit* is essentially a printing mistake, and only found in a certain version of Rav Chaim Vital's *Pri Eitz Chaim* and not in his authoritative *Sha'ar Hakavanos*, which actually lists other reasons for the celebrations. Accordingly, the text of Rav Chaim Vital's was truly '*yom sameach* Rabi Shimon Bar Yochai', and not '*yom shemeis* Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai' (See *Birkay Yosef* 493:4; *Sefer Maris Ha'ayin, Likutim* 7:8; *Shu"t Rav Pe'alim, Orach Chaim* 1:11; *Eid Hagal Hazeh* pp. 5-6).

Another source which indicates that Lag B'Omer is Rabbi Shimon's *yahrtzeit* is the *Idra Zuta*, the portion of the *Zohar* which is a record of Rabbi Shimon's teachings on the day of his *petirah* and the events that occurred then. It states there that after Rabbi Shimon passed away, they heard a Heavenly voice that announced: "Arise, come and gather for the '*hillula*' of Rabbi Shimon." Although the simple understanding of this passage is that everyone should gather on that day which he died, some interpret this to mean that there should be an annual festive gathering on his *yahrtzeit* (*Kaf HaChaim* 493:26; *Eid Hagal Hazeh* pg. 12).

We mentioned earlier the *minhag* of going to the *kevorim* of Rabbi Akiva and his *talmidim* on Lag B'Omer, as it is a day of *simcha* for them as well. However, the prevalent custom is to go solely to the *kever* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. This *minhag* Yisroel seems to go with opinion that Lag B'Omer is Rabbi Shimon's *yahrtzeit*, and the celebration of Lag B'Omer is his alone (*Sha'ar Hakavanos* pg. 87; *Eid Hagal Hazeh*, pg. 12).

⁴ The *Sefer HaToda'ah* (pg. 490) cites that Rav Ovadia M'Bartenura wrote a letter to his brother in 1488 stating: בי"ח באייר יום – "the 18th of Iyar is a *yahrtzeit* and was celebrated by masses coming and lighting giant torches". However, it seems unclear whether he was referring to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai or rather Hillel and Shammai, as there was an old *minhag* to visit their *kevorim* near Meron in Iyar around the time of Pesach Sheini and hold large celebrations there, as attested to in a famous travelogue from an anonymous *talmid* of the Ramban written in the late 1200s (printed at the end of the recent *Beis Midrash L'halacha B'hisvashvus* 5764 edition of *Kaftor Vaferach*; vol. 2; pg. 450, '*Inyanei Eretz Yisroel*'). Interestingly, this is the only celebration that he denotes taking place in Meron that time of year. Curiously, in the very next sentence he briefly mentions that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son, Rabbi Elazar are also buried in Meron, with no mention of any annual festivities.

Simcha On A Yahrtzeit?

One of the difficulties the *achronim* grapple with regarding Lag B'Omer being Rabbi Shimon's *yahrtzeit*, is how the day of Rabbi Shimon's death can be celebrated as a day of *simcha*. Generally, a *yahrtzeit* is a day designated for *teshuva* and fasting, not a celebration. The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 580:1-2) even lists several dates upon which various *tzadikim* passed away and states that it is considered proper to fast on those days (see *Shu"t Chasam Sofer, Yoreh Deah* 233 and *Shu"t Shoel U'Meishiv [Chamisha'ah]* 39).

The *Sefer HaToda'ah* (pg. 490) writes, that even though normally the *yahrtzeit* of a *tzaddik* is a day to fast on, it was the will of Rabbi Shimon that his *yahrtzeit* be made a day of great rejoicing, and this is how it has been for many generations. However, it is still very strange that the *yahrtzeit* of such a great *tzaddik* should be a day of great *simcha*?

The *Shem Aryeh* (*Orach Chaim* 14) has a *Teshuvah* in which he addresses this issue in a roundabout way.

The *Shem Aryeh* was asked about the *minhag* that people turn *yahrtzeits* into days of great celebration. The *Rema* (*Yoreh Deah* 402:12) rules that one should fast on the day of a *yahrtzeit*. The *sho'el* [questioner] was very bothered, that not only do people not fast anymore, but they turn *yahrtzeits* into days of great *simcha*. Not only do they not fast, they even make fun of those who do. Even worse, says the *sho'el*, is that even the *yahrtzeits* of great *tzadikim* they turn into days of *simcha* and make big *seudos* in honor of the *yahrtzeit*. It would be one thing if a regular *yahrtzeit* they would turn into a day of *simcha*, but to turn the *yahrtzeit* of great *tzaddik* into a day of great *simcha* is simply going too far. They try and answer themselves by saying, "*chas vesholam* to fast on the *yahrtzeit* of a *tzaddik*, on the contrary, one must rejoice", and they bring proof to themselves from the fact that everyone rejoices on Lag B'Omer in honor of the *yahrtzeit* of R' Shimon bar Yochai. If the Arizal and the Chida say that there is a big *inyan* to rejoice on the *yahrtzeit* of R' Shimon bar Yochai it must be that is what one should do. Although most people aren't on the level of R' Shimon bar Yochai, nonetheless they were *erliche* Yidden and by rejoicing on a *yahrtzeit* we are simply following in the ways of R' Shimon bar Yochai (בּתּר ר' שׁמעוּן בן יוּחאי אנו נגּררִים).

The *Shem Aryeh* responds, that we have to analyze what the great *simcha* is on R' Shimon's *yahrtzeit*. Once we understand that, we can see if we can extrapolate from his *yahrtzeit* and apply it to others.

The *Shem Aryeh* then goes on to explain what the great *simcha* is about the *yahrtzeit* of R' Shimon:

The Gemara in Shabbos (33b⁵) relates that R' Shimon bar Yochai was overheard speaking against the Roman occupation. The Romans heard and wanted to execute him. When he heard of this decree he ran away and hid in a cave where he lived secluded for thirteen years, together with his son, Rebbe Elazar. The fact that he lived out his life and died a natural death as opposed to being executed is considered a *simcha*. Based on this, the *minhag* of going to Rabbi Shimon's *kever* on the *yahrtzeit* also has special significance. The law was that anyone executed by government order was not allowed to be buried. The fact that Rabbi Shimon is buried is an indication of the great miracle that took place and going to the *kever* commemorates that miracle. A person is obligated to rejoice over a miracle that happened to his forefathers, as a result many people go to Meron to celebrate and rejoice over this special miracle.

Based on the above, the *Shem Aryeh* writes, that turning a *yahrtzeit* into a day of celebration is something fitting specifically for R' Shimon who experienced a special miracle, and his death was testimony that he was saved from a government execution, however, for anyone else, a *yahrtzeit* is far from being a day of *simcha*, and anyone who

⁵ It's interesting to note that the Gemara which talks about R' Shimon bar Yochai is on *Daf* 33.

turns his father's *yahrtzeit* into a day of *simcha* is making a big mistake, especially if one's father was a *talmid chocham*, as the greater a person is, the bigger the loss is.⁶

Traveling to Meron

One of the *minhogim* of Lag B'Omer is to go to the *kever* of Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai in Meron. This custom is cited by the *Ateres Zekeinim* (*Orach Chaim* 493), who writes: "It is the custom in Eretz Yisroel to go to the *kever* of Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai and of his son, Rebbi Elazar, on the 33rd day of the *omer*."

An even earlier source of this *minhag* is from Rav Chaim Vital who states: "Regarding those who go to the *kever* of Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rebbi Elazar his son in Meron on Lag B'Omer, I have seen my teacher *zt"l*, these eight years going with his wife and family and he was there those three days." Additionally, Rav Chaim Vital relates what he heard from another *talmid* of the *Arizal*. Namely, that the year before Rav Chaim Vital first came to the *Arizal*, the *Arizal* went to Meron to give his son his first haircut. The *Arizal* did so amongst great feasting and joy (*Pri Eitz Chaim, Sha'ar Sefiras Ha'omer*, chap. 7).

Apparently, the custom of going to Meron on Lag B'Omer was practiced even before the time of the *Arizal*. People would leave their homes weeks before and travel great distances in order to be at Rebbi Shimon's *kever* on Lag B'Omer. Rav Chaim Vital cites proofs in order to validate this *minhag* Yisroel (*Pri Eitz Chaim* cited above and *Eid Hagal Haze*, pg. 23-25).

To further emphasize the uniqueness of Lag B'Omer, Rav Chaim Vital cites a story that occurred one year on that day. Rav Avraham HaLevi had a custom to recite the *tefillah* of *nacheim* every day in the *berachah* of "*v'li'Yerusholayim*." (Generally, this is only added to *shemoneh esrei* on Tisha B'Av during *Mincha*.) As per his custom, he recited this in Meron on Lag B'Omer as well. Upon completing his *tefillah*, Rav Yitzchok Luria (the *Arizal*) said to him in the name of Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai, 'Say to this man, why does he recite *Nacheim* on the day of

⁶ It's important to point out that the *Shem Aryeh* was a *litvishe gadol* from Vilna, and the above represents his orientation of things, many *chassidim*, however, heavily disagree. In fact, in many *Chassidic* circles, a practice has developed of performing *chesed* on a *yahrtzeit* – specifically to make sure that the poor people in town had a proper meal on the day of the *yahrtzeit*. The *berachos* recited thereby created a *tikun* for the departed soul, and therefore, this practice became known as *tikun*. This developed into a custom of serving schnapps and *mezonos* on the *yahrtzeit*.

With time, some had concerns about this practice, particularly the *kashrus* of the foods and beverages served. Rav Avraham Meir Israel, a Rosh Yeshiva in Yeshivas Chasan Sofer in Brooklyn, wrote to Dayan Yitzchok Weiss, saying that he would like to stop the custom of *tikun* that had developed, primarily because of concern that the whiskey was often *chometz she'avar alav hapesach*; that is, it had been owned by Jewish storekeepers, distributors or manufacturers on Pesach and had not been sold, thus rendering it prohibited. In his response, Dayan Weiss agrees with Rabbi Israel's concerns, particularly since this custom of *tikun* has extremely weak *halachic* foundations. Nevertheless, Dayan Weiss quotes numerous *Chassidic* sources that support this custom. In conclusion, he feels that one should not change the custom where it is practiced. However, where there are *kashrus* concerns, he suggests providing very detailed instructions as to where one may purchase the products being served.

The *Sdei Chemed* (Vol. 5, page 241) voices strong opposition to the *minhag* of *tikun* for a different reason: that people celebrate the *tikun* in the *shul* or *beis hamedresh* and it is prohibited to eat or drink in *shul*, except for *talmiday chachomim* who are permitted to eat in a *beis hamedresh* while they are in the middle of their learning. This problem can be avoided by celebrating the *tikun* in a room adjacent to the *shul* that is not used regularly for *davening*. In a later edition, included now in the current editions of *Sdei Chemed* (Vol. 5, page 335) he quotes subsequent correspondence from the Brezhaner Rav, Rav Shalom Mordechai Schwadron (the grandfather of the late Rav Shalom Schwadron, who wrote to him that it is permitted to conduct any *seudas mitzvah* in a *shul*, and therefore it is permitted to have *tikun* there. The *Sdei Chemed* further quotes the Spinker Rebbe, who wrote to him that all the *Admorim* [Rebbe's] conduct their *tishin* in the *beis hamedresh* on the basis that our *shullen* are built with the understanding that these activities may and will be conducted there.

my joy? Therefore he will soon be in consolation.’ Shortly after this incident, Rav Avrohom’s eldest son died, and people came to console him (*Pri Eitz Chaim*; see also *Ateres Zekeinim, Shulchan Aruch* 493).⁷

Opposition

Several objections to the custom of Lag B’Omer celebrations can be found in the writings of the *achronim*. As is known, the prevalent custom in Eretz Yisroel in general and in Meron specifically is to light bonfires in honor of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. This *minhag* is probably as old as the *minhag* of traveling to Meron for Lag B’Omer. Apparently, the custom had been to burn expensive articles of clothing and other valuable objects in the bonfires of Meron. This practice in particular upset several *achronim*.

The *Chasam Sofer* writes in a *Teshuvah* (*Yoreh Deah* 233), that although the people going to Meron do so *lesheim Shomayim* and they will undoubtedly receive much reward, he himself prefers to be among those who refrain from traveling there. This is so that he does not have to be there and deviate from their practices in their presence, as he does not wish to join them in this celebration. His main contention is that it is incorrect to institute a Yom Tov on a day that is not mentioned in the Gemara or in the *poskim* and that is not the anniversary of a miracle. Even though he goes on to justify Lag B’Omer as a day of *simcha* based on *kabbalistic* concepts, he concludes that he is unsure whether they are permitted to institute it as a Yom Tov.

Another *achron* to take issue with the practices in Meron on Lag B’Omer was Rav Yosef Shaul Nathanson, the *Shu”t Sho’el U’meishiv* (*Chamisha’ah* 39). He starts with a complaint that we mentioned earlier – how can one commemorate the passing of a *tzaddik* by making it into a Yom Tov? Such a day should be spent fasting and doing *teshuva*. He then goes on to argue against the practice of burning expensive clothes in the bonfires and maintains that it violates the prohibition of *b’aal tashchis* [pointless destruction]. He contends that it cannot be that such practices took place during the lifetimes of the *Arizal* and Rav Yosef Karo. Rather, they probably observed Lag B’Omer through *limud haTorah, davening* and *tefillos* that through Rabbi Shimon’s death and through this day, mercy should be aroused for all of Klal Yisroel.

And yet a third *achron*, the *Shu”t Chikrei Leiv* (*Yoreh Deah* 11) also firmly disagrees with the custom of burning articles of clothing. In doing so, he makes an interesting observation. Even during the great celebrations that took place in the *Beis HaMikdosh* during Succos - the *simchas beis hasho’eivah* – the only things burned were the worn-out trousers and belts of the *Kohanim*. These items were used as wicks to provide lighting at the *simchas beis hasho’eivah* (see Mishnah Succah 5:3). However, taking expensive items of clothing and burning them in a fire, certainly violates the prohibition of *ba’al tashchis*.

It is also well known that many rabbonim, including Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv *zt”l*, when asked whether one should go to Meron on Lag B’Omer, replied “Rabbi Shimon is *duh*”, pointing to a Gemara (see, for example, *Ashrei Halsh, Orach Chaim* vol. 3, pg. 432:17). In other words, if one wants to celebrate Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s greatness properly on “his day”, they feel that it is preferable to sit and learn his Torah (i.e. learn Gemara). His son-in-law, Rav Chaim Kanievsky, echoed the same sentiments (see *Teshuvos HaGra”ch* vol. 2, pg. 744 and *Moadei HaGra”ch* vol. 1:173, pg. 81).

Justifying the Celebrations

In 5634 (1874), the Rav of Tzefas, Rav Shmuel Heller *zt”l*, published a pamphlet entitled “*Kavod Melochim*” in which he justifies the Lag B’Omer practices in question. He maintains that the practice of burning expensive articles of clothing does not transgress the prohibition of *ba’al tashchis*. He explains that *ba’al tashchis* only applies in a situation where one receives no benefit from the destruction except for the destruction itself. In the case of the destruction of clothing in the Lag B’Omer bonfires, however, a positive aspect is achieved.

⁷ For another early source see footnote 4.

This is based on the concept that the more one is involved in the physical world and connected to it, the further he is removed from the spiritual. In the same vein, a person who thinks too highly of himself, is also limited in how much *ruchniyus* he can acquire. In order to achieve spirituality and its inherent sublime joy, one must disconnect himself from the physical trappings of this world and subdue his haughtiness. Thus, in order to connect to the tremendous energies of *ruchniyus* that emanate from Meron on Lag B'Omer, the participants found it necessary to detach themselves from *gashmiyus* and to abnegate themselves. This was accomplished by burning their expensive garments, as this is a method of cutting oneself off from the physical world and its luxuries. Additionally, by contemplating how easy it is for one to lose his expensive physical trappings, it becomes easier for one to become more modest.

In his work, Rav Heller relates a fascinating incident with the *Ohr HaChaim*. He writes that when he was young, he heard from several rabbonim, who had heard from their fathers what they saw when the *Ohr HaChaim* visited Meron on Lag B'Omer. Upon arriving in Meron, he dismounted from his donkey at the bottom of the hill upon which the *kever* of Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai was located. He then proceeded to crawl up the mountain on his hands and knees. The entire way up, "he bellowed like a beast of burden and exclaimed, 'How can I, a lowly creature, enter into the place of fire that gives forth tongues of flame?'" Rav Heller goes on to relate that when the *Ohr HaChaim* was there, he was in an exalted state of *simcha*, and he himself also burned several expensive articles of clothing.

Rav Heller also mentions in justification of burning expensive clothes, that the Gemara tells us that when a *tzaddik* dies it is like the *Beis HaMikdosh* has just been destroyed. Therefore, just like we do things *zecher lechurban* [to remind us of the destruction of the *Beis HaMikdosh*], similarly, as a *zecher* for losing R' Shimon bar Yochai, we throw clothes into a fire.

Another Justification

Another source which justifies the celebrations in Meron is a letter sent by the rabbonim of Teveria to Rav Chizkiyahu Medini, the *mechaber* of the *Sdei Chemed*. He originally wrote to them outlining the complaints of the *Chasam Sofer* and the *Shoel U'Meishiv* and asked them if they knew of any justification for the *minhag*. They wrote at length to defend the custom, and amongst their arguments, they claim that in fact there are appointees who try to dissuade people from burning expensive garments. They also encourage the people to donate the value of the article to *tzedokah*. If someone did testify to the fact that expensive clothing was burned, it was either because: 1) the words of the appointees were ignored, 2) it was done when those in charge were not present, 3) or they merely heard someone say that he was going to burn it; however, it is entirely possible that he was persuaded not to do so (see *Sdei Chemed*, *Asifas Dinim*, Eretz Yisroel 6).

The rabbonim of *Teveria* also disagree with the *Shoel U'Meishiv's* contention that there were no celebrations in Meron during the time of the *Arizal* and *Beis Yosef*, and that there was only *limud haTorah* and *tefillos*. They cite various *seforim* that testify that the opposite is true; that the *Beis Yosef* and the *gedolim* of his generation indeed participated in the Lag B'Omer celebrations in Meron.

Yet Another Justification

The Gemara in *Avodah Zorah* (11a) brings down a *din* that when a king of Yisroel dies his clothes get burnt. The Gemara continues and says, "just like we burn the kings clothes, similarly, we burn the clothes of a *nosi*". The Gemara, then brings that when Rabbon Gamliel died, Onkelos HaGer burnt clothes which were worth seventy *moneh tzuri*, a colossal amount of money.

Some suggest, that just like we burn the clothes of a king and *nosi* of Yisroel, similarly, we burn the clothes of a Tanna Elokei, and that is why people burn expensive items of clothing on Lag B'Omer.

However, this approach is very difficult as the *Magen Avraham* (*Orach Chaim* 311:16) and the *Taz* (*Orach Chaim* 311:4) both explain, that the reason we burn the clothes of a king is that there is special *din* when it comes to

honoring a king, that his clothes are *ossur b'hanoh* [forbidden to benefit from] for anyone else, and since his clothes are *ossur b'hanoh* we burn them. This *din* however, is a special *din* by a king, and there is no such *din* that if a Tanna Elokei dies, his clothes are *ossur b'hanoh* and should be burnt.⁸

Moreover, even if we say Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai had the same *din* as a *melech* and a *nosi*, that would only apply to his personal clothes, what does that have to do with clothes of people which never belonged to Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai in the first place.

One Final Justification

An interesting explanation of what the burning of clothes has to do with Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai was advanced by Rav Yehoshua Trunk of Kutna, at the end of his work on the Rambam, *Yeshu'os Malko (Likutei Torah* pg. 152). He explains that when Rebbi Shimon was learning in the cave for twelve years, he was on the same level as Adom HaRishon was before he sinned. And it was for this reason that just as Adom in Gan Eden did not have need for clothes, so too Rebbi Shimon did not wear his clothes (they sat in sand up to their necks – see Shabbos 33b). As a remembrance of this great level achieved by Rebbi Shimon, clothes are burned in his honor.

In the aforementioned piece, the *Yeshu'os Malko* goes on to explain the common *minhag* that a *kallah* buys for her *choson* a *tallis*. He explains, that before Adom HaRishon sinned he walked around without any clothes, however, Chavah came along and caused him to sin, and as a result he had to now wear clothes. To show that Chavah was the cause that man has to wear clothes and to rectify the sin, the *minhag* became that a *kallah* gives her *chossan* clothes that can be used for a mitzvah (namely a *tallis*).

Whatever the Justification Is, Surely It Is Still *Ba'al Tashchis*?

Although we mentioned numerous justifications to answer the *minhag* to burn expensive clothes, in the end of the day expensive clothes are being thrown into a fire and our being wasted, what is the *heter*?

The *minhag* is, that under the *chuppah* as a *zecher lechurban* [to remind us of the destruction of the *Beis HaMikdosh*] the *choson* smashes a glass. The *Pri Megodim (Mishbetzos Zahav, Orach Chaim 560:4)* asks, that surely smashing a glass is *ba'al tashchis*? And he answers that it is coming, *כדי לרמז מוסר ושיתנו לב*, to teach us a powerful lesson and to make us aware about the *churban*, since it is coming to teach us an important lesson it's not *ba'al tashchis*.

We find a similar thing in the Gemara in *Berachos (31a)*. The Gemara relates that at a *chasunah* that Mar bar Ravina made, he saw that people were getting over excited, so he took an expensive glass cup worth four hundred zuz and smashed it in front of them, in order to restore some order, and it worked. The question is, how could Mar bar Ravina do this, surely it was *ba'al tashchis*? We see that if one destroys something for purposes of giving *mussar* etc. there is no problem.

The explanation for the above is, that *ba'al tashchis* is destroying something for no good reason, if however, it is done for a purpose it is not considered *ba'al tashchis*. Therefore, if there is a good reason behind burning clothes, especially if we go like the reasoning of Rav Shmuel Heller, there is no problem of *ba'al tashchis*. (See *Shu"t Torah Lishmah 8*, who says very similar to the above.)

Bonfires In Eretz Yisroel

The *minhag* is to light bonfires in honor of Rebbi Shimon on the evening of Lag B'Omer both in Meron and elsewhere (*Sefer Eretz Yisroel 18:3*). Two of the reasons that have been suggested are:

1) It is related in the *Idra Zuta (end of Ha'azinu)* that on the day of Rebbi Shimon's *petirah*, he revealed lots of hidden secrets of the Torah. Due to the great level of *kedusha* that emanated from those teachings, a fire

⁸ The *Magen Avraham* and *Taz* are both coming to answer why when Dovid HaMelech died on Shabbos they had to place a loaf of bread or a child on him in order to be able to move him, surely, Dovid HaMelech was dressed at the time, and so his corpse shouldn't have become *muktzeh*. The *Magen Avraham* and *Taz* both answer, since there is a *din* that the king's clothes are *ossur b'hanoh* and must be burnt, the clothes had no value and consequently didn't stop Dovid HaMelech from becoming *muktzeh*.

surrounded the house where Rebbi Shimon was teaching. Therefore, in honor of Rebbi Shimon, bonfires are lit to remind us of his great level of *kedusha* and the *kedushas haTorah* that he taught (*Hilchos Chag B'Chag, Sefiras Ha'omer*, pg. 97).

2) Additionally, it is related that on the day that Rebbi Shimon died, the sun stopped and the day was lengthened in order to allow him more time to reveal more hidden aspects of the Torah (*Moadei Kodesh, Shavuos 17:28*).

Bows and Arrows

The Yerushalmi in *Berachos* (9:2) relates that during Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai's lifetime, the rainbow never appeared. The reason for this is because the rainbow is a "reminder" *kaviyachol* [so to speak] that Hashem should not destroy the world, *cholilah*. When there is someone alive who is a complete *tzaddik*, this reminder is unnecessary (Rashi, *Kesuvos 77b*). As a remembrance of this, some have a *minhag* to shoot bows and arrows (*Bnei Yissoschar*, Iyar 3:3).

[As an interesting aside, some point out that the *gematria* of "Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai" is the same as "hakeshes," "the rainbow", both equal 805 (*Sefer Va'yedabeir Moshe*, quoted in *Moadei Kodesh*, chap. 17, footnote 67).]

Haircuts

Another Lag B'Omer related custom is to give three-year-old boys their first haircuts on that day and train them in the mitzvah of *peyos*. The source of this *minhag* is the incident cited above, that the *Arizal* took his son to Meron and gave him his first haircut on Lag B'Omer.

One possible explanation as to the connection between Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai and giving a child his first haircut is based on the Gemara in *Makkos* (17b) which states that if a woman gives birth to a son, she should give birth to a child like Rebbi Shimon. Rashi explains that she should *daven* that her son should be like Rebbi Shimon. Therefore, the *minhag* became to specifically give haircuts on Rebbi Shimon's *yahrtzeit* in order to remind parents that they should *daven* that their child should be like Rebbi Shimon (*Moadei Kodesh*, Shavuos, chap. 18, footnote 40).

Oops! I Said Tonight is Lag B'Omer Before Counting Sefirah, Now What?

In Hebrew, one can allude to a number by reciting the Hebrew letter or letters that represent it. For example, one could attempt to count the eleventh day of *sefirah* by stating that today is *yud alef b'omer*, or attempt to count the thirty-third day of *sefirah* by counting that today is Lag B'Omer. The *poskim* dispute whether one fulfills the mitzvah if one counts this way. Whereas some *poskim* rule that this is a valid method of counting, other *poskim* rule that he has not fulfilled the mitzvah since he did not count the number explicitly (*Shaarei Teshuvah* 489:6).

There is a very common *shailah* that results from this dispute. What happens if on the evening of Lag B'Omer one says "tonight is Lag B'Omer" before counting *sefirah*. Can he still recite a *berachah* on the counting of *sefirah* that night, or do we say that he has already counted for that night and cannot recite the *berachah* anymore? The *Biur Halachah* (489:1, *d.h. moneh*) rules that this issue remains unresolved. Therefore, one should count in the regular way to make certain he fulfills the mitzvah, but without a *berachah* since it is a doubt whether he is still obligated to perform the mitzvah. On subsequent nights he would be able to resume counting with a *berachah*.

The Minhag of Eating Matzah on Pesach Sheini

Before discussing the *minhag* of eating *matzah* on Pesach Sheini, we first must clarify when there is a mitzvah to eat *matzah* and when there is not. Concerning the eve of the fifteenth of Nissan, *Leil HaSeder*, the Torah commands us several *mitzvos*. The three that are relevant to our discussion are as follows (Rambam, *Sefer HaMitzvos, Aseh* 56 and 158):

- 1) There is a mitzvah to eat *matzah*.
- 2) There is a mitzvah to eat of the meat of the *korban pesach*.
- 3) There is a mitzvah to eat *matzah* together with the *korban pesach*. (We will discuss the mitzvah of eating *marror* shortly.)

This means, that even though there is a mitzvah to eat the *korban pesach* together with *matzah*, the *mitzvos* of *matzah* and eating the *korban* are independent of each other. Therefore, if one has the meat of the *korban*, but no *matzah*, he still must eat the meat. Similarly, if he has *matzah*, but no *korban*, he still must eat the *matzah*. This is why there is still a mitzvah *min haTorah* to eat *matzah* on *Leil HaSeder*, even though we unfortunately do not have a *Beis HaMikdash* and the capability of offering *korbonos*.

This is all true concerning the eve of the fifteenth of Nissan. However, with regards to the eve of the fifteenth of Iyar – the evening following the slaughtering of the *pesach sheini* – the halachah is different. Although there is a mitzvah to eat the meat of the *pesach sheini*, there is no independent mitzvah to eat *matzah*. The only time a person must eat *matzah* on that evening is when he has the meat of the *korban*.

The *Chasam Sofer* makes this point in one of his *Teshuvos* (*Orach Chaim* 140) and he finds an allusion to this in the *pasukim*. Concerning the *pesach rishon*, the Torah writes (*Shemos* 12:8), “They shall eat the meat on that night – roasted over the fire – and *matzos*; with bitter herbs shall they eat it.” However, when the Torah commands us concerning *pesach sheini*, there is a slight change in the wording: “In the second month, on the fourteenth day, in the afternoon, shall he make it; with *matzos* and bitter herbs shall he eat it” (*Bamidbar* 9:11).

The *Chasam Sofer* points out that in the first *pasuk* we are commanded to eat the meat and the *matzah* together with the *marror*. This indicates that the *marror* is secondary to the meat and the *matzah*. Indeed, there is only a mitzvah *min haTorah* to eat *marror* when there is a *korban*. Nowadays, we eat *marror* as per a mitzvah *miderabbonon*.

Concerning *pesach sheini*, however, the Torah makes both *matzah* and the *marror* secondary to the *korban*. Therefore, nowadays, unlike *Leil HaSeder* when there is still a mitzvah to eat *matzah*, there is no mitzvah to eat *matzah* on the eve of the fifteenth of Iyar.

Eating Matzah – The Minhag

Although there is no mitzvah to eat *matzah* on that evening, many have a custom to eat *matzah* on the day of Pesach Sheini itself. The obvious difficulty with this *minhag* is, why should there be such a *minhag* at all? During the time of the *Beis HaMikdash* when various individuals found it necessary to offer the *korban pesach sheini*, they ate *matzah* on the eve of the fifteenth of Iyar, not on the fourteenth – the day when the *pesach sheini* was *shechted*. Although several answers have been suggested, we will only discuss one of them.

In order to understand this answer, a short introduction is required. There is a Torah prohibition against adding to *mitzvos* called *ba'al tosif*. One is not allowed to make up new *mitzvos*, add to existing ones, or to perform *mitzvos* when there is no mitzvah to do so. For example, one is not allowed to add a fifth compartment to the four compartments in the *tefillin shel rosh*. Also, one is not permitted to sit in a *succah* after Succos.

However, in order to transgress the prohibition of *ba'al tosif*, one has to have in mind that he wishes to fulfill the mitzvah. Using our previous example, if one keeps his *succah* standing the entire year and decides to sit in its shade during the warm summer months, he is permitted to do so as long as he does not intend to fulfill the mitzvah of *succah* thereby.

This concept, that intent to fulfill the mitzvah is required in order to transgress *ba'al tosif*, is only true when it is not time to perform the mitzvah. However, at a time when the mitzvah is meant to be performed, one can transgress *ba'al tosif* even without intent to perform the mitzvah.

Based on this, some wish to explain the reason why the *minhag* is to eat *matzah* specifically on the fourteenth of Iyar and not on the following evening. Since the eve of the fifteenth is theoretically the time to perform the mitzvah of eating *matzah* together with the *korban pesach sheini*, there is concern that eating *matzah* at that time might violate *ba'al tosif*, since it is not *halachically* required. Therefore, the *minhag* evolved to eat the *matzah* on the fourteenth (*Shu"t Divrei Yisroel*, 1:130).

Although the more prevalent *minhag* is to eat *matzah* on the fourteenth of Iyar, there were many who also did so on the eve of the fifteenth. Some were even accustomed to make a “mini-seder” and read parts of the *Haggadah*. Of course they omitted the *berachos* that are only relevant to the first two nights of Pesach. Additionally, they

learned the *halachos* of the *korban pesach sheini* (*Shu"t Kinyan Torah Behalacha* 7:42, *Darchei Chaim VeShalom* 631; *Moadim Lesimcha*, Iyar-Sivan, pg. 100).

Not Practiced

As we have mentioned, there is a *minhag* to eat *matzah* either on the fourteenth of Iyar, on the eve of the fifteenth, or on both occasions. This custom was especially practiced by those of the Chasidic communities. On the other hand, many communities did not eat *matzah* at all on Pesach Sheini. Apparently, this is was the custom of the Vilna Gaon (*Maaseh Rav* 185) and the communities of Lita (*Shu"t Rivevos Efrayim*, 2:129 and 239).⁹

An Interesting Aside

As an interesting aside, it is worthwhile to point out a question posed by the Sar Shalom of Belz. In conjunction with the mitzvah of *koreich* on *Seder* night, we read the paragraph of *zecher lemikdash k'Hillel*: "This is what Hillel did when the *Beis HaMikdash* stood. He would make a sandwich of *matzah* and *marror* in order to fulfill what it says, 'with *matzos* and bitter herbs shall he eat it'" (*Bamidbar* 9:11).

The Belzer Rebbe asked, why did the compiler of the *Haggadah* choose this particular *pasuk*? This *pasuk* appears in conjunction with the Pesach Sheini. Would it not have been preferable to use the similar *pasuk* that appears in the *parsha* of the Pesach Rishon, "They shall eat the meat on that night – roasted over the fire – and *matzos*; with bitter herbs shall they eat it" (*Shemos* 12:8)?

The son of the Sar Shalom, Rav Yehoshua of Belz, answered that the paragraph of *zecher lemikdash k'Hillel* is actually a *tefillah*. When reciting it, we are expressing our hope that even though we did not merit to partake of the *pesach rishon*, we should at least have the opportunity to offer the *pesach sheini* and eat it together with *matzah* and *marror* (*Shu"t Divrei Yisroel*, 1:10; *Haggadas Kol Aryeh*).

May we be *zoche* to be able to bring the *pesach sheini* this year.

Eating Roasted Meat on Pesach Sheini

Before continuing our discussion about Pesach Sheini, we must mention one halachah and one *minhag* that are relevant to Pesach Rishon.

1) The *Shulchan Aruch* states (469): "It is forbidden to say about any meat, whether live or slaughtered: 'this meat is for Pesach.' This is because it appears as if he sanctified it while it was still alive for the sake of a *korban pesach*, and he is thereby eating *kodshim* [sacrificial meat] outside the *Beis HaMikdash*. Rather, he should say: 'This meat is for Yom Tov.'"

In other words, there is a concern that if one says concerning meat, "this is for Pesach," it will appear as if that meat is from an actual *korban* and people will suspect him of transgressing the Torah prohibition of eating *kodshim* outside the *Beis HaMikdash*.

2) Similarly, there is a custom of not eating roasted meat on *Seder* night. The reason for this *minhag* is that since the *korban pesach* was roasted, if one eats this type of meat, it will appear as if he is eating *kodshim* outside the *Beis HaMikdash* (*Shulchan Aruch* 476:1)

Concerning Pesach Sheini, some *poskim* contend that one should not eat roasted meat on the eve of the fifteenth of Iyar. Since that was the night when the roasted *korban pesach sheini* was eaten, if one were to eat this type of meat on that night, people might mistakenly be led to believe that he is eating *kodshim* outside the *Beis HaMikdash* (*Shu"t Yaffe Lalev* 5:476; *Reshash, Pesochim* 53a).

⁹ For more on the topic it's worthwhile looking at the *maamar* in *Kovetz Moriah* (vol. 397 - 399, Nissan 5775) written by its author, Rabbi Matisyahu Gabai, who explains why the Steipler Gaon would eat *matzah* on Pesach Sheini, while his brother-in-law, the Chazon Ish, would not.

However, many maintain that this stringency is not practiced in any community and that one does not need to concern himself with it. If one wishes to be strict, perhaps there would be basis to forbid eating of a lamb that was roasted whole, as was the case with the *korban pesach* (*Shu"t Rivevos Efrayim, Orach Chaim 2:138*).

Even those who permit eating roasted meat on the eve of the fifteenth of Iyar, nevertheless hold that one should not say concerning meat that is to be served on Pesach Sheini, "this is for Pesach Sheini." Just as with Pesach Rishon, such a statement looks like one is sanctifying a *korban* (*Shu"t Rivevos Efrayim, Orach Chaim 2:138*).

Divrei Torah for the Shabbos Table

Are We Maximizing Our Spiritual Potential?

In this week's *parsha* we learn about the various blemishes that invalidate an animal from being offered as a *korban* [sacrifice] in the *Beis HaMikdash*. Although a *ba'al mum* [blemished animal] may not be offered on the *mizbayach*, it can still be donated to the *Beis HaMikdash* to be sold, with the proceeds being used for upkeep and repairs. The Gemara (*Temurah 7b*) rules that just as a *ba'al mum* may not be brought as a *korban*, it is also forbidden to give an unblemished animal to the *Beis HaMikdash* maintenance fund. What is the reason for this additional prohibition?

Rav Pam explains that donating a flawless animal to the *Beis HaMikdash* treasury to serve a more generic function that could be accomplished by virtually any animal is a waste of its potential. Instead of allowing it to reach the higher level of holiness for which it is fit, its owner needlessly downgraded it to be used for a lesser purpose.

Rav Pam adds that this lesson applies to humans as well. Many people are not born with the innate talents to teach Torah or inspire others to come closer to Hashem. If a person who is blessed with this ability opts to instead engage in other pursuits, he is not living up to his spiritual promise. Although it is certainly commendable to support one's family, the skills needed to do so are far more prevalent, and someone who passes up a job in order to teach Torah can generally be replaced quite easily. Although we are sadly unable to offer *korbonos* in the absence of the *Beis HaMikdash*, the message of the *korbonos* that were brought there still resonates and calls for us to examine whether we are maximizing our spiritual potential and making the best use of our Divine gifts. (R' Ozer Alport)

Sefiras HaOmer – The Importance of Time

We are currently in the midst of the *sefiras ha'omer* and we learn about the mitzvah of *sefiras ha'omer* in this week's *parsha*, therefore, it would be wrong to not say something about it. The *pasuk* that teaches us the mitzvah of *sefiras ha'omer* says: וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת מיום הביאכם את עומר התנופה שבע שבתות תמימות תהינה – "And you shall count for yourselves, from the morrow of the day of rest from the day you bring the *omer* as a wave offering seven weeks; they shall be complete" (*Vayikra 23:15*).

The wording of this *pasuk* calls for our attention. What is the meaning of, וספרתם לכם, "to count for yourselves"? What does לכם have to do with counting? Obviously, there is some message being hinted at with this phrase. We find in *Parshas Lech Lecha* that Hakodosh Boruch Hu told Avraham, לך לך, "Go for yourself". Rashi explains the term "for yourself" as meaning for your benefit. So similarly, the word here by *sefiras ha'omer* "for yourselves" should also mean for your benefit. But what benefit is there here by *sefiras ha'omer*? If this were a Yom Tov like Succos or Pesach we could see some personal pleasure involved. After all, on Yom Tov one is supposed to enjoy himself by eating and drinking food and wine, but what personal pleasure is there in *sefiras ha'omer*?

A Time of Accounting

The great *mekubal* Rav Chaim Vital, *zt"l* (*Eitz Hadaas Tov*) answers that the benefit from *sefiras ha'omer* comes from the personal accounting one does on the time that has passed and by improving oneself in the future. During *sefiras ha'omer* we count seven weeks in anticipation of the Yom Tov of Shavuot. Notice that the name of the Yom Tov is "Weeks". We would naturally assume that the name of the Yom Tov should be called the Yom Tov of *Matan Torah*. Instead, it is specifically called "Weeks". It is these "weeks" that prepare us for the fiftieth day which is the Yom Tov celebrating *Matan Torah*, the giving of the Torah. During these seven weeks we purify ourselves from our defilement just like we freed ourselves from the defilement and *avodah zarah* of Egypt.

Don't Procrastinate

Another famous question is asked by the *Sefer HaChinuch*. Why do we count up towards Shavuot, counting the days that passed? Normally when one counts in anticipation of a coming event he counts down, only so many days left.

A beautiful answer is given utilizing the parable of a procrastinator. He always pushes off his chores with the excuse, there's still plenty of time and so it isn't burning right now. I can do it later.

What is the difference between a successful CEO and a failure? A successful businessman is diligent and conscientious taking care of his jobs immediately and working with a clean desk. He takes care of every chore promptly. At the end of the day everything has already been taken care of, nothing has been pushed off. So he keeps his desk clean.

On the other hand, a procrastinator will ultimately wind up a failure. His desk is always cluttered with undone work waiting for his attention. The papers are piled high leaving no room to work because he's so lazy and consistently pushes everything off. He does only what is an emergency and everything else has to wait. He'll never succeed that way.

The procrastinator has a little voice telling him that he can do it later. People like this continually push things off with the illusion that later on it will be easier. Thus, they push it off, and push it off until in the end all their chores build up until they are totally unmanageable. They lose all their opportunities to succeed.

This attitude is crucial to spiritual success. Shammai says in *Pirkei Avos*, "Don't say when I have time then I'll sit and learn, maybe you'll never find time." When a mitzvah presents itself to you don't let it sit and ferment. Who knows if you'll ever get around to it? This is *Chazal's* profound advice for success.

This is especially true of Torah learning. Right now he's so busy. In a few years he'll have plenty of time to dedicate to learning. One day he'll retire and go back to *kollel*. But he doesn't take into consideration what condition he'll be in then. Once he's on pension he finds himself going to doctors every day. After all, the doctor's office is the meeting place of all the senior citizens. Like the famous joke about the old man who didn't show up at the clinic one day. His friends called him up to find out what happened. "Oh, I wasn't feeling well, I was in bed and couldn't go to the doctor!"

The purpose of the counting of the *omer* is in anticipation of the Yom Tov of the Giving of the Torah. Therefore, we count up, counting the days that passed. If we counted the days that remain, we could console ourselves that we still have time to get ready. And so it would continue until we finished counting at Shavuot. Instead, we count up, mentioning the days that have passed, in order to arouse ourselves to realize how much we have lost. Oy vey! It's getting late! Look at how much time has gone by. I had better get a move on and hustle and do what I can to prepare myself for Matan Torah. Thus, answers Rav Chaim Vital, the counting is called "For You" for your benefit. We count to motivate ourselves to prepare for *Matan Torah*.

The Only Jew, Only One Day

There is another insight that *sefiras ha'omer* teaches us. We have to count the days. It says in *krias shema* "that I command you this day." We find this expression elsewhere. "See, I am placing before you this day..." What is the importance of this phrase, "this day"?

A wise Rov once gave a Jew advice how to overcome his *yetzer horah*. He should always think of himself as the only Jew in the world, and he has only one mitzvah, and only one day. This is the key to overcoming his *yetzer horah*.

This foolish man misunderstood the rabbi and thought that all he had to do was one mitzvah and then he was done. And only today and never again. And he was the only Jew in the world, and everyone else was a *goy*! Therefore he gave himself the liberty of stealing from his customers because, after all, they're only *goyim*. That afternoon he went home to have dinner and his wife told him to go wash his hands for bread. He refused to wash blurting out at her, "The rabbi said I don't have to!" He then sat down and started eating without a *berachah*. His

wife became very angry and thought that he had lost his mind. But he was adamant. "The rabbi told me I don't have to!"

As she was arguing with him a loud banging was heard on the door. The old man whom he had cheated barged in and demanded to know why he had stolen from him.

"Why, don't you know that *gezel ha-goy* [stealing from a non-Jew] is *muttar*? That's what the rabbi told me!"

With that everyone ran to the rabbi find out what was going on.

Upon hearing the story, the rabbi sat there astonished. He explained that he had been misunderstood. What he had told this man was very sound advice how to conquer his *yetzer horah*. He must not push off and postpone fulfilling *mitzvos* with the excuse that there are plenty of Yidden better than me who can do those *mitzvos*. He shouldn't say these *mitzvos* aren't so important and there are other *mitzvos* which I can do later in a few days time.

Instead, he should look at himself as the only Jew in the world, and he only has this one day, and only this one *mitzvah*. Then it becomes quite easy to push off the *yetzer hora's* excuses. By following this advice every minute of the day, he can raise himself up in his Torah observance and study of Torah and become a truly G-d fearing Jew.

This is the importance of counting *sefirah*. One *mitzvah*, every day. This is the secret of learning how to capture the success of the moment. (Adapted from *Maadanei Melech* by R. Mordechai Malka)

Needless Stress

This week's *parsha* concludes with a tragic episode in which a man cursed and blasphemed Hashem. Initially, Moshe did not know the appropriate punishment for this sin, so the blasphemer was placed in jail while they awaited clarification from Hashem regarding his sentence. Rashi explains that even though this incident occurred in the same period of time as the episode of the wood-gatherer (*Bamidbar* 15:32-36), the blasphemer was not placed in a jail cell together with him but was incarcerated by himself. Why indeed were they not placed together?

The *Sifsei Chachomim* (on Rashi) explains that there would indeed be real harm done were we to put them together. Putting someone whom the courts may not execute along with a person who is certainly on death row can cause unwarranted anguish and pain. The person may think, *Oy vey, they may kill me also*. To save him from any unnecessary anxiety, they kept the two apart.

The Torah is teaching us to be sensitive to others.

If we examine the incident but a step further, we will see just how sensitive Bnei Yisroel were toward the *mekallel* [blasphemer].

The Rosh on *Chumash*, as well as the *Da'as Zekeinim mi'Baalei HaTosfos*, ask: Why was there any doubt whether the *mekallel* would receive a death sentence? If a person curses his parent, the death penalty is mandated. Should cursing Hashem be any less? Of course, his crime was worse than cursing a parent. And at first glance, one would indeed say that he should be executed by *beis din*. Bnei Yisroel, however, were concerned that execution may be too good for him; perhaps his crime was so severe that he didn't deserve the atonement that comes along with the administration of the death sentence, and perhaps he deserves a fate worse than death.

That's why they did not know what to do with him. There was never a question of letting him off scot-free; rather, his crime was so horrendous that perhaps his fate should be left to Hashem.

If the *mekallel* may deserve a fate worse than death in the hands of *beis din*, what harm is there in putting him together with the *mekosheish*? We are not dealing with an innocent man whom we don't want to distress needlessly by placing him together with a condemned man. We are dealing with a sinner, who may deserve a fate worse than anything we can dish out. What's wrong with letting him stew a bit?

Perhaps the Torah is teaching us that you cannot take any liberties when it comes to inflicting needless distress. Even if the decision would have been to leave him alone and have his fate determined by Heaven, then putting him together with the wood-gatherer — even for a short time — would be inflicting undue aggravation on him.

Such is the care we must take to avoid hurting a person without authorization, including a person who is so evil that we have no means of punishing. Imagine how much more care we need to display toward the truly innocent and just. All steps need to be taken to ensure that no pain, even emotional, is inflicted without cause. (R' Avraham Bukspan)

Lag B'Omer - Never Give Up

During the *sefirah* period we mourn over the deaths of the 24,000 *talmidim* of R' Akiva. The Gemara (*Yevamos* 62b) discusses the incident:

Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of disciples ... and all of them died at the same time because they did not treat each other with proper respect. The world remained desolate until Rabbi Akiva came to our Masters in the South and taught the Torah to them. These were Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yosi, Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua; and it was they who revived the Torah at that time. A *Tanna* taught: "All of them died between Pesach and Shavuot". Rabbi Chama ben Abba, or some say, Rabbi Chiya ben Abin said: "All of them died a cruel death." What was it? Rabbi Nahman replied: "Croup."

Lag B'Omer, in contrast, is a sudden burst of elation in total contrast to the solemnness of this time. The Gra writes that on Lag B'Omer the plague ended and the *talmidim* ceased to die. The *Mashgiach* of Torah Ore, Rav Zeidel Epstein, *zt"l*, commented (*Ha'aros* by Moreinu Harav Zeidel Epstein vol. IV, p. 154) that there is a very important lesson to be understood from the biography of R' Akiva. At the age of forty, he started from scratch and labored twenty-four years, managing to become one of the greatest Torah scholars of his day. He amassed 24,000 *talmidim*. That in itself was quite a feat: going from a complete ignoramus to the most illustrious rebbi of Klal Yisroel.

But then, suddenly, he lost them all in the short span of just over a month. Here was the greatest *Rosh Yeshiva* of the generation. He had been surrounded by crowds of the best Talmudic scholars of the time. He had spent the major portion of his life building up the largest and most renowned *yeshiva* in the world. And suddenly, he was thrown into solitude and loneliness.

He had started learning at the age of 40 and had spent 24 years amassing his *talmidim* and building his great *yeshiva*. So he was probably over seventy by this time. How terrible a tragedy this was for a man of his age, to endure such a misfortune and start anew — opening a new *yeshiva* with only five *talmidim*. Any ordinary person would have been decimated by the tragedy and would have no strength to continue on, much less to start all over again from scratch.

But R' Akiva didn't despair. He started all over again! And in doing so, he succeeded in saving Torah in Klal Yisroel. The whole Talmud we have, our sole remnant of the Oral Tradition, is due almost entirely to those five new *talmidim*. Their names appear continuously in the *Mishnayos*. This is a brilliant image of how important it is not to despair. One must fight his impulses, fight his situation, and trust in Hashem Yisborach that He will send him the *geulah* [redemption].

* * *

We discussed Rebbe Akiva, now let's consider his *talmid* Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai, whose *yahrzeit* is celebrated on Lag B'Omer. His life story also teaches us that we should never give up, regardless of the situation.

The *Nachlas Avos* writes that Yochai (Reb Shimon's father) was married for many years and didn't have children. Yochai told his wife that he wants to divorce her and marry someone else, so he can bear children. His wife didn't want a divorce. She *davened* and she cried a lot to Hashem, asking to merit bearing a child.

On the night of Rosh Hashanah, Yochai had a dream. He was in an orchard. There were many trees there, some tall and some small. Yochai saw himself leaning on a small tree, without fruit. He understood that this tree represents him. It didn't have fruit, because he didn't have children. A *maloch* came into the orchard, carrying a bucket filled with water and he began watering the trees. Yochai understood that the *maloch* was giving children for the upcoming year. A tree that was watered will bear fruit that year. How he hoped the *maloch* would pour some water on his sapling, too.

The *maloch* came to Yochai's tree, and put down his barrel of water. Then, the *maloch* took out a small jug and poured its contents over the tree. The tree immediately sprouted flowers and grew beautiful fruit.

When he awoke, he told his wife about the dream. They understood that the dream bore good tidings.

On *motzei* Rosh Hashanah, Yochai repeated what he saw in his dream to Rebbe Akiva. Reb Akiva agreed that the dream meant that they would have a child that year. Yochai asked, "Why didn't the *maloch* water my tree from the barrel, as he watered all the other trees? What is the significance of that small jug?"

Reb Akiva answered, "This jug wasn't filled with water. It was filled with your wife's tears; the tears she shed to have children. In the merit of those tears, you will have a holy child."

That year, Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai was born. When one doesn't lose hope, and he continues to *daven* for a salvation, salvations will occur.

* * *

Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai was overheard speaking against the Roman occupation. The Romans heard and wanted to execute him. When he heard of this decree he ran away and hid in a cave where he lived secluded for thirteen years, together with his son, Rebbe Elazar. On Lag B'Omer we sing: שם קניית הודך והדרך – "There you acquired your glory." It was specifically in that cave that Rebbe Shimon reached his unprecedented heights. Rebbe Shimon could have despaired and felt that all is lost. He was distant from the Torah centers, isolated from all teachers and students. Furthermore, at this point, Rebbe Shimon thought that he may need to remain in the cave forever. He didn't know that eventually he would be able to leave. (We will soon write what occurred, that caused Rebbe Shimon to courageously leave the cave.) Living in a cave forever doesn't seem to be very productive and glorious. But Rebbe Shimon continued to study Torah with all his might there in that cave, and it was particularly there that he reached his outstanding, unfathomable heights. He reached those levels, because he didn't lose hope.

When did Rebbe Shimon decide that he can leave the cave? According to the *Bavli* (Shabbos 33b) Eliyohu HaNovi came and informed him that the Caesar had died, and the decree against him had been annulled. The *Yerushalmi* (*Shevi'is* 9:1) and several *Medrashim* supply us with a different story. After twelve years of living in the cave, Rebbe Shimon still wasn't certain that he could return home. It didn't seem safe, since the Romans were still after him. But one day, he left the cave for a short time, and watched a hunter try to catch birds. Rebbe Shimon was able to hear the announcements that were declared in Heaven. Sometimes, he heard Heaven announce *dimus* (free). When this was said in Heaven, the hunter wasn't able to catch the bird. Other times, he heard Heaven say *sapkula* (caught) and the hunter caught the bird.

This taught Rebbe Shimon a lesson in *hashgochah protis*. He realized that even a bird isn't caught, unless Hashem decrees it. He said to his son, Rebbe Elazar, "If Hashem's *hashgochah protis* is over the birds, He certainly has *hashgochah protis* over us. Even a bird can't be caught without Hashem's decree. The Romans will certainly not be able to harm us, if it isn't Hashem's will."

That is when they courageously left the cave. They weren't afraid, because they knew that nothing could happen to them if it wasn't Hashem's will. Originally, when he entered the cave he thought that he might remain there forever, but he never lost hope. He continued to study Torah with all his might. And that led to his greatness.

We relate these stories so we can follow in the *tzaddikim's* ways. We must know that even Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai, and all *tzaddikim* of the past, had great struggles and challenges. And it is specifically because they passed all these tests that they reached the levels that they did. When we read about how Rebbe Akiva and Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai never lost hope, we must learn a lesson for ourselves, never to lose hope even in the most dire situation.

On this special day of festivities in honor of Rebbe Shimon we should be careful of becoming so engrossed in celebrating that we forget the man and his teachings. It is a day to reflect on the importance of our holy Torah and undertake to feel the same joy in our learning and in Yiddishkeit as we do singing around the bonfire. (R' Eliezer Parkoff)

The week's booklet is dedicated *leiluy nishmas* all those who were tragically *niftar* in Meron two years ago and especially for R' Moshe ben R' Meir Eliezer who I was *zocha* to *daven* next to for many years in Adas Yeshurun.

The printing costs for this week's special double sized sheet cost around \$500, please help me cover my weekly printing costs by visiting: <https://thechesedfund.com/limudaymoshe/limuday-moshe-weekly-printing-costs> . Or by calling: +1518-323-0376, Campaign ID: 28855. Thank You.

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