

Torah Wellsprings

Collected thoughts
from
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Achrei - Kedoshim

Lag B'omer





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Achrei-Kedoshim - Lag B'omer

Desire

Nadav and Avihu were *niftar* בקרבתם לפני ה' "when they came too close to Hashem." The holy sefarim explain that their demise was due to their deep attachment to Hashem, until their neshamos left their bodies and flew up to Hashem.

As the Or HaChaim writes, "These tzaddikim knew they were dying, but they didn't refrain from letting themselves become drawn to the sweet... desire until they died."

Desire is essential for *avodas Hashem*. As the Noam Elimelech (Vayeira ד"ה) writes, (או) יאמר פירוש הפסוקים "Hashem's primary will is that a person should desire to do His will. The main service is in the heart."

The desire to do good deeds is an extremely high

level. The Shem MiShmuel (*Korach* 7765) writes, "My father [the Avnei Nezer] told me that if a person desires to keep the Torah and mitzvos, he will go to Gehinom. And if he does go, I guarantee it that he will fly out of there as fast as an arrow."

It states (*Tehillim* 105:3), ישמח לב מבקשי ה' "Rejoice the hearts of those who yearn for Hashem." The *pasuk* doesn't say, ישמח לב עובדי ה', "Rejoice the hearts of those who *serve* Hashem," instead, it states ישמח לב מבקשי ה', "Rejoice the hearts of those who *want* to serve Hashem. Because wanting to serve Hashem is the highest level.

The Torah praises Avraham Avinu for the *hachnasas orchim* he performed for the three *malachim* who came to his home. Rebbe Tzaddok

HaKohen notes that his *hachnasas orchim* wasn't actually necessary because *malachim* don't need to eat!

Avraham is also praised for *akeidas Yitzchak*. Once again, Rebbe Tzaddok HaKohen points out that the sacrifice didn't end up happening because the malach told Avraham to hold back from shechting Yitzchak.

The answer to both questions is that Avraham *wanted* to do *hachnasas orchim*, and Avraham *wanted* to do the *akeidah*, and one's desire is the most significant part of the mitzvah.

The Midrash (*Mishlei* ch.12) says, "Whoever lies on his bed and thinks, 'Tomorrow I will do a *chesed* for *ploni*,' he will merit rejoicing with the tzaddikim in Olam HaBa." Take note that he earns Olam HaBa for merely *wanting* to do a deed of kindness, even if, in the end, he wasn't able to do

so. It's the good intention that is most important.

The Midrash (*Shmuel Rabsa* 3) tells that before Shmuel HaNavi was born, a *bas kol* announced that a child will soon be born. "He will be named Shmuel, and he will be a *navi*." People knew about this *bas kol*, and therefore, all parents of new-born-sons named their child Shmuel, hoping that he will be the child that is destined to be the *navi*.

Shmuel, the son of Chanah, became that *navi*. Nevertheless, all children named Shmuel at that time merited prophecy, at least one time in their lives. The Chida said that this is hinted at in (*Tehillim* 99:6), שמואל בקוראי שמו, which implies "Since they were called Shmuel, they merited prophecy."

Why did they merit *nevuah*? Only because of their parents' intense desire, fervent prayers, and hopes that they should

merit a child a *navi*, did it occurred.

There was a chassid who wanted with all his heart to serve Hashem, but he always failed. He said to his Rebbe, the Nesivos Shalom zt'l, "I think that when I die they will write on my tombstone, 'Here lies the person who wanted' (בעל השאיפות)."

The Nesivos Shalom told him, "If I see a tomb in a cemetery inscribed, 'here lies the baal hashe'ifos, I will stop there to stay a few chapters of Tehillim.'"

If you want to recognize the greatness of desire, think about two people, one is at the top of a mountain, and one is at the bottom. The person on top wants to go down, and the one at the bottom wants to climb up.

Right now, it looks like one is higher than the other, but due to their opposite desires, they will soon change places. The

one on top will be at the bottom, and the one at the bottom will reach the top.

There were rooms, *lishkos*, built alongside the walls of the Beis HaMikdash. Some of the rooms had the same holiness as the interior of the Beis HaMikdash, and some didn't. It wasn't the location of the rooms that determined how holy it was; rather, its holiness was determined depending on where the door opened to, as we will explain:

The Mishnah (Maaser Sheini 3:8) states, "A *lishkah* that is built within the area of the Beis HaMikdash, but its door faces to outside the Beis HaMikdash, that room doesn't have the holiness of the Beis HaMikdash... If the room is built outside the Beis HaMikdash, but the doors open into the Beis HaMikdash, that room is holy, like the Beis HaMikdash..."

This tells us that it isn't so much where one is,

rather where one is heading.

Reb Shalom Shwadron zt'l would teach this Mishnah in his drashos. He explained that if one works outside the beis medresh, but he is always looking and yearning to be in the beis medresh (and when he has the opportunity, he goes there to learn Torah), then essentially, it is like he is always in the beis medresh. But if a person is in the beis medresh, and his wish is to be outside the beis medresh earning money, then even when he is in the beis medresh, he is outside.

Sefiras HaOmer

The mitzvah to count the omer is to show our

anticipation and yearning for mattan Torah. It is to express our desire.

As the Sefer HaChinuch (306) writes, "We are obligated to count the omer...until the day we received the Torah to show our strong desire for this special day... It can be compared to a slave who counts the days towards his freedom. He is always counting the days: 'When will the time come when I will be freed?'

The Chinuch asks, if we are counting to show our anticipation for Shavuos, why don't we count how many days are left to Shavuos? Why do we count how many days have passed?¹

1. The korban omer is made up of barley, which is generally used for animal fodder. On Shavuos, the *shtei halechem*, the two breads are sacrificed in the Beis HaMikdash, made from wheat flour, which is human food. This demonstrates that during these days of counting the omer, we rise from being animalistic to becoming a human being.

Based on this, the Chidushei HaRim zt'l answers the Chinuch's

He answers that at the beginning of sefiras ha'omer, there are too many days left until Shavuos. If one were to say, "There are forty-nine days left until mattan Torah, this would distress him. Therefore, we count the days that passed. The Chinuch adds that when we get closer to Shavuos we continue counting the days that passed because we don't want to change the style of the counting in the middle.

The Ra'n (Pesachim 28.) quotes the following Midrash:

When the Yidden left Mitzrayim, Moshe Rabbeinu told the nation that they will serve Hashem at Har Sinai.

The nation asked, "When will that be?"

"In fifty days."

They counted the days.

The Ra'n writes, "In commemoration of that count, the Chachamim established the counting of the omer."

The Yidden in the desert counted enthusiastically, day after day, up to mattan Torah. During these forty-nine days, the Yidden had many spiritual ups and downs. For example, when they were in Eilam, they complained that they don't have water to drink (see Shemos 16:2). In Refidim, they had doubts in emunah, and Amalek came (see Shemos 17:7-8). There were other struggles and tests that the Jewish nation went

question, why we count the days that passed, and not the days that are left until Shavuos. This is because we aren't only showing our anticipation and yearning for Shavuos, we are also celebrating each day that passes, since we depart from being like an animal and we get closer to being a person, as Hashem wants us to be.

through during those forty-nine days. But they counted each day joyously in anticipation of mattan Torah. This demonstrates that even when a Yid falls and goes through ups and downs, he should still look forward to the time when he will yet serve Hashem properly.

Pesach Sheini

Tamei people came to Moshe Rabbeinu and complained (Bamidbar 9:7), אנחנו טמאים לנפש אדם למה נגרע לבלתי אנהנו טמאים לנפש אדם למה נגרע לבלתי, "We are tamei as we were in contact with a dead person. Why should we miss out and not be able to bring the korban Pesach at the right time?"

Hashem responded that they would get a second chance to bring the korban Pesach a month later, on Pesach Sheni.

But their request is not really understood. They knew that they were tamei! So why did they ask, למה

נגרע "Why can't we bring the korban Pesach?" It can be compared to a person who is missing his arm and asks, "Why can't I wear tefillin?" The answer is obvious! How can he wear tefillin without an arm? Similarly, it should be evident and straightforward why they can't bring the korban Pesach. They couldn't bring the korban because they were tamei.

The Chidushei HaRim zt'l answers that למה נגרע is the shout that came forth from the depths of their heart. It wasn't a rational question. They knew why they can't bring the korban Pesach, and they asked, nonetheless, "But why not?" Because they so much wanted to perform this mitzvah.

Because of their strong desire, Hashem created a new halachah and granted them the opportunity to sacrifice the korban Pesach on Pesach Sheni. This is the only time that Hashem

created a new halachah - people's pleas and strong and it was because of desire.²

2. The story of Bnos Tzelafchad (*Bamidbar 27*) is similar to the story of Pesach Sheini. In that story, the Bnos Tzelafchad came with a request to which Moshe didn't know the answer, and Hashem said they were correct. At the time that the people requested Pesach Sheni, again Moshe Rabeinu did not know the answer, and Hashem agreed with the people. The difference between the two stories is as follows; In regard to the Bnos Tzelafchad, Hashem was going to teach the halachah eventually, even if the daughters of Tzelafchad wouldn't have asked for an inheritance. As Rashi (*Bamidbar 27:7*) writes, Hakadosh Baruch Hu said, כבר כתובה פרשה זו לפני, "This is how it was written before Me in heaven." כן בנות צלפחד דוברות, "They speak correctly.... Their eyes saw what Moshe didn't see." And Rashi (*ibid. 27:5*) writes, ראויה היתה פרשה זו להכתב על ידי משה, אלא שזכו, בנות צלפחד ונכתבה על ידן, "This *parashah* should have been written by Moshe but the daughters of Tzelafchad merited that it should be written through them."

Whereas the halachah of Pesach Sheni was a brand new halachah, created by the desires of Yidden who didn't want to miss out on the opportunity to do this mitzvah.

When the people who were *tamei* asked Moshe for a way to bring a *korban Pesach*, Moshe didn't tell them, "What do you want from me? You are *tamei*." Rather, he knew that a new halachah might be created as a result of their desires. He told them, עמדו ואשמעה מה, יצוה ה' לכם, "Stay here and I will hear what Hashem responds to your request."

Rashi writes, כתלמיד המובטח לשמוע מפי רבו. אשרי ילוד אשה שכך מובטח שכל זמן, [Moshe spoke] like a student who is certain that he will hear a response from his rebbe. Fortunate is a human being who is confident that whenever he wants, he can speak with the *Shechinah*!"

The Shinover Rav *zt'l* explains that Moshe was the humblest

We learn from this that if we yearn for a mitzvah, and shout from the depths of the heart, למה נגרע, "Why should I miss out on this mitzvah," Hashem will grant us the opportunity.

There is a rule, אין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה, the Torah isn't always written in the sequence of events. One prime example of this is in Chumash Bamidbar. Chumash Bamidbar begins with counting Bnei Yisrael, which took place during the month of Iyar. Afterward, in parashas Behaloscha, the Torah goes back to tell us what happened a month earlier, in Nisan, when the Jewish nation brought the korban Pesach. This demonstrates that the Torah doesn't necessarily follow the chronological order of events.

Yet, it begs for an explanation, why did the Torah choose to go away from the standard, chronological order.

Rashi (Bamidbar 9:1) answers that the Torah didn't want to begin with the *korban Pesach* because, מפני שהוא גנותן של ישראל, כל ארבעים שנה שהיו ישראל במדבר לא הקריבו אלא פסח זה בלבד, "the Parasha of the *korban Pesach* is in a sense disgraceful to the Jewish nation. Because during the forty years they were in the desert, this was the only *korban Pesach* they brought."

Why was that?

The Gemara explains that the Jewish nation didn't circumcise their children in the desert because it was considered dangerous to make a bris milah in the desert, a place

person. Generally, he wasn't certain that Hashem would speak with him. But this time Moshe was certain that for the sake of those people who so much wanted to bring the *korban Pesach*, he would receive an answer.

where the north wind doesn't blow. And when someone has a child that doesn't have a bris milah, the parent is disqualified from bringing a korban Pesach. This is the reason they were only permitted to bring one korban Pesach in the desert, and then they couldn't bring another one until they came to Eretz Yisrael.

The *rishonim* ask: If they weren't permitted to do bris milah and bring the *korban Pesach*, why is it considered a disgrace that they only brought one korban Pesach?

The *Imrei Emes* *zt'l* replies that had they desired with all their heart to bring a *korban Pesach*, Hashem would have made it possible, just as Hashem made it possible to bring a korban Pesach for the people who shouted למה נגרע. Because when one desires sincerely to do a mitzvah, Hashem helps it happen.

As Chazal say:

בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך מוליכין אותו
"Hashem leads people on the path that they want to go."

The Midrash tells a story about an alcoholic whose children wanted to help him wean off his addiction. His children got him drunk, and they brought him to a cemetery and put him in a prepared, dug-up grave to sleep there. They figured that when their father awakens from his stupor and finds himself in the cemetery, lying in a grave, he will realize that he is ruining his life and will stop drinking.

Around this time, wine merchants were carrying barrels of wine near the cemetery, and they thought that they heard shouts of war. So, they hid their wine barrels in the graveyard and ran away.

One of the barrels had a leak, and when the drunk

person woke up, he found a trickle of wine dripping into the grave where he was lying. He didn't ask any questions. He opened his mouth and let the wine come in.

Three days later, the children realized that they didn't act correctly. They shouldn't have left their father alone in the cemetery. They went to the cemetery to see how he was faring.

They found him drinking wine. They realized that בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך מוליכין אותו, "The way a person wants to go, Hashem leads him there." The children decided they would take turns giving wine to their father. Each week, another son would provide the wine.

The moral of the story is that if you want something strongly enough, it will happen. If you desire ruchniyos, Hashem will help you succeed. Shout, למה נגרע

help you attain your desires.

In our discussion on Lag b'Omer (in the section titled "redeemed from punishment") we elaborate that on Lag b'Omer Hashem focuses on the good desires and yearnings of the Jewish nation. Even when their deeds aren't perfect, Hashem rejoices with the Jewish nation that desires to serve Him.

The Lag b'Omer Celebration

The Bnei Yissaschar (Iyar 3:3) writes, אשר נתאמת לנו מאנשי אמת אשר השמחה ביום הזה על ציון רשב"י היא שלא כטבע, "It was confirmed to us from people who tell only the truth that at the tzion of Reb Shimon bar Yochai, on Lag b'Omer, the joy is supernatural."

The Maharil of Paltishan zt'l writes, "I had the merit to be in Meron on Lag b'Omer (approximately 170 years ago). Brothers and friends, I can't express in

writing the great simchah that was there! Fortunate are the eyes who saw it! Whoever was there felt with certainty that the joy comes in the merit of Reb Shimon bar Yochai who wants people to rejoice on this day."

Reb Avraham Rozen's describes the Lag b'Omer he saw (in תשכ"ז) "Until the morning, no one went to sleep – the joy was so great. Then, the people who were there at night went to sleep, and a new group arrived. The entire day, including the following night, was the same. I won't burden myself to write the details of the joy seen there, at every moment and in various ways. Whoever didn't see the joy never saw true happiness his entire life... Some are jumping like deer, some are singing, some are

drinking, some are clapping their hands and dancing with all their might.... I don't know how to describe the joy, but I will tell you the feelings I had in my heart at the time. I imagined that Moshiach had already come, and I was watching the simchas beis hashoavah in Yerushalayim. It was wondrous!

Many of us can testify to this. The joy they experience in Meron on Lag b'Omer is far above and beyond what they ever experienced.

The Gemara Shavuos (page 34, and the discussion begins on דף ל"ג) states, ר' שמעון מחכו עליה במערבא. The Chasam Sofer taught this Gemara to his students on Lag b'Omer, and he translated it as "In Eretz Yisrael, people are rejoicing with Reb Shimon."¹³

3. Tzaddikim would keep in mind the count of the Omer throughout the entire day. For example, when Reb Mendel of Riminov zt'l reminded himself of the Omer, he would count again

Even people who don't go to Meron should be joyous on Lag b'Omer. The Chida (Moreh b'Etzba 223) writes, "Be happy in Reb Shimon bar Yochai's honor, because Lag b'Omer is his hilula, and it is known that he desired that people rejoice on this day."

Why are we so happy? No one is getting married. No new child came to the world, so what is the reason for this joy? There are several answers to this question:

Reb Akiva's Students, the Continuity of Torah, and Never Lose Hope

The Beis Yosef says that we celebrate Lag b'Omer, because Reb Akiva's

students stopped dying on this day.

Some meforshim disagree. They say that the students ceasing to die isn't a reason to celebrate, because the reason they stopped dying is because there were none left! All 24,000 students died. Rather the reason for our rejoicing is the celebration of the continuity of Torah.

Because when Reb Akiva saw that he didn't have any students left, he went to the south and taught Torah to five students: Reb Meir, Reb Yehudah, Reb Yossi, Reb Shimon, and Reb Elazer ben Shamoah. Their lessons were recorded throughout the Mishnayos and the Gemara, and this how the Torah was perpetuated

(היום... יום... לעומר). Some tzaddikim, and among them the Chasam Sofer with his yeshiva students, would study either mesechta Shavuos or mesechta Sotah, because each of these mesechtos have forty-nine daf. Each day they learned the daf that corresponds to the Omer, and this helped them remember the Omer, throughout the day.

until today. On Lag b'Omer we celebrate Torah's continuity, and it happened because Reb Akiva didn't lose hope. Even after losing all his students, he forged ahead and did what he could, and that's how Torah continues until this day.

Reb Shimon bar Yochai also didn't lose hope, and that brought him to the highest levels.

The Gemara (*Shabbos* 33:) tells that Reb Shimon bar Yochai, Reb Yosi, and Reb Yehudah were discussing the Roman empire. Reb Yehudah praised them because "they built marketplaces, bridges, and bathhouses." All these make life more pleasant and help people serve Hashem. Reb Yosi remained silent. Reb Shimon disgraced the Roman Empire. He said, "They built everything for their own benefit..." Their intention wasn't to help Yidden serve Hashem, just to earn wealth, etc.

Yehudah ben Geirim was present at this exchange, and he repeated it. Eventually, the scholar's comments reached the ears of the Roman government.

The Romans said, "Yehudah who praised us should be honored. Reb Yosi, who was silent, should be exiled to Tzipori. And Reb Shimon who disgraced Rome should be killed."

When he heard of the decree, Reb Shimon and his son hid in beis medresh. Reb Shimon's wife would bring them bread and water each day. When Reb Shimon realized that the Romans search efforts were intensifying, he was concerned that they might torture his wife until she reveals their hiding place, so he escaped with his son to a cave. Now, no one knew where they were.

What did they eat and drink? Miraculously, a carob tree grew in their cave, and a spring opened

up. They wore their clothing only while davening to extend the life of their garments. Throughout the day, they studied Torah covered in earth, up to their necks.

Reb Shimon and Reb Elazar lived in the cave for thirteen years, and they didn't stop studying Torah.

Reb Shimon didn't lose hope; he didn't despair, although he was exiled from the Jewish community – and as far as he knew, this situation could last forever. Nevertheless, he didn't lose hope, and he continued serving Hashem and studying Torah. In this merit, he attained very high heights. As we sing, שם קנית הודך והדרך, "*There* [in the cave] you acquired your glory," and the wisdom of kaballah and *Zohar* were revealed to him.

We learn from Reb Akiva and Reb Shimon never to despair. Sometimes we feel like failures, that

nothing significant will ever come from us. But remember what happened to Reb Akiva when he was on the brink of despair. He didn't give up, and because of that, we have the Torah today. Remember what Reb Shimon bar Yochai did when he had to escape and live in a cave. He didn't lose hope, and this brought him to the highest levels. When we will follow in their ways and keep trying, despite the hardships, we will also accomplish great things in our lives.

Redeemed from Punishment

We discussed that we are happy on Lag b'Omer because Reb Akiva's students stopped dying or because the perpetuation of Torah was established on this day (when Reb Akiva taught Torah to his new students).

Another reason for our joy on Lag b'Omer is because, on this day,

Hashem judges everyone favorably. Hashem sees our good deeds, focuses on our good desires, and He ignores our faults. To explain this, we will tell the story of Reb Shimon's departure from the cave.

After Reb Shimon and his son, Reb Elazar, spent twelve years in the cave, Eliyahu came to the cave's entrance and announced, "Who will inform Bar Yochai that the king died, and the decree was annulled?"

Reb Shimon and Reb Elazar, hearing this proclamation, left the cave and returned to civilization.

Another Midrash (*Bereishis Rabba*, 79) tells the story differently:

"Reb Shimon bar Yochai and Reb Elazar, his son, were hiding in a cave... and ate carob... until their bodies began to rot... [One day], they came out of the cave and sat at the cave's entrance where they

observed a hunter trapping birds. Reb Shimon heard a *bas kol* announce דימום, free, and the bird was able to escape to freedom. When he heard the *bas kol* say ספקולה, captured, the hunter was able to capture the bird. Reb Shimon said, 'We see that even a bird isn't captured unless it was decreed from heaven. Certainly, it is so for a human being. [The Romans won't be able to capture us if it isn't Hashem's decree.]' They left the cave and discovered that things had calmed down. The Roman decree against them was annulled..."

Probably, when the hunter caught a bird, he said, "I am so talented..." And when the bird got away, he was angry with himself. He would say, "Why can't I be more on target?" Little did he know that his successes and losses were by Hashem's decree and weren't dependent on his expertise and talent.

This was when Reb Shimon realized that the Romans can't harm him if it wasn't decreed so in heaven. With this thought in mind, he and his son left the cave, and they found out that the decree was annulled.⁴

4. It seems like a contradiction between the two Midrashim. One Midrash says that Eliyahu HaNavi announced at the mouth of the cave that the decree was annulled, and therefore Reb Shimon and Reb Elazar left the cave. The other Midrash says that Reb Shimon heard the *bas kol* regarding the birds, and that's how he knew that everything is destined by Hashem, and it is safe for him to leave the cave.

It is possible that this isn't a contradiction. To explain, we quote the Maharal (*Netzach Yisrael* 28): "Know, it is certain that there are locations in the world that are conducive for holiness. The cave where Reb Shimon hid is such a place. There is no doubt that Eliyahu HaNavi appeared to Reb Shimon several times in the cave... And it doesn't make a difference whether Eliyahu appeared to him in a way that Reb Shimon saw that it was Eliyahu HaNavi or if Eliyahu appeared to Reb Shimon and no one saw him. There are many times that Eliyahu tells someone something, gives him an idea, shares a thought, and the person doesn't know where the idea came from. He thinks they are his own thoughts, but they are really Eliyahu's words, speaking to him..."

So, it is possible that unknown to Rebi Shimon, Eliyohu announced that the decree was abolished and that it was safe to leave the cave, and Reb Shimon heard the announcement in his heart and in his thought and understood them to be his own. This explains why Reb Shimon and Reb Elazar came out of the cave and stood at the entrance. They weren't yet certain that it was safe to go back to civilization, but they were considering it. Then Reb Shimon heard the *bas kol* related to the birds and realized that he won't be caught by the Romans if it wasn't decreed from Above. That's when he had courage to return to civilization. So, both Midrashim

When they returned to civilization, they saw people working in the fields, plowing and planting. Due to their afflictions and Torah study in the cave for so many years, Reb Shimon and Reb Elazar were on a very high spiritual level. They couldn't understand how a human being could spend his time working while neglecting Torah study. In Reb Shimon bar Yochai's opinion, it wasn't necessary to do any *hishtadlus* for

parnassah.⁵ Distressed by what they saw, Reb Shimon said, "They are abandoning the eternal world, and they are establishing themselves in the temporary world!"

Wherever Reb Shimon and Reb Elazar looked, they miraculously burned people and fields with their eyes.⁶

A *bas kol* came forth, "Did you leave the cave to destroy My world? Return to your cave!"

can be telling two parts of the same story. Eliyahu got them to leave the cave, to stand at the entrance, and to consider returning home. The *bas kol* convinced them that it was safe to do so.

5. See *Brachos* (35:) ר"ש בן יוחי אומר אפשר אדם חורש בשעת חרישה וזורע בשעת זריעה וקוצר בשעת קצירה ודש בשעת דישה וזורע בשעת הרוח תורה מה תהא עליה אלא בזמן שישראל עושין רצונו של מקום מלאכתן נעשית ע"י אחרים שנא' ועמדו זרים ורעו צאנכם וגו' Reb Shimon bar Yochai said, 'If a person will plow in the season for plowing, plant in the season for planting, harvest in the season for harvesting....what will be with the Torah? Rather, when the Jewish nation does Hashem's will, others will do their work for them. As it states (*Yeshaya* 61:5) 'Gentiles will stand up and take care of your sheep...'"

6. This probably wasn't intentional. It was just that they were so upset with society's behaviors, that they looked at them negatively, and this burned them.

They returned to the cave. After another twelve months passed, Reb Shimon and Reb Elazar understood that they now have permission to leave the cave. They said to each other, "We've learned that *resha'im* are punished in Gehinom for no longer than twelve months. Now that twelve months have passed, we can leave the cave."

At this time, they heard another *bas kol*, this time telling them, "Go out of your cave."

Reb Elazar was still smiting people with his eyes, but after Reb Elazar struck with his eyes, Reb Shimon would heal them.

Reb Shimon, seeking to placate his son, said, "My son, it is enough that you and I are in the world, studying Torah."

It seems that Reb Shimon was still upset with people, as he was before. But now he understood

that Hashem is happy with the world. As he said to his son, "My son, it is enough that you and I are in the world, studying Torah." This calmed him, and he stopped harming people with his eyes, and he corrected anything that his son ruined with his eyes.

But then Reb Shimon attained a greater awareness of Hashem's compassion. He found out that Hashem is happy with all Yidden. He discovered that the people who he used to be angry at are beloved by Hashem. With this new perspective, he saw people in a positive light.

This is what happened:

Close to Shabbos, they saw an old man rushing with two bundles of *hadasim*, and they asked him what they are for.

The man replied, "They are *l'kovod Shabbos*."

They asked, "Why isn't one bundle enough?"

The old man said, "It states, זכור ושמור, so I have two packages of *besomim*. One for זכור and one for שמור."

Reb Shimon said to his son, "See how much Yidden love mitzvos!"

This was the moment that their perspectives changed. They recognized the virtues of the Jewish nation, how much they love the mitzvos, and how much they want to serve Hashem.

Because there are always two ways you can look at your fellow man. There is the critical approach, seeing his faults. And there is the approach of focusing on the positive and good qualities of others. Reb Shimon and Reb Elazar understood that Hashem wants them to see the good

in others and to judge everyone favorably. Because every Yid has a good side to him and performs many mitzvos. The faults and the *aveiros* come from the yetzer hara's enticement, but the essence of a Yid is pure, and his innermost desire is to serve Hashem.

The Gemara (*Succah* 45:) states:

Reb Shimon bar Yochai said, "I can free all people from judgment [that they shouldn't be punished for their *aveiros*]. If I add my son's merits, Reb Elazer, I can redeem people from judgment from the beginning of creation until today. And if we add the merits of Yosam ben Uziyahu⁷ along with us, we can redeem the entire world from judgment, from

7. Rashi writes that Yosem ben Uziyahu "Was a tzaddik, more humble than other kings, and excelled in *kibud av*. About him it states (*Malachi* 1), בן יכבד אב 'a son honors his father.' Because all the days that his father had *tzaraas* and Yosem was judging the

the day the world was created until the end of all time."⁸

How does Reb Shimon bar Yochai redeem us from the judgment?

Rashi writes: [Reb Shimon says], "I take their sins on myself. Thereby they are free from the judgment."

But there is another way. As we explained, Reb Shimon learned to focus on the good deeds and the virtuous desires of Klal Yisrael. He saw their love for the mitzvos, and their qualities. With that perspective in mind, he says to the court in heaven, "They deserve only good.

They don't deserve to be punished." This is how Reb Shimon saves us from harsh judgment.

In the margins of the Gemara, there are notes from Reb Akiva Eiger called *Gilyon HaShas*. On the Gemara (*Succah* 45:) where Reb Shimon proclaimed *יכול אני לפטור את כל העולם כולו מן הדין*, that he can redeem the entire world from the judgment and punishment, Reb Akiva Eiger writes the following few words: *ע"ן אבות דר' נתן פט"ז*.

Avos d'Reb Nosson tells that Reb Shimon says, "The Jewish nation doesn't go to Gehinom." And the reason is that they aren't guilty of

nation...he didn't put the crown on his head. He attributed all his judgments that he ruled to his father."

8. After *sefiras ha'omer*, people say (*Tehillim* 67), *למונצח בנגינות*, and some focus on one word of this chapter, each night (as this is taught by the *mekubalim*, and it is printed in many siddurim). On Lag b'Omer, the focus is on the word *אלקים*. This hints that on Lag b'Omer, even Elokim, Hashem's name for strict judgment, agrees to redeem the Jewish nation from the judgment. *אל-הים* is *roshei teivos* for *את אני לפטור את* *יכל אני לפטור את העולם מן הדין*, "I can redeem the entire world from judgment."

their faults because Hashem gave them a yetzer hara, so what can be expected from them?

Reb Shimon expresses this idea with the following *mashal*:

A king owned an unfertile field; almost nothing grew in it. A group of people approached the king, wanting to rent this field. They told the king, "We will plant wheat in your field, and we will take good care of it, and in exchange, we will pay you ten *kur* of wheat each year."

The king agreed to this offer.

But after a year of hard work in the field, all the field produced was one *kur* of wheat.

The king rebuked them. "You told me you would pay me ten *kur*!"

They replied, "Our master, our king: You know that this field is infertile. All those years you had it,

nothing ever grew in the field. Now, for a year, we were plowing, sowing, fertilizing, pruning, and irrigating the field. We tried our best, yet it produced only one *kur* of wheat. Don't hold us responsible because we tried our best."

Reb Shimon bar Yochai concludes, "This is the defense the Jewish nation says to Hakadosh Baruch Hu on the day of judgment. They will say, 'Master of the world, You know that the *yetzer hara* entices us to sin. As it states (*Tehillim* 103), כִּי הוּא יֹדֵעַ יִצְרֵנוּ, 'Hashem knows our *yetzer hara*.' So, don't hold us responsible for our poor performance. We tried our best."

So, we are saved from Gehinom, and we are protected from judgment because Reb Shimon will speak in our favor. He will tell Heaven our good side, and he will tell Heaven that we aren't responsible for our faults. With this

claim, everyone will be acquitted.

The Chidushei HaRim zy'a says that every year, on Lag b'Omer, Reb Shimon bar Yochai repeats his famous statement, "I can exempt the entire world from judgment and punishment!" On Lag b'Omer, especially, Hashem sees our good, ignores our bad, loves us immensely, and that is the origin of our great joy on this day.⁹

Teshuvah and Yom Kippur

People's nature is that when they find favor in someone's eyes, they want to find even more favor. In our discussion above, we discovered that on Lag b'Omer, in Reb Shimon's

merit, Hashem focuses on our merits and doesn't see our faults. Therefore, it follows that on this day that we find favor in Hashem's eyes, we should seek to find even more favor in His eyes, by doing *teshuvah* becoming even more worthy before Hashem.

Reb Yohonoson Eibshitz zt'l (*Yaaras Dvash* vol.2, 11) writes, "It is proper for every *yirei shamayim* to do *teshuvah* on Lag b'Omer because Reb Shimon's merit will help him purify himself. He shouldn't spend this day with foolishness, as that will be a *tzaar* for the tzaddik."

Rebbe Tzaddok
HaCohen zt'l (*Tzikdas*

9. The *Zohar* teaches, "Before Reb Shimon's *petirah*, he said, 'There are three courts in heaven: a *beis din* of 23 judges, of 71 judges, and there's a court where Hakadosh Baruch Hu rules, alone... Whoever is judged in Hashem's court will certainly be deemed innocent. In the other courts, some of the judges will say וְנִיחַ, innocent, and some will say חַיִּיב, guilty. But by Hakadosh Baruch Hu there is pure good, *chesed* and compassion. As it states (*Tehillim* 130:4), כִּי עִמָּךְ הַסְלִיחָה, 'Atonement is with You...'"

HaTzaddik 127) writes, "The Zohar (Chayei Sarah 129) states that when a person does *teshuvah* –and even when the greatest *rasha* does *teshuvah* – he rises to the highest levels. I heard in the name of Rebbe Bunim of Pshischa *zt'l* that this is all in the merit of Reb Shimon bar Yochai. He accomplished with his toil

in *avodas Hashem* that a *baal teshuvah* should reach such high levels."¹⁰

Someone described Lag b'Omer in Meron as follows: "Inside, at the *tzion*, it is like Yom Kippur, and outside, in the courtyard, it is like Simchas Torah." The Ruzhiner Rebbe praised this description.¹¹

10. There was a *bachur* who was slipping spiritually. Many *mechanchim* spoke to the *bachur*, but they couldn't stop his spiritual descent. Rebbe Shlomke Zvhil *zt'l* requested to speak with the *bachur*.

People told the Rebbe, "It isn't worth the Rebbe's time. Many people tried and failed..."

But Rebbe Shlomke tried. He told the *bachur*, "Hakadosh Baruch Hu has immense *nachas ruach* from a Yid when he battles with the *yetzer hara*, even if he loses the fight. Hashem enjoys the Yid's attempts, and Hashem enjoys watching him put up a fight against the *yetzer hara*. Hashem has more pleasure from the Yid's fights with the *yetzer hara* than He has pleasure from the *malachim*. The *yetzer hara* is called *מלך זקן וכסיל*, an old, foolish king. I request one thing from you. Don't make your *yetzer hara* king. When a king decrees something, everyone must listen immediately. I request that you don't listen immediately. When he asks for something, push it off for later. This will make Hashem very happy."

The *bachur* followed this advice, and he did *teshuvah*. He became one of the respected Yidden of Yerushalayim.

11. Rebbe Shlomke Zvhiler *zt'l* said (בדרך צחות) that all *yomim tovim*

This man's description of Lag b'Omer is accurate, because there is an aspect of Yom Kippur on Lag b'Omer.

The Sar Shalom of Belz was once speaking about the greatness of Lag b'Omer, and his son, Reb Zundel *zt'l*, said, "Lag b'Omer is like Yom Kippur." His father said that he is correct.

The Chasam Sofer (*Drashos* vol.2 280.) also writes

that Lag b'Omer is like Yom Kippur.¹²

Rebbe Yehoshua of Kaminka *zt'l* teaches:

The Gemara (*Brachos* 58.) says that the Beis HaMikdash is called הוֹד.¹³ We can therefore deduce that הוֹד שְׁבִהוּד is the Kodesh Kadoshim. On Lag b'Omer, הוֹד שְׁבִהוּד, we come to the Kodesh Kadoshim, similar to the *kohen gadol* who enters there on Yom Kippur.

are alluded to in the celebration of Lag b'Omer in Meron. Many *sefardim* have a custom to slaughter sheep near the *tzion*. This reminds us of the *korban Pesach*. The mountains that surround the *tzion* remind us of Shavuot (when Hashem gave the Torah on Har Sinai). And the tents that people camp in around the *tzion* remind us of Succos.

Based on the description that was told to the Ruzhiner, we can add to the list two more holidays that are experienced in Meron, on Lag b'Omer: Yom Kippur and Simchas Torah.

12. The Chasam Sofer's words are kabalistic, but here are a few of the ideas that he writes: "הוֹד שְׁבִהוּד represents *Keser*, which represents Yom Kippur... Lag b'Omer, spelled out like this: למ"ד גימ"ל is *gematriya* זקו, which represents...Yom Kippur."

13. The words of the Gemara are: תנא משמיה דרבי עקיבא לך ה' הגדולה זו קריעת ים סוף והגבורה זו מכת בכורות והתפארת זו מתן תורה והנצח זו ירושלים וההוד זו בית המקדש:

The Beis Aharon writes, הצדיקים במעשיהם מזכין את ישראל ור' שמעון בר יוחאי מזכך גופן של ישראל לעולם, "Tzaddikim, with their good deeds, purify Bnei Yisrael, and Reb Shimon bar Yochai purifies the bodies of Bnei Yisrael always." This purification is another element of Lag b'Omer, which is reminiscent of Yom Kippur.

Chazal (*Bava Kama* 9) say, הידור מצוה עד שליש. This means it is recommended to pay one-third more for a mitzvah than its minimal price so that he can buy a more beautiful mitzvah. As Rashi explains, "If he finds two *sifrei Torah* that he can buy, and one is more beautiful than the other, he should add one-third more money and buy the more beautiful one. As it states (*Shabbos* 133:), זה א"ל יאננהו, do beautiful mitzvos before Hashem. Write a beautiful *sefer Torah*, buy a beautiful lulav, a beautiful talis, and beautiful tzitzis."

The Sar Shalom of Belz *zt'l* asked, Hashem keeps

the entire Torah (see *Brachos* 6). How does He keep the concept of adding one-third onto the *mitzvos*?

The answer is, a Yid does two-thirds of his fight against the *yetzer hara*, and Hashem completes for him the final third of the battle. As the Gemara (*Succah* 52:) states, יצרו של אדם מתגבר עליו כל יום ומבקש להמיתו ואלמלא הקב"ה עוזרו אינו יכול לו, "The *yetzer hara* attacks a person every day and seeks to kill him. If Hakadosh Baruch Hu didn't help, he wouldn't win the battle." Hashem helps him by completing the last third of the fight.

The Sar Shalom added: *Sefiras Ha'omer* is 49 days, and on the 33rd day, two-thirds of the *omer* has passed. During the first two-thirds of the *omer*, we counted the *omer*, and we strove to purify ourselves. On Lag b'Omer Hashem completes the mission, and we become completely clean from all sins.

Rebbe Shalom Kaminka *zt'l* and the Tzanzer Rav *zt'l* were present at the Sar Shalom's Lag b'Omer *tish* when the Sar Shalom taught this lesson (that we purify ourselves 2/3 of the *sefirah*, and on Lag b'Omer, Hashem completes our purity). And for the next forty-five minutes, Reb Shalom Kaminka and the Tzanzer Rav were thinking about this *vort* with immense *hislahavus*. Throughout these forty-five minutes, the Tzanzer Rav cradled his head in his hands, and Rebbe Shalom of Kaminka cried copious tears.

Even for the Low People

The Beis Aharon *zt'l* (p.212) teaches, "Whoever believes in Reb Shimon bar Yochai receives *chizuk* from Reb Shimon bar Yochai. Just as Hashem is Hashem

for everyone, so too is Reb Shimon for everyone – even for the lowly people."¹⁴

We see this happening in Meron – and especially on Lag b'Omer. Great *tzaddikim* go to Meron, but very simple people go there too. The simple people dance together with the great *tzaddikim*, and they feel right at home because they feel in their hearts that Reb Shimon is encouraging them, elevating them, giving them another chance to serve Hashem.

It states, אדם ובהמה תושיע ה', "Hashem saves man and animal." The *gematriya* of these words are רבי שמעון בר יוחאי (Magdil Yeshuos Malko). This hints that in Reb Shimon's merit, Hashem will grant salvation for all people, even for people on

14. The Beis Aharon's words are as follows: כל מי שיש לו אמונה בר' שמעון בר יוחאי יש לו חיוזוק בר' שמעון בן יוחאי. כשם שהשם יתברך הוא ה' לכל כך ר' שמעון בן יוחאי הוא לכל – אפילו לפחותים

a low level, similar to animals.

In תרצ"ה tzaddikim of the Vizhnitzer family *zt'l* came to Meron. There were many people at the tzion at the time, so someone announced, "Make room for the Viznitzer Rebbe's children!"

A woman replied, "By Reb Shimon, we are all his children."

The Imrei Chaim *zt'l* was very pleased by this woman's response. We are all Reb Shimon's children, and just like a parent, Reb Shimon davens for all of Klal Yisrael.

Salvation

Another reason we are happy on Lag b'Omer is that it is a day of salvation.

The Tzvi LaTzaddik of Bluzhev *zt'l* said "We can't know when the *geulah sheleimah* will be, but I think it will be on Lag b'Omer, on Reb Shimon's day, because it is a very pure day, and it is a day for salvations.¹⁵

Reb Shimon performed miracles in his lifetime, as stated in the *Zohar*, and the miracles continue until today.

The *Zohar* (*Rus* 104) tells:

There was an epidemic in Lud, and people took Reb Shimon around the city, so he could see with his own eyes what they were enduring.

Reb Shimon said, "How can it be that I'm in this city and there's a plague? I

15. When the Bas Ayin moved to Eretz Yisrael, Rebbe Mordechai Chernobyler *zt'l* wrote to him the following:

"Pour your eyes out before Reb Shimon. If I could go to Eretz Yisrael, I would go to Reb Shimon's grave and I would storm the heavens until Moshiach comes."

declare, the plague should stop!"

A *bas kol* come forth and instructed the bad angels: "You must leave this city because Reb Shimon bar Yochai is here. Hakadosh Baruch Hu decrees in heaven, and Reb Shimon annuls the decrees on earth below."

In another location, the *Zohar* relates that one time the world suddenly became dark, and Reb Shimon bar Yochai said to his son, Reb Elazar, "Come with me, and we will see what Hakadosh Baruch Hu is planning to do to the world."

They found a *malach*, tall like a high mountain with thirty flames of fire coming out of its mouth. Reb Shimon asked the *malach* what it was planning to do. The angel replied, "Hashem decreed that in every generation there must be at least thirty *tzaddikim* who are like Avraham Avinu. But now,

there aren't thirty *tzaddikim* like Avraham in the world. Therefore, Hashem sent me to destroy the world."

Reb Shimon bar Yochai said to the *malach*, "Go back to Hakadosh Baruch Hu and tell him that Yochai's son is in the world." Reb Shimon was implying that his merits should be sufficient to annul the harsh decree. There aren't thirty *tzaddikim*, but there is Reb Shimon bar Yochai.

"The *malach* went to Hakadosh Baruch Hu and said, 'Ribono Shel Olam, You know what Reb Shimon bar Yochai told me to tell You.'

Hakadosh Baruch Hu replied, "Go and destroy the world, and don't pay attention to what Yochai's son says."

The angel returned, planning to fulfill the mission Hashem sent him to do. Reb Shimon bar Yochai saw the *malach*, and he said, "If you don't leave,

I will decree that you will never return to your place in heaven. I will send you to a forsaken place. Therefore, listen to what I tell you. Go to Hakadosh Baruch Hu and say, 'Even if there aren't thirty tzaddikim in the world, twenty tzaddikim are also sufficient. As Hashem told Avraham (18:31), *לא אשחית, בעבור העשרים*, 'I will not destroy if there are twenty tzaddikim.' And even if there are only ten tzaddikim, that is also enough to protect the world from destruction, because Hashem said (18:32), *לא אשחית, בעבור העשרה*, that He will not destroy the world if there are ten tzaddikim. And even if there are only two tzaddikim in the world - namely, Reb Elazar and myself - it is also sufficient... And if there is only one tzaddik in the world, it is also enough. As it states, *צדיק יסוד עולם*, the tzaddik is the foundation of the world."

At that moment, a *bas kol* came forth from heaven

and said, "Reb Shimon, fortunate is your lot. Hakadosh Baruch Hu decrees in heaven, and you annul them from the earth. Regarding you it is written (*Tehillim* 145), *רצון יראיו יעשה*, 'Hashem does the will of those who fear Him.'"

Many miracles continue to happen in Reb Shimon bar Yochai's merit. As Reb Ovadyah of Bartunara writes in a letter, "On the eighteenth of Iyar, the day of his [Reb Shimon's] *yahrtzeit*, people from all around Meron go to Meron and they light bonfires... Many barren women become fruitful, the ill are healed, because of the good *kabbalos* (vows) that they take on at that place." The Ra'v Bartunara was a very rational person. When people claimed that miracles are occurring, he didn't take their words blindly. He checked them out and decided on his own whether the claim was valid. In fact, in this same letter, he debated the validity and truth of some

of the miracles people or his time were talking about. Yet, when it comes to the miracles in Meron, and especially on Lag b'Omer, he writes with certainty that miracles happen there.

Two Conditions for the Miracles to Happen

The Bartunura (quoted above) writes that the miracles happen due to the vows people take on. This means that people should take on new, good *kabbalos*, either to give tzedakah or to do some good deed, or to take on a good practice. It doesn't need to be an actual vow. It is sufficient to accept this on oneself *bli neder*, without an actual vow, if he is sincere about keeping it. This *kabbalah* makes the person a better candidate to receive Hashem's blessings and miracles.

A second condition to be worthy of Hashem's miracles is to believe in Reb Shimon bar Yochai's merit. As the Beis Aharon

(we quoted above) writes, "Whoever believes in Reb Shimon receives *chizuk* from Reb Shimon." We must believe in the greatness of Reb Shimon bar Yochai, and we must believe that in his merit, Hashem performs miracles for the Jewish nation. The greater the belief, the greater the chances of receiving Hashem's salvation.

Rachel Imeinu said to Yaakov Avinu (*Bereishis* 30:1), *הבו לי בנים ואם אין מתה אנכי*, "[Daven for me and] bring me children because if not, I can be compared to the dead." Rebbe Yehoshua of Belz *zt'l* notices that Rachel suspected that Yaakov's *tefillos* might not be answered. As she said, *ואם אין*, "and if not..." Rebbe Yehoshua of Belz *zt'l* says that this is the reason Yaakov wasn't able to help her. Because if you don't believe in the tzaddik's ability to help you, he can't. Therefore, Yaakov Avinu told her, *התחת אלקים אנכי*, "Am I in G-d's place!?"

Yaakov was saying, "If you don't believe in me, how can I help you? התחת אלקים אני, I am not like Hashem. Hashem helps even those who don't believe in Him. Very often, Hashem helps those who don't even pray to Him, because of Hashem's endless compassion. But I am a tzaddik, and my

ability to help you is dependent on your belief in me."¹⁶

Tefillos - What We should Daven For

Lag b'Omer is a day of salvation, and therefore, fortunate are those who invest in tefillah on this day. What should you pray

16. The Divrei Shmuel of Slonim *zy'a* told the following story:

A wealthy businesswoman from Eretz Yisrael was about to send out a ship filled with merchandise. Before the ship set sail, she went to Reb Shimon bar Yochai's *tzion* to pray that the ship, with all the merchandise, reach their destination.

She couldn't get close to the *tzion* because there was another woman in front of her praying loudly for three hundred rubles, in order to marry off her child. The wealthy woman took three hundred rubles from her purse and gave it to her. The relieved woman thanked her immensely and left, and then this wealthy businesswoman was able to reach the *tzion*.

Standing before the *tzion*, she said, "Reb Shimon, the woman who was here before me received her request. She prayed for three hundred rubles and she received that amount immediately. May my requests also be answered immediately."

The Divrei Shmuel repeated this story and expressed that it tells us the extent of this woman's belief in tefillos by Reb Shimon's grave. She didn't think that the woman received three hundred rubles because she gave it to her. She accredited the salvation to the tefillos she davened!

for? Pray for whatever is on your heart.

Here are a few recommendations for tefillah:

1] *Daven* for good children.

The Gemara (*Makos* 17:) states that a mother should daven that her children be like Reb Shimon bar Yochai.

The Minchas Elazar (*Shaar Yissaschar*) explains that the Gemara refers to someone who is davening on Lag b'Omer. On this day, everything is possible. On this day, one can ask for the greatest things - even that one's child be like Reb Shimon bar Yochai.¹⁷

2] Daven for *parnassah*.

According to a Midrash, the *mon* began to fall on Lag b'Omer. Therefore, Lag b'Omer is an ideal day to daven for *parnassah*.

The Chasam Sofer (*Yorah Deiah* 233) makes the following calculation: Chazal tell us that when the Yidden left Mitzrayim, they ate matzos for thirty days. They finished the matzos on Pesach Sheini. The Midrash adds that they didn't have food to eat for three days, and then the *mon* fell. According to this calculation, the *mon* first came down on Lag b'Omer.

The Taamei HaMinhagim writes, ישפע רב בכל העולמות "A great

17. The Minchas Elazar was very outspoken regarding his dislike of the irreligious Israeli government and Zionist movement. This brought him some enemies. Once, as he was walking to Meron, he received a letter that said, "If you dare go to Meron, you will be killed there." The Minchas Elazar said to his gabbai, Reb Chaim Ber, and to Reb Asher Zelig Margolis zt'l, who were walking with him to Meron "We are going to Reb Shimon. The *malach hamaves* doesn't have any power there."

bounty [of *parnassah*, etc.] should come to all worlds" is *roshei teivos*, רשבי.

The Yerushalmi (*Brachos* 9:18) writes, "Whenever Reb Shimon needed money, he would say, 'Valley! Valley! Fill up with gold coins,' and it would happen."¹⁸

3] Daven for *refuah*.

שמעון בר יוחאי is *gematriya* ורפאתיו, so Lag b'Omer is also *mesugal* for *refuah*.

The Tzemech Tzedek taught that מרון (without the מלך רופא (יו"ד) is *roshei teivos* נאמן ורחמן.

18. There was a poor, Eretz Yisrael Yid who was shouting during his *tefillos* at the *tzion* of Reb Shimon bar Yochai. Next to him stood a wealthy Yid from America. He took the long trip from New York to Meron, as he wanted to daven for his own issues. But this person's loud prayers were disturbing his concentration. He would have gone to stand in a different corner of the *tzion* to daven if he could, but that wasn't possible because there were many people at the *tzion* and there wasn't much room to move around.

The poor man was shouting, "Hashem! In the merit of Reb Shimon! Send me fifty thousand dollars!"

The wealthy Yid asked the poor man for his address, which he readily gave him. "When I get back to America," he thought to himself, "I will write a check for fifty thousand dollars and sign it, 'Reb Shimon bar Yochai.'" With this tease, I will pay him back for all the headache and frustration he caused me."

Some weeks later, this wealthy man was going through his bank statements and saw that he was charged fifty thousand dollars! He didn't understand. When did he write such a large check? Then he remembered the hoax he played on the poor Yid in Meron. He looked at the check, and he saw that he accidentally signed his own name, and not Reb Shimon bar Yochai.

The poor man's *tefillos* were indeed answered.

There are many stories of *refuos* that occurred in Meron, particularly on Lag b'Omer, and we write some of them in the footnote.¹⁹

19. It is known that the *sefirah* הוד is *mesugal* for *refuah*. Reb Pinchas of Koritz zt'l said that Lag b'Omer, which is the *sefirah* הוד שבהוד is certainly *mesugal* for *refuah*.

Rebbe Pinchas of Koritz taught that if one needs to take a medication, he should begin to take it on Lag b'Omer, הוד שבהוד.

In the summer of תשי"ט, the Brisker Rav zt'l was ill, and throughout Elul, Reb Shach zt'l was always at the Brisker Rav's bedside. The Brisker Rav said that he heard from his father, Reb Chaim Brisker, that Meron is an ideal place for tefillah, and therefore, he wants people to daven for him in Meron. Rav Shach immediately went to Ponovezh, spoke with the roshei yeshiva, and fourteen outstanding talmidei chachamim (including the Steipler zt'l, who requested to come along) traveled to Meron, and they recited the entire sefer Tehillim.

They were in Meron on a Thursday night. Sunday, Rav Shach was at the Brisker Rav's side again, and the Brisker Rav asked him whether people davened for him in Meron. Rav Shach told him the details of the trip, and who was there. The Brisker Rav's eyes shone from joy and gratitude. (Rav Shach said that it was a *neis* that he arranged it, because otherwise, what would he answer the Brisker Rav?)

In תשי"ט, due to the fighting with the Arabs, the roads to Yerushalayim were closed, and opened only for one day, every two weeks. A *bachur* named Meirovitz was shot in the leg, outside of Yerushalayim, and he couldn't get to Shaarei Tzedek Hospital in Yerushalayim for two weeks. By the time he got there, his leg was badly infected, and the doctors said they needed to amputate it.

Lag b'Omer was approaching and Meirovitz asked his friends to bring him to Meron, where he can pray for his health. "It's impossible," his friends told him. And indeed, it was almost

impossible. In those days, a trip to Meron could take an entire day, with changing busses several times. Due to his condition, he would need to travel with his foot raised the entire time. How could they make the long trip with him like this?

But the *bachur* begged until his friends agreed to do whatever they can. They rented a truck, so he could lie down, and they travelled all the way to Meron.

At the *tzion*, the *bachur* said the following prayer, "My entire family was killed by the Nazis. Only I survived. I must marry and build a family so my family will continue to live on. But how can I get married if I lose my leg?"

Afterwards, they went to the *chatzer* (courtyard) for the dancing. Meirovitz wanted to dance, so he put his arms around the shoulders of two of his friends, and they danced with him. Suddenly, he began dancing on his own. From all the dancing, the dressing fell off and a healthy foot was revealed!

A young boy was smitten with a grave disease. Doctors tried some treatments, but the boy's body was too weak, and he wasn't responding well to the treatments. The doctors reached the conclusion that there was nothing more they can do.

The boy's father said, "Until now the doctors did what they know; now it is our turn, as Yidden, to do what we know." The father arranged for a minyan to daven for the boy in Meron, and the boy was brought along with them.

At the *tzion*, the boy cried out in pain. This spurred everyone to daven with greater concentration, and they hoped the boy would have a *refuah sheleimah*.

At the time, the boy received nutrition intravenously. But when he sat there, near the *tzion*, he asked for water. Everyone was surprised. It was a sign of improvement.

When they returned home, the father brought his son to a doctor, hoping to hear that there indeed was improvement. The doctor was shocked at the change. With just a few more treatments the boy had a *refuah sheleimah*.

The following is one of the more famous stories that occurred, on Lag b'Omer, תרפ"ג. It was repeated by Reb Asher Zelig Margolis *zt'l* (and by many other people who were in Meron at the time).

Three or four years earlier (around תרע"ט) a childless couple came to Meron, and they prayed at Reb Shimon bar Yochai's *kever* for a child. They promised that if they bear a child, they will bring him to Meron on Lag b'Omer for the *chalahah* (first haircut).

They had a child. When he turned three, the mother came to Meron, as she had promised. (Her husband remained home.)

That year, Lag b'Omer was on Friday, so most people remained in Meron for Shabbos. On Shabbos, when Reb Asher Zelig was davening *Mussaf* he heard loud screams and cries. The three-year-old child suddenly turned deathly ill, having contracted cholera. Everyone was panicking, especially the mother, whose cries could be heard above all others.

Reb Asher Zelig Margolis *zt'l* related that he had a lot of pain in his throat. The doctors recommended an operation, but he was very wary of doing so. He came to Meron and said the entire *Tehillim*. In the middle of saying the *Tehillim*, he began coughing violently, and the blood and puss that were blocking his throat was released. He was healed.

Once, someone was telling Rebbe Dovid Biderman *zt'l* about his ill son. Rebbe Dovid Biderman advised him to daven in Meron. The man replied, "I was already in Meron, and my son is still ill."

Rebbe Dovid Biderman told him, "When a person goes to a doctor once, and he isn't healed, does he stop going to the doctor? He will go again. I advise you to go again and again to Meron, until your son has a *refuah sheleimah*."

Reb Asher Zelig describes how the child appeared, "He was green and seemed to be dead." Everyone was distraught. The *tefillah* was over, but no one made Kiddush. A feeling of gloom reigned.

The mother took the child and placed him near the *tzion*. She said, "Reb Shimon! I brought my only son here. He was born in your merit. I kept my promise, and I gave him his first haircut here. Please do not ruin my happiness and the happiness of my husband, who is waiting for us to return. Reb Shimon! I'm leaving my son here. Don't embarrass me. Bring him back to health and life as I brought him here yesterday. Sanctify Hashem's name. Reveal to everyone that there is Hashem and that there are *tzaddikim*."

She left her son near the *tzion*, closing the door

behind her. Only the child remained inside. A few minutes later, the child's voice was heard. He was calling for his mother.

Reb Asher Zelig opened the door. The boy was standing on his feet, calling, "Mother, I'm thirsty. Bring me water."

A tumult of joy roared. The dead child came back to life. They all said the *brachah* *מחיה המתים*.

Shaar Yissaschar writes that שמעון בן יוחאי is *gematriya* *מחיה המתים*.

4] Pray for the Barren to bear Children

The Shem Shlomo of Munkatz *zt'l* taught that to bear children, one should have *kavanah* in the *brachah* *רפאנו*. Therefore, Lag b'Omer, *הוד שבהוד*, which is *mesugal* for *refuah*, is undoubtedly also *mesugal* for bearing children.²⁰

20. The Midrash (*Shir HaShirim Rabba* 1) tells that there was a couple in Tzidon who didn't have children for ten years. They came to

The Nachlas Avos tells a story that happened to the holy Tana Yochai, Reb Shimon's father.

Yochai was married for many years, without children. He was ready to divorce his wife, hoping that perhaps he can have children with another wife, but his wife didn't want a divorce. She prayed and cried that she be able to bear children.

On Rosh Hashanah night, Yochai dreamed that he was in an orchard with

many trees of various sizes. Yochai saw himself leaning on a small tree, and there wasn't any fruit on the tree. Yochai understood that this tree represents him and that it doesn't have fruit, meaning that he doesn't have any children.

A *malach* came into the orchard, carrying a bucket filled with water, and he began watering the trees. Yochai understood that the *malach* was giving children for the upcoming year. The trees that will be watered

Reb Shimon for a divorce. Reb Shimon told them, "Just like you arranged a celebration when you got married, I want you to make a celebration when you divorce."

They made a grand party, and she gave him a lot of wine to drink. When the wine was wearing off, he told her, "Take whatever you love the most from this home and bring it to your parent's home."

Then he fell asleep. She told her slaves to lift up the bed with her husband still lying in it, and to bring him to her parent's home.

He awoke at midnight and didn't understand why he was in her parent's home. She said, "You told me I can take whatever I love most. There is nothing I like more than you."

They returned to Reb Shimon. He davened for them, and they bore children.

will bear fruit that year. How he hoped the *malach* would pour some water on his sapling, too.

The *malach* came to Yochai's tree and put down his barrel of water, and the *malach* 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 Reb Akiva. Reb Akiva agreed that the dream meant they would have a child that year.

Yochai asked, "Why didn't the *malach* use the

standard water for my tree? Why did he put down the bucket of water and watered my tree from a small jug?"

Reb Akiva answered, "The jug was filled with your wife's tears; the tears she shed to bear children. In the merit of those tears, you will have a holy child."

That year, Reb Shimon bar Yochai was born.

5] Daven for *Shidduchim*

The Avnei Nezer *zt'l* told his chassidim that Lag b'Omer is *mesugal* for *shidduchim*, because about Reb Shimon it is said, הַצִּיל הַלְלוּצִים, "He saves those who are stressed and worried," and who is more stressed and worried than someone waiting for their *shidduch*?²¹

6] Daven for Ruchniyos

21. Zelig was an older *bachur*, a good *bachur*, and no one understood why it was taking him so long to find his *bashert*.

Lag b'Omer, Zelig's mother was traveling to Meron. She hoped

that her tefillos will be answered, and her son will find his shidduch. On the bus, she was thinking about her son, Zelig. Before he was born, she and her husband davened in Meron for a child, as they were childless at the time. They promised that if a boy is born, they will call him Shimon. But somehow, when the miracle occurred, and their son was born, they forgot about their promise, and they named him Zelig.

She immediately called her husband and said, "Perhaps the name is the problem. Perhaps if we called him Shimon, he would have found his bashert, already."

The father said that he would call up his rebbe and ask him what they should do.

The rebbe told him that they should call their son Shimon Zelig.

The mother davened in Meron at the *kever* of Reb Shimon bar Yochai, requesting that her son, whose name was now changed to Shimon Zelig, should become engaged.

The next Shabbos, the *gabai* gave "Shimon Zelig" an *aliyah*.

There was another man in this *beis medresh* called Zelig. He asked the *gabai*, "Why did you call this *bachur* Shimon Zelig, isn't his name just Zelig?"

The *gabai* said, "Until now he was called Zelig. But his father told me that from now on I should call him Shimon Zelig. I don't know why."

This man, Zelig, spoke with the father, and asked why his son is now called Shimon Zelig. The father told him the story.

Zelig also had an older daughter. He would have long chosen Zelig as his daughter's husband, because he took a liking to Zelig and thought he would be a good spouse for his daughter. However, as known, Reb Yehuda HaChassid ruled that the names of the father-in-law and son-in-law mustn't be the same. But now that their names weren't exactly the same, he was willing to go ahead with the *shidduch*. Shimon Zelig became engaged to Zelig's daughter!

The Sfas Emes (*Emor* 5652) writes, "I heard from my grandfather [the Chidushei HaRim *zt'l*] that on Lag b'Omer one can attain *yiras Shamayim*." We can pray for all kinds of success in *avodas Hashem*, and our tefillos will be effective.

In *Tehillim* (chapter 19) there are five expressions, and each has five words, to praise the Torah and mitzvos:

1. תורת ה' תמימה משיבת נפש
2. עדות ה' נאמנה מחכימת פתי
3. פקודי ה' ישרים משמחי לב
4. מצות ה' ברה מאירת עינים
5. יראת ה' טהורה עומדת לעד

The fifth phrase discusses *yiras Hashem*. It is five of five (five words of the fifth phrase) similar to Lag b'Omer which falls on the fifth day of the fifth week of *sefira* (הוד שבהוד). This is a hint to the concept that Lag b'Omer is an ideal time to

attain *yiras Shamayim* (Imrei Emes *zt'l*).

7] Daven for Klal Yisrael's Salvation

The Minchas Elazar of Munkatch *zt'l* would sing בר יוחאי at his father's grave. This is because his father, author of *Darkei Teshuvah*, wrote three *sefarim* on *Tikunei Zohar*, and the *Tikunei Zohar* was written by Reb Shimon bar Yochai. Thus, there was a connection between his father and Reb Shimon bar Yochai. Therefore, the Minchas Elazar would go to his father's grave on the *yahrtzeit* and sing בר יוחאי three times.

One year, after singing בר יוחאי, the Minchas Elazar discussed the words of the final phrase, אשרי העם הם, לומדיך, which literally translated means, "Fortunate is the nation who teach you." It seems it should say לומדי תורתך, "Fortunate is the nation who learn your Torah," or

לומדי ספרך, "Fortunate is the nation who learn your *sefarim*." Why does it state לומדיך, that they teach Reb Shimon? What do they teach Reb Shimon?

The answer is, the Minchas Elazar explained, that when there are harsh decrees in the world, the Satan often conceals the harsh decrees from tzaddikim so that they won't know about them and pray to annul the decrees. But when Yidden come to a tzaddik's grave, they tell the tzaddik about the decrees; now the tzaddik can pray for Klal Yisrael.

After saying this explanation, the Minchas Elazar fell on his father's grave and told his father the many *gezeiros* of his time.

The *Zohar* (*Idra* 296) says that when Reb Shimon was buried in Meron, a *bas kol* came forth and said, "Many *kitrugim* are silenced on

this day, in your merit." Tzaddikim say that this occurs every year on Lag b'Omer. The *malachim* that slander and seek to harm Klal Yisrael are silenced on Lag b'Omer.

The *Zohar* writes that the gates of heaven open on Pesach Sheni and remain open an entire week. Afterward, the gates close.

Rebbe Naftali of Ropshitz *zy'a* asks, why can't the gates remain open longer?

The answer is that during this week we have Lag b'Omer, and on Lag b'Omer everyone prays and receives everything they need. Since Klal Yisrael has already received all their hearts' desires, there is no reason to keep the gates open.

Reb Shimon's Hillulah

Finally, we are happy because this is Reb Shimon's holiday. When Reb Shimon

was niftar, on Lag b'Omer, a bas kol announced, "Gather and celebrate the holiday of Reb Shimon."²²

Reb Asher Zelig Margolis zt'l said that this bas kol emanates and is

heard every year. The proof is in the many people who desire to celebrate on this very holy and special day. Obviously, in the depths of their souls, they hear the call of the bas kol, and they gather to celebrate.²³

22. The Zohar tells that at the levayah of Reb Shimon bar Yochai, there was a dispute regarding where to bury him. As they passed Tzipori, the people of Tzipori demanded that Reb Shimon be buried there. They even took sticks and were hitting the people of Meron who wanted to bring Reb Shimon to Meron. And then a miracle occurred. Reb Shimon bar Yochai's bed/coffin rose in the air and flew all the way to his burial place in Meron. And that is when the bas kol announced, "Gather and celebrate the hillulah/holiday of Reb Shimon bar Yochai."

23. Rebbe Shlomke of Zvhil zt'l asked his *gabai* to awaken him when they were ready to begin their trip to Meron for Lag b'Omer. When the *gabai* awoke the Rebbe, he saw that the Rebbe's pillow and bed was soaked with tears.

As they traveled, Reb Shlomke urged everyone to be happy. He said, "We have to be happy also while traveling to Meron."

Reb Shlomke would say, "Reb Shimon sends out invitations to his hilulah. Everyone is invited. If someone doesn't come, that means the invitation didn't come through (like when one sends invitations in the mail, and some letters get lost).

A family spent a Shabbos in Meron. The head of the family said, "For the same amount of money we spent on this Shabbos, we could have gone to a luxurious vacation resort."

For the next three years, he didn't return to Meron. It wasn't that

The Chida (*Moreh b'Etzba* 223) writes, "Be happy in Reb Shimon bar Yochai's honor, because Lag b'Omer is his *hilula*, and it is known that he desired that people rejoice on this day."

The Mishnas Chassidim writes, "It is a mitzvah to be happy on this day, the joy of Reb Shimon bar Yochai."²⁴

Hadlakah (bonfire)

We will now discuss some of the customs of Lag b'Omer.

In Meron, and all cities in Eretz Yisrael (and in many *chutz le'aretz* communities) there is a custom to celebrate Lag b'Omer with a *hadlakah* (bonfire) in honor of Reb Shimon bar Yochai.

The *sefer* מסע מירון describes the *hadlakah* in

he didn't want to go. It was just that things didn't work out for him. For example, when his son turned three, he wanted to make the *chalachah* in Meron, but the boy was slightly ill so they didn't go.

His wife told him, "It seems that since you said that it wasn't worthwhile coming to Meron, Reb Shimon isn't inviting us anymore."

He realized she might be right, so he closed himself in a room and cried and repented for the foolish words he said. After he washed his face and dried his tears someone knocked at his door. It was his neighbor who said, "I just bought a new car. I want the first use of the car to be for a mitzvah. Do you want to come with me to Meron?" He had just been reinvited to Meron.

24. The Mishnas Chasadim concludes, "If you live in Eretz Yisrael, celebrate near his grave and be very happy there. Certainly do so if you have a *chalachah yingel*, to make *peyos* for a child..."

Meron eighty years ago (תרמ"ה): "Everyone buys olive oil and pours it in honor of the *tana*. Then those who will light the fire come forward and with emotion, joy, and ecstasy, light a towel soaked in oil, and throw it into the large bowl of oil. Everyone stands by - their eyes watching, waiting for the fire. When the first flames burst forth, everyone rejoices. The sound of their happiness is so loud, I never heard or saw a joy similar to it. The people of Eretz Yisrael say the *neshamah* of Reb Shimon bar Yochai is there at this *hadlakah*. At that time, I took out the names of my friends and family and prayed for them that the merit of the holy *tana* should protect them, that they should have *hatzlachah* in *gashmiyos* and *ruchniyos*."

The Sadugeira Rebbe *zt'l* spoke about the specialness of the *hadlakah* on the roof of the *tzion*. He

said 80,000 *neshamos* get their *tikun* at this time.

Some *tzaddikim* would throw clothing into the fire in Meron to increase the light and the joy of the day. Some *gedolim* disagreed with this custom because of *baal tashchis* (it is forbidden to waste money, and destroying clothing is a waste of money).

Reb Shmuel Heller *zt'l* the *rav* of Tzfas wrote a *sefer K'vod Melachim* on this subject, to prove that it is permitted to burn clothing, and he notes that the Or HaChaim HaKadosh *zt'l* and other *tzaddikim* did so.

Some throw their *yarmulke* into the fire. My father *zy'a*, and my grandfather Rebbe Moshe Mordechai of Lelov *zy'a*, had that custom.

Someone once told Rebbe Dovid Biderman of Lelov *zy'a* that his son was acting improperly and that he keeps taking off his *yarmulke*. Rebbe Dovid

Biderman advised them to bring their son to Meron on Lag b'Omer.

The father followed this counsel, but it was very embarrassing for him. At every stop, they had to look for the child, so they could continue on their way, as he always wandered off.

When they finally came to Meron and lit the fire, the Rebbe took the boy's *kappel* and threw it into the fire. The boy immediately started to shout, "My *kappel!* My *kappel!*" He changed in a minute. Before, he was constantly throwing off his *kappel*, and now he wanted it.

The *Zohar* (*Idra Zuta* 291:) tells that on the final day of Reb Shimon's life, he revealed to his students the great and holy secrets of kabbalah. As long as he taught, the sun didn't set. The Bnei Yissaschar (*Lag b'Omer* 6) writes that this explains the custom to light candles and bonfires on

Lag b'Omer. It is in commemoration of the sun that continued to shine on the final day of Reb Shimon's life.

***Chalakeh* (haircut)**

Another renowned custom in Meron, on Lag b'Omer, is *chalakeh*; a three-year-old child gets his first haircut there, as this is *mechanech* the child with the mitzvah of *peyos*.

Reb Chaim Vital *zt'l* writes, "The Arizal came to Meron [on Lag b'Omer] with his young son and his entire family, and they made *peyos* for his son there, as is the custom. He made it a day of celebration."

The Mishnas Chassidim writes, "If you live in Eretz Yisrael, go and celebrate by Reb Shimon's grave, and be very happy there. Certainly, do so if you have a *chalachah*, and you will make *peyos* for your child..."

Different explanations are given for this custom. Reb Yaakov Meir Shechter *shlita* explains that Reb Shimon bar Yochai promised, *כי לא תשכח מפי זרעו*, Torah will never be forgotten. The *mesorah* will be passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, when we make *peyos* for a child, and we are about ready to bring the child to cheder to study Torah, we do it at Reb Shimon's grave, for he promised that the chain of Torah and *yiras Shamayim* would continue eternally.

I heard another explanation from the Chernobyler Rebbe *shlita*:

The Gemara (*Me'illa* 17.) states, "The government decreed that Yidden may not keep Shabbos and or perform *bris milah*. Reb Reuvan Istrobuli sought to annul these decrees, so he cut his hair in a non-Jewish hairstyle (long hair in the back and no hair in the front), so the goyim would think he is one of them. He sat among

the politicians and asked them, "If you hate someone, do you want to make him wealthy or poor?"

They replied, "Obviously, we want him to be poor!"

"So, they shouldn't work on Shabbos, and they will become poor."

The government officials agreed with him and retracted the decree that forced Yidden to work on Shabbos.

Then he asked them, "If you have an enemy, do you want him to be strong or weak?"

They said, "Obviously, we want him to be weak!"

"If so, you should let them circumcise their children at eight days, and they will be weak."

They replied, "You are correct," and they retracted that decree, too.

Sometime later, they realized that Reb Reuvan

was a Yid, and that he tricked them, so they reinstated those two *gezeiros*.

Once again, the Jewish community needed a solution on how to annul these two decrees. The *chachamim* sent Reb Shimon bar Yochai to the king, because "many miracles happen to him."

A demon called Ben Temalyon met with Reb Shimon and offered his assistance... The demon went ahead of Reb Shimon and attached itself to the king's daughter, causing her immense pain. When Reb Shimon arrived, Reb Shimon announced, "Ben Temalyon, leave!" which it did.

The king was very thankful to Reb Shimon and brought him into the treasury room. "Take whatever you want."

Reb Shimon found the documents of the decrees forbidding the Jewish nation from practicing

milah and keeping Shabbos, and he tore up the documents.

In this story, Reb Reuvan Istrobuli helped the nation dressed as a gentile, while Reb Shimon saved the nation appearing like a Yid.

One of the purposes of a Jewish haircut is so it should be noticeable that we are Yidden. We, therefore, have the custom to make the *chalah* in Meron, at Reb Shimon's *kever*, because Reb Shimon was able to annul the harsh decrees while appearing as a Yid.

Learn from his Ways

On Lag b'Omer, it is also customary to sing *בר יוחאי*, "the son of Yochai." Reb Naftali Katz *zt'l* writes (*Siddur Beis Rachel*) that singing *Bar Yochai* purifies the *neshamah*, even for those who don't grasp the secrets of this song.

As we sing this song, as well as the song ואמרתם כה לחי ורבן שמעון בר יוחאי, written by the Ben Ish Chai, it is worthwhile to think about the greatness of Reb Shimon bar Yochai - his fear and love of Heaven, his accomplishments, his erudition in Torah, etc. - and to strive to emulate his holy ways.

We don't expect to reach the greatness of Reb Shimon bar Yochai. The sefarim say that Reb Shimon resembled a malach, as it states (Daniel 4:10) עיר וקדיש משמי אנחית, "A malach came down from heaven" and the roshei teivos are שמעון. Nevertheless, we should seek to emulate his ways, and in our own way, reach the perfection that we can attain.

Perhaps this is the reason we sing בר יוחאי, and, in this song, we call Reb Shimon, "The son of Yochai." We are reminded that Reb Shimon was a human being, had parents,

and yet he reached such high levels. Therefore, if we devote ourselves to Hashem's service, we can also reach very high levels.

People tend to think of tzaddikim as people who were born totally different from everyone else. Therefore, when they hear of a tzaddik's greatness, they shrug their shoulders and say, "But who can be like him? He was an angel. If I were born a *malach*, I too, would be like that."

Therefore, it is important to remember that tzaddikim are human beings. They also have challenges, and they became great and holy because they passed those tests. If we pass our tests, we can also reach incredibly high levels.

Seudah

Part of the Lag b'Omer celebration is to make a seudah.

This seudah is considered a seudas

mitzvah. As the Maharil (החדשות ק"ד) writes, "The meals at a *bris milah*, *pidyon haben*, *siyum mesechta* [are all *seudas mitzvah*]. Chazal say, 'Whenever *talmidei chachamim* sit at a meal, it is like enjoying from the light of the *Shechinah*. Therefore, Lag b'Omer is also considered a *seudas mitzvah*."

Surprisingly, we eat on this day. Generally, a *yahrtzeit* is a fast day. For example, Moshe Rabbeinu's *yahrtzeit* on the seventh of Adar is a day for fasting and is called "*taanis tzaddikim*." Lag b'Omer is also a *yahrtzeit*, as it is the *yahrtzeit* of Reb Shimon bar Yochai. So why is it a day of eating and celebrating?

We can answer as follows: Chazal tell us that when Moshe Rabbeinu was

niftar, many halachos of the Torah were forgotten. In contrast, when Reb Shimon bar Yochai was *niftar*, secrets of the Torah were revealed. This explains why on Lag b'Omer we celebrate while some people fast on the 7th of Adar.

The Taamei HaMinhagim offers another explanation:

Reb Shimon bar Yochai was unique in the manner he annulled harsh decrees. Most *tzaddikim* fast to annul harsh decrees, but the *Zohar* tells us that Reb Shimon bar Yochai annulled harsh decrees through joy. Therefore, on Reb Shimon's *yahrtzeit* we eat and celebrate. That is how we annul harsh decrees on this day.²⁵

25. The *Zohar* (*Shemos* 15.) teaches: Once, Reb Shimon was teaching secrets of Torah and Reb Elazar was near him. Their faces were shining like the sun. They studied two days straight, without eating and drinking. They didn't know whether it was day or night. When they finished, Reb Shimon said the *pasuk* (*Shemos* 34:28),

Meron

For those who can, it is a great privilege to be in Meron on Lag b'Omer. It is a place for tefillah and salvation, and it is the ideal place to celebrate Reb Shimon's day.

We have stories from the Remak and the Arizal in Meron, and it was practiced before that, too.

Reb Chaim Vital *zt'l* writes, "Klal Yisrael is accustomed to go to the *kevarim* of Reb Shimon bar

Yochai and Reb Elazar (his son) on Lag b'Omer; they eat and are happy there. My rebbe [the Arizal] once went there on Lag b'Omer with his entire family, and he remained there for three days..."

The Sefer Taamei HaMinhagim tells the following story:²⁶

There was a very holy beis medresh in Tzfas: The Arizal was the rebbe, the Beis Yosef was the rav, the Alshich HaKodesh was the

ויהי שם עם ה' ארבעים יום וארבעים לילה – לחם לא אכל מים לא שתה
Har Sinai for forty days. He didn't eat bread and he didn't drink water."

When Rebbe heard this story, he was astounded. Rebbe's father, Reb Shimon ben Gamliel, told him, "My son, don't be so surprised. Reb Shimon was a lion, and so was his son. Not a regular lion, rather אריה שאג מי לא ירא 'When the lion roars, who isn't afraid?' Even the upper worlds are afraid of them, certainly we should be afraid. Reb Shimon never decreed a fast day in order to attain their requests. He decreed what was needed and Hakadosh Baruch Hu acquiesced. Hakadosh Baruch Hu placed a decree and he annulled it."

26. The story was told by the Minchas Elazar, who heard it from the Shinover Rav *zt'l* who heard it when he was in Tzfas from a reliable source.

magid, and Reb Elazar Azkari, the "Chareidim," was the *shamesh* of the beis medresh.

Initially, people didn't realize that the Chareidim was an exceptional tzaddik and a giant in Torah. They thought he was just a simple, good Yid.

One year, the Arizal was with his students in Meron, on Lag b'Omer, and they were dancing together. A tall, elderly man was also there, dancing with his students. This elderly man also danced with the Chareidim.

Suddenly, the Arizal grabbed the hands of this elderly man, and they danced together for a long time. After that, the Arizal danced with the Chareidim.

The Arizal's students were surprised that the Arizal danced with the Chareidim. They asked him, "It is Torah, so we have a right to ask, in order to learn from your ways.

Why did you dance alone with Reb Elazar Azkari? It isn't proper for a gadol b'Yisrael to dance with a simple person. We don't ask why you danced with the elderly man because he is probably a great scholar, but why did you dance with Reb Elazar Azkari?"

The Ari replied, "I saw Reb Shimon bar Yochai (the tall, elderly man) dance with Reb Elazar Azkari, so why shouldn't I?"

That's when the students discovered the true exalted stature of Reb Elazar Azkari, later known as the Chareidim for the sefer he authored.

Reb Shmuel Heller *zt'l* tells about the time Reb Chaim ben Atar, the Or HaChaim HaKodesh came to Meron for Lag b'Omer: "When he reached the bottom of the mountain of Meron, he got off his donkey, and he crawled up the mountain, on his hands and knees, grunting like an animal the entire way. He

shouted, 'How can my lowly being enter this awesome place, where Hakadosh Baruch Hu, angels, and souls of all tzaddikim are present?!' And at the *hilulah* he was very happy."

It states (*Shemos* 34:23), שלש פעמים בשנה יראה כל זכורך את פני ה', האדון ה' "Three times a year every Yid must see the face of the Master, Hashem..." This *pasuk* is referring to the mitzvah of going up to the Beis HaMikdash for Pesach, Shavuos, and Succos (עליה לרגל).

The *Zohar* states, מאן פני ה', האדון ה' דא ר' שמעון בר יוחאי "Who is the master... It is Reb Shimon..." We don't know what this *Zohar* means. However, we see a correlation between the mitzvah of *aliyah l'regel* and going to Meron. People who go to Meron often sense that this is a small taste of what will be when Moshiach comes, and everyone will travel to the Beis HaMikdash.

Going to Meron is a privilege, but it comes along with a responsibility:

We say the tefillah of נחם once a year, at Minchah, on Tisha b'Av. Reb Avraham HaLevi Bruchim *zy'a* (a student of the Arizal) would say this prayer every day, in every *Shemonah Esrei* and when reciting *birchas hamazon*. This is because he wanted to mourn the Churban Beis HaMikdash every day. As it states in Shulchan Aruch (1:3) ראוי לכל ירא שמים שיהא מיוצר ודואג על חרבן בית המקדש, "It is proper for everyone who fears Hashem to feel distressed and to be worried about the churban Beis HaMikdash."

One year, he was in Meron on Lag b'Omer, and he said נחם in *birchas hamazon*, as he always did.

Suddenly, the Arizal saw Reb Shimon bar Yochai standing on his grave, as though he were alive, and Reb Shimon asked him, "Ask your student, Reb

Avraham Bruchim, why he said נחם on my day of great joy."

The Arizal rebuked Reb Avraham for saying נחם. Lag b'Omer is a time for celebration and not for mourning.

Within a month, Reb Avraham HaLevi Bruchim was *niftar*.

We learn from this story that we must be happy on

Lag b'Omer, and especially in Meron.

Because being in Meron is a great privilege, but like all privileges, it comes along with responsibilities. It isn't the right time to mourn the churban Beis HaMikdash on this day. Certainly, we shouldn't be angry and upset over petty, insignificant issues. One must find it in his heart to be happy on this holy day.²⁷

27. It states in the *sefer* מסע מירון that in Cheshvan תקכ"ב, there was an earthquake in Tzefas and in Meron, and many Arabs with their wives and children ran to the building over Reb Shimon's grave to protect themselves but the door was locked. They shouted, "Reb Shimon! Reb Shimon! We heard about your greatness from our fathers, and we witnessed it with our eyes. Open your doors." Miraculously, the doors opened, and they went inside. Reb Shimon became even more revered to them.

A month later, on the 6th of Kislev, there was a second earthquake. Yidden and *lehavdil* goyim ran to Reb Shimon's grave. They found the building jumping up in the air and falling back down again. The *kippah*, dome, split in two. They became very afraid. They said, "Reb Shimon! Reb Shimon! If this is what is happening to your building, what will be with us?" After a half hour, the earthquake settled, and the building sat firmly in its place. They went inside and checked to see the damages, but there were none. The *kippah* merged together, and there was no sign of any scratches or damages.

When One Can't Go to Meron

Obviously, some people can't go to Meron on Lag b'Omer. For example, if a person knows that he won't be able to be happy in Meron, it might be better if he doesn't go (as we just explained). Some people live far away, and there are other considerations that people must weigh and measure, to decide whether or not they should go to Meron.

Additionally, (at the time that I am writing this) perhaps only small crowds will legally be permitted to be in Meron – as was last year.

When one can't get to Meron, he should remember the Chazal (*Kiddushin* 40.), חשב אדם לעשות מצוה ונאנס ולא עשאה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו עשאה, "If a person wanted to do a mitzvah, but circumstances prevented stood in his way, the *pasuk* gives him credit as if he performed the mitzvah..."

And he should be happy on Lag b'Omer, wherever he is.

It is also recommended that he study lessons from Reb Shimon bar Yochai, because the holy sefarim (*Meor Einayim*, *Shabbos*) tell us that studying the lessons of a tzaddik is similar to being at his grave.