

# Hopeful

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

This week, we celebrate *Lag Ba'omer* and the legacy of Rabi Shimon bar Yochai. We celebrate the conclusion of the plague that affected the 24,000 students of Rabi Akiva, who were expected to transmit the Torah to future generations. Their loss was such an overwhelming tragedy that we mourn them until this day.

This year, we mark the first *yahrtzeit* of the 45 holy people who perished at the *Lag Ba'omer* celebration in Meron. We mourn the recent passing of Rav Chaim Kanievsky, who mastered the Torah and epitomized its greatness. And the pain of those who perished suddenly from Covid is fresh in our thoughts as we contemplate the enormity of losing 24,000 *anoshim gedolim* in one period.

This *Shabbos*, we *lain Parshas Behar*, which opens with the *mitzvah* of *Shmittah*. We are all familiar with the *Rashi* that questions why the *mitzvah* is introduced by the statement that the laws were given to Moshe Rabbeinu on Har Sinai. All the laws of the Torah were given and taught to Moshe upon Har Sinai. Why, then, is it necessary to state that the laws of *Shmittah* were given then as well?

*Rashi* explains that this was done to demonstrate to us that just as all the intricate *halachos* pertaining to *Shmittah* were given to Moshe on Har Sinai at the time of *Kabbolas HaTorah*, so were all the *halachos* of all the *mitzvos*.

Why *Shmittah* is singled out as the *mitzvah* from which we derive this lesson is an oft-asked question. Various explanations are given, including that *Shmittah* is an extraordinary commandment in that its proper observance requires a person's total belief in Hashem.

A person who doesn't believe that Hashem controls the world and furnishes each person with his needs is unable to forgo a year of cultivating, planting and harvesting his field. Since the industrial revolution, we no longer live in an agrarian society and therefore view the main aspects of the *mitzvah* as something that affects people who happen to be farmers by profession.

We speak about them, highlight their heroism, and invite them into our homes, *shuls* and schools this year as we mark the *Shmittah* year. But outside of the obligations related to the fruits and produce grown in Eretz Yisroel this year, we in *chutz la'aretz* don't view it as something relevant to us.

We couldn't be more wrong.

With the *mitzvah* of *Shmittah*, it is as if *Hakadosh Boruch Hu* told us, modern-day people, that we should not work for one year. Whatever it is that we do for a living, we would not be allowed to do it for one year. From the past *Rosh Hashanah* to the coming *Rosh Hashanah*, we would have to stay home and count on Hashem to provide for us. We would spend the year studying Torah and pursuing *mitzvos* in a way we are not able to do the other six years when we are otherwise occupied.

The *mitzvah* would affect everyone, just as it did when everyone lived off the land, either as owners, workers or purveyors. How do we think we would fare? With what degree of fright would we enter the *Shmittah* year? Would we trust that Hashem would provide for us, or would we fear that we would suffer a year of hunger and worse?

*Shmittah* is thus a unique *mitzvah* that reinforces our belief in Hashem, as each person is witness to the fact that He cares for and provides for all of his needs. This buttresses our belief that everything that transpires with us is from Hashem. Nothing happens on its own. We have what the Ultimate Provider determined we should have, as do our friends, neighbors and competitors.

When we internalize that belief, we get along better with other people, as we are able to overcome bad traits brought upon by jealousy. We also become humble and are able to grow in Torah, as one of the requirements to master Torah is humility.

Perhaps that is another connection between *Shmittah* and Har Sinai. *Chazal* teach that the Torah was given on Har Sinai, the smallest and humblest of mountains, to teach us that for a person to grow in Torah, he must be humble. *Shmittah*, as well, brings humility to a person when he considers that his wealth and success are brought to him by Hashem and are not a result of his own ingenuity, creativity and prowess. This allows him to grow in Torah and *middos tovos*.

This is an added benefit of studying the *halachos* of *Shmittah*, as recommended for those who do not own fields or land in Eretz Yisroel. By doing so, we demonstrate our belief that all of Torah was given to us on Har Sinai, and as we continue to learn the *halachos*, the idea that Hashem provides for all is reinforced, even to those who are not agrarians or farmers.

Thus, *Parshas Behar* is studied in the lead-up to the *Yom Tov of Shavuos*, which commemorates our receiving of the Torah.

Therefore, *Behar* follows *Emor*, which contains the *halachos* of *Sefirah*. We count from the second day of *Pesach* until *Shavuos*, declaring that we acknowledge that we were freed from Mitzrayim so that we could accept the Torah at Har Sinai on *Shavuos*.

We count towards *Shavuos*, the day that marks our receipt of the Torah, to demonstrate that we are striving and reaching upward. Each day of the count, we seek to improve ourselves so that we can better study, observe and excel in Torah.

The *Maharal* teaches that the period of *Sefirah* is blessed with awesome light that is not present the rest of the year (*Nesiv HaTorah* 12). This *ohr* increases daily along with the levels of Torah, until it reaches a climax on *Shavuos*, when the Torah was given. In fact, as we count *Sefirah*, we say, “*Hayom*,” because *yom*, day, is an expression of light, and we make the *brocha* and thank Hashem for granting us the light of this specific day of the *Omer*, as every day more light is revealed as we proceed along the path to Torah (*Derech Mitzvosecha*).

Concurrent with the light and increased levels of Torah found between *Pesach* and *Atzeres* is our obligation to raise ourselves from the level of barley, basically an animal food, which comprises the *Korban Omer*, to the more refined wheat of the *Shte Halechem* of *Shavuos*.

*Chazal* (*Yoma* 9b) teach that the second *Bais Hamikdosh* was destroyed because of *sinas chinom*. Simply explained, the people looked down upon each other out of baseless hatred. Perhaps we can say that until the period during which the *talmidim* of Rabi Akiva died because of a lack of respect for each other, there was hope that the Jews would be able to repent for the sins that caused the *churban Bais Hamikdosh*. However, when the terrible plague struck the Jewish people and the 24,000 *talmidim* died,

it became obvious that the people were overcome with *sinas chinom* and were lacking in *ahavas Yisroel* and *achdus*.

As we mourn the passing of the 24,000 giants, we are reminded of the punishment for not dealing with each other with the proper respect.

We are reminded that “*ve’ohavta lerei’acha kamocho*” is not only a nice undertaking and a good *minhag*, but a *mitzvah mide’Oraisa* incumbent upon us to observe in order to be connected to Hashem and worthy of Torah and *geulah*.

During *Sefirah*, we attempt each day to perfect another of the 48 *kinyanim* of Torah and engage in raising ourselves from the *nefesh habehami* levels of *se’orim*, animal food, to the *nefesh haruchni* at the 49<sup>th</sup> level of *kedusha*. These attributes prepare us for *Kabbolas HaTorah*, when we stood united, *k’ish echod beleiv echod*, at Har Sinai.

Learning the lessons of *Shmittah* help us to arrive at that level.

During these days of *Sefirah*, it is incumbent upon us to end the hatred, spite, cynicism and second-guessing of each other, of people who look different or see things differently than us. It is time we adopt the message of *Sefirah* and the passing of Rabi Akiva’s *talmidim* so that we can return again to where and what we were and what we are meant to be.

The number of days in the *Sefirah* period is cited as connected to the 48 methods necessary to acquire Torah. The *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avos* teaches that in order to properly acquire Torah, we must excel in the 48 methods through which Torah is acquired. Most of them relate to the way we deal and interact with one another. One who has not perfected himself ethically and morally cannot properly excel in Torah. A person who is deficient in the way he deals with other people will also be lacking in Torah.

The mourning we engage in is directly tied to the introspection that this period obligates. The lessons of *Shmittah* encourage us to view ourselves properly as creatures of Hashem, and doing so helps us interact well with others and grow in Torah and *mitzvah* observance.

It also prompts us to have a positive outlook on whatever befalls us in life. When we know that all that happens is from Hashem, we do not become shattered at tragedy. Instead of being forlorn and hopeless, we accept what happened and look forward to the future with anticipation of being recipients of Hashem's kindness.

Rabi Akiva was the greatest *Tanna* of his generation. It is said that he was the *shoresh* of *Torah Shebaal Peh*. While on Har Sinai, *Hakadosh Boruch Hu* revealed to Moshe Rabbeinu the *halachos* that Rabi Akiva would discover through his *drashos*. Rabi Akiva's greatness was such that Moshe asked Hashem why he was chosen to deliver the Torah and not Rabi Akiva (*Menachos 29b*).

The line of transmission of the Torah from Har Sinai to future generations ran through him and his students. When his original students died, the Jewish world mourned. They worried about how the *mesorah* that ran through Rabi Akiva would continue. They worried about who would teach Torah to future generations. A grieving people on the run from Roman persecution, they cried and wondered if they could ever be consoled for the loss of so many great men crucial to the spiritual survival of the nation.

However, despite the tremendous loss, Rabi Akiva was not crushed. He immediately set about rebuilding that which was lost. He recharged the people's faith and helped them recover from the devastating tragedy and proceeded to transmit the Torah to a new group of students.

On *Lag Ba'omer*, which marks the cessation of the deaths of Rabi Akiva's *talmidim*, we commemorate the renewal. We celebrate the determination. We foresee the future bright with hopefulness and optimism. On this day, the *talmidim* stopped dying and Rabi Akiva's *talmid*, Rabi Shimon Bar Yochai, revealed the secrets of *Toras Hasod*, which infused future generations with added dimensions of *kedusha* and Torah.

As the centuries pass, and as every generation faces enemies seeking their destruction and annihilation, we look to Rabi Akiva and Rabi Shimon Bar Yochai for inspiration. We note how they persevered, ensuring that our nation and Torah are alive and flourishing to this day. In the wake of a tragedy that would have felled a lesser people, Rabi Akiva strengthened himself and set about ensuring that the chain would remain unbroken.

In our day, as well, as we recuperate from a plague, from tremendous tragedy, from the loss of the man who was viewed as our light and Torah leader, we need to reject gloom and doom, overcome anguish and grief, and redouble our faith in Hashem and His promises to the faithful who don't question and doubt.

The Torah rejects hopelessness. So does *Shmittah*. *Sefirah* says that we can always improve. The fires of *Lag Ba'omer* burn vibrantly, comforting us with their message that the future will be bright, the *mesorah* will continue, and our people will be great.

Let us learn the lessons of *Shmittah*, *Sefirah*, Rabi Akiva, and his *talmid*, Rabi Shimon. Let us learn the lesson of *Lag Ba'omer*. Let us rejoice with our faith in the Creator who cares for every one of us and let us all pray that we merit soon the great light that will benefit us all with the coming of *Moshiach Tzidkeinu* speedily in our day.