



On Lag BaOmer Rabbi Akiva Rectified the 33 Years Missing from the Life of Yaakov Avinu

Lag BaOmer approaches auspiciously. Throughout the Jewish world, this special day is celebrated as the day that the divine Tanna Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai passed away. He was one of the five new disciples ordained by Rabbi Akiva on Lag BaOmer after his previous 24,000 disciples perished during the first 33 days of the Sefirah. Hence, it is fitting for us to explore an enigmatic allusion found in the sacred Derashos of the Chasam Sofer related to **ל"ג BaOmer—the 33rd day of the Counting of the Omer**. He notes that if we spell out the names of the two letters **ל"ג** as follows: **למ"ד**—**גמ"ל**—their gematria equals 147, the number of years that Yaakov Avinu, a"h, lived. In this essay, we will explore the connection between the 147 years that Yaakov Avinu lived and the glorious celebration of Lag BaOmer.

It appears that the Chasam Sofer is hinting to a revelation from our mentor, the Arizal, in Sha'ar HaKavanos (Pesach 12). He asserts that when Yaakov Avinu fled from Lavan HaArami with his entire household, including the twelve shevatim, he made preparations to mitigate the forces of "din" that prevail during the Sefirah but are ameliorated on Lag BaOmer.

Let us review that incident. Lavan HaArami intended to uproot the future of Yisrael by murdering Yaakov and his children; however, HKB"H admonished him in a dream (Bereishis 31, 29): **"השומר לך מדבר עם יעקב משוב עד רע"**: **beware of speaking with Yaakov either good or bad**. As is evident from the subsequent pesukim, Lavan suggested that Yaakov make a pact with him (ibid. 44): **"ועתה לכה נכרתה ברית אני ואתה והיה"**: **so, now, come, let us enter into a covenant, I and you, and He shall be a witness between me and you**. Yaakov responded to his request as follows (ibid. 45):

"ויקה יעקב אבן וירימה מצבה. ויאמר יעקב לאחיו לקטו אבנים, ויקחו אבנים ויעשו גל ויאכלו שם על הגל, ויקרא לו לבן יגר שהדותא ויעקב קרא לו גלעד... ויאמר לבן ליעקב הנה הגל הזה והנה המצבה אשר יריתי ביני ובינך, עד הגל הזה ועדה המצבה, אם אני לא אעבור אליך את הגל הזה, ואם אתה לא תעבור אלי את הגל הזה ואת המצבה הזאת לרעה."

Yaakov took a stone and raised it up as a monument. And Yaakov said to his brethren (Rashi: referring to his children), **"Gather stones!" So, they took stones and made a mound, and they ate there on the mound. Lavan called it Yigar Sahadsa, but Yaakov called it Galeid . . . And Lavan said to Yaakov, "Here is this mound, and here is the monument which I have cast between me and you. This mound shall be witness and the monument shall be witness that I may not cross over to you past this mound, nor may you cross over to me past this mound and this monument for evil."**

According to the Arizal, when Yaakov Avinu erected the **ג"ל** (mound) of stones, he had **ל"ג BaOmer** in mind. He intended to invoke the name of protection and security **כד"ט** whose gematria equals **ג"ל (33)**. This is the source for what the Kedushas Levi writes (Vayeitzei): **"But Yaakov called it Galeid"—this passuk alludes to Lag BaOmer, since ג"ל is the same letters as ל"ג**. We find a similar remark in the siddur of the author of the Tanya (Sha'ar Lag BaOmer). Also, the Maor V'Shemesh explains at length that Lavan HaArami intended to invoke the forces of "din" against Yisrael. Yaakov, however, mitigated those forces with the name **כד"ט**, which possesses the same gematria as **ג"ל**, which is revealed on **ל"ג BaOmer**.

Based on this introduction, we can suggest that the Chasam Sofer intended to embellish the idea of the Arizal. The Chasam Sofer said that the **"למ"ד גמ"ל"** alludes to

the 147 years of Yaakov Avinu's life. The Arizal asserts that Yaakov Avinu made preparations to sweeten the forces of "din" on Lag BaOmer by erecting a ג'ל of stones to function as an impassable barrier between himself and Lavan.

Notwithstanding, it is still incumbent upon us to explain the connection between Lag BaOmer and Yaakov Avinu alluded to by the sacred words of the Arizal. Additionally, we must explain the connection between the 147 years that Yaakov Avinu lived and the festival of Lag BaOmer.

The Cause for Joy on Lag BaOmer Is that the Deaths of Rabbi Akiva's Students Ceased

To begin with, we learn from our early sources that we rejoice on Lag BaOmer, because the disciples of Rabbi Akiva ceased to die. We learn this from the Gemara (Yevamos 62b):

"שנים עשר אלף זוגים תלמידים היו לו לרבי עקיבא מגבת עד אנטיפרס, וכולן מתו בפרק אחד מפני שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה, והיה העולם שמים, עד שבא רבי עקיבא אצל רבותינו שבדרום ושנאה להם, רבי מאיר ורבי יהודה ורבי יוסי ורבי שמעון ורבי אלעזר בן שמוע, והם הם העמידו תורה אותה שעה. תנא כולם מתו מפסח ועד עצרת."

Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of disciples extending from Gevat to Antiparis. They all died during one period of time, because they did not treat each other with respect. Thus, the world was left barren (of Torah) until Rabbi Akiva came to our Rabbis in the south and taught it to them. They were Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Yossi, Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua; it was these disciples who upheld Torah-study at that time. A Tanna stated: All of the disciples perished between Pesach and Shavuos.

The language of the Gemara—"A Tanna stated: All of the disciples perished between Pesach and Shavuos"—implies that they died throughout the Sefirah extending from Pesach to Shavuos. Yet, this seems to be at odds with what the Tur writes (O.C. 493): "יש מסתפרים מל"ג בעומר ואילך שאומרים שאז פסקו: (O.C. 493) "מלמות—some get haircuts from Lag BaOmer and onwards, because they say that that is when they stopped dying.

The Beis Yosef (ibid.) attributes this minhag to what the Avudraham writes in the name of the ReZaH: "יש מקומות שנוהגין: לישא אשה ולהסתפר מל"ג בעומר ואילך שאמרו שאז פסקו מלמות, וכן כתב

אבן הירחי ששמע בשם ה"ר זרחיה הלוי, שמצא כתוב בספר ישן הבא מספרד שמתו מפסח ועד פרוס העצרת, ומאי פרוס בלגא, מדתנן (פסחים ו.) שואלין בהלכות הפסח קודם הפסח ל' יום, ובלגא חמשה עשר יום קודם העצרת וזהו There are places that it is customary to get married and get a haircut from Lag BaOmer and afterwards, since they claim that that is when the disciples stopped dying. This is also what the Even HaYarchi wrote that he heard in the name of Rabbi Zerachiah HaLevi (the ReZaH). He found it written in an old manuscript from Spain that they died from Pesach until Lag BaOmer.

This is consistent with the ruling of the michaber in the Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 493, 1): "נוהגים שלא לישא אשה בין פסח לעצרת: (O.C. 493, 1): "נוהגים שלא לישא אשה בין פסח לעצרת: —it is customary not to marry a woman between Pesach and Atzeres, until Lag BaOmer, because the students of Rabbi Akiva died during that period of time. In relation to this ruling, the Rama writes in his gloss: "הגה, מיהו מל"ג בעומר ואילך הכל שרי"—but from Lag BaOmer and afterwards everything is permitted. In addition, the michaber writes (ibid. 2): **It is customary not to get a haircut until Lag BaOmer, since they claim that that is when they stopped dying.** The Rama adds in the name of the Maharil that in these countries, it is customary to celebrate and not to recite tachanun on Lag BaOmer.

We Celebrate on Account of the New Disciples Ordained by Rabbi Akiva

Nevertheless, the commentaries are perplexed by this fact. It seems implausible that the celebration on Lag BaOmer is because the students of Rabbi Akiva stopped dying on that day. After all, according to the account in the Gemara, all of the first disciples perished during that same period of time. In other words, it makes no sense to say that they stopped dying, since none remained. So, on account of which disciples do we have cause to celebrate and rejoice?

The Pri Chadash addresses this difficulty (O.C. 493, 2): "ומיהו יש לדקדק בשמחה זו למה, ואי משום שפסקו מלמות מה בכך, הרי לא נשאר אחד מהם וכולם מתו, ומה טיבה של שמחה זו." He questions the nature and reason for rejoicing, seeing as no students remained; they had all died. He answers: "ואפשר שהשמחה היא —על אותם תלמידים שהוסיף אחר כך רבי עקיבא שלא מתו כאלו"—perhaps the joy is on account of those disciples that Rabbi Akiva added afterwards, who did not die like the first ones.

The Gaon Chida provides a similar explanation in the sefer *Tov Ayin* (18, 87).

Thus, we learn from these sources a novel explanation pertaining to the statement that the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's students ceased on Lag BaOmer. It refers to his five new disciples, who did not continue in the ways of the former disciples and who, therefore, remained alive. We can now comprehend the cause for celebration on Lag BaOmer. After the first 24,000 disciples perished between Pesach and Lag BaOmer, the world was left desolate due to the absence of Torah. On that very same Lag BaOmer, however, Rabbi Akiva ordained five new disciples, who replenished the world with Torah. It is this renewal of Torah that we celebrate.

In the sefer *Kaf HaChaim* (O.C. 493, 26), he provides substantiation for this explanation from the teachings of the Arizal (*Sefiras HaOmer*, Drush 12). There we learn that "din" prevails during the days of the Sefirah. Hence, the midah of "din" struck down the students of Rabbi Akiva for failing to treat one another with due respect. On the day of Lag BaOmer, however, the forces of "din" were annulled and replaced by "rachamim" from the name of protection and security כד"ט, whose gematria equals ל"ג. Therefore, Rabbi Akiva opted to initiate his five preeminent disciples into the fold on that same day; among them was the divine Tanna Rashbi.

What remains to be explained is the special significance of Lag BaOmer. Why was it different from the other days of the Sefirah in that the harsh forces of "din" that struck down the students of Rabbi Akiva were ameliorated? We discuss this at length in the sefer *Kedai Hu Rabbi Shimon* (33). We explain that it is entirely in the merit of Rabbi Akiva. Although, he lost all of his 24,000 disciples that he had nurtured for 24 years, during which he did not return home; nevertheless, he did not despair or lose hope. He remained steadfast in his tremendous trust in Hashem and proceeded to ordain new disciples on Lag BaOmer. As a result, he elicited the name of protection and security to mitigate the forces of "din," thereby protecting the new disciples and enabling them to thrive.

The Life of Yaakov Avinu Was Shortened by 33 Years

As it is the nature of Torah to be elucidated in seventy different ways, I would like to present a novel explanation

to our royal audience. To explain how Rabbi Akiva was able to sweeten the forces of "din" on Lag BaOmer, let us refer to the pesukim in parshas Vayigash (*Bereishis* 47, 8): **"וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל יַעֲקֹב כִּמּוֹה יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֶּיךָ, וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל פַּרְעֹה יָמֵי שְׁנֵי מַגֻּרֵי שְׁלוֹשִׁים וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה, מֵעַט וּרְעִים הָיוּ יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֶּי, וְלֹא הִשְׁיִגוּ אֶת יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי אֲבוֹתַי בְּיָמַי."** **Pharaoh said to Yaakov, "How many are the days of the years of your life?" Yaakov said to Pharaoh, "The days of the years of my sojourns have been one hundred and thirty years; few and bad have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not reached the days of the years of the lives of my forefathers in the days of their sojourns."** In the Tosafists' commentary *Da'as Zekeinim*, they present an incredible idea based on the Midrash:

"בשעה שאמר יעקב מעט ורעים היו, אמר לו הקב"ה אני מלטתך מעט ומלבן והחזרתך לך דינה גם יוסף, ואתה מתרעם על חייך שהם מעט ורעים, חייך שמונין התיבות שיש מן 'וַיֹּאמֶר' עד 'בְּיָמֵי מַגֻּרֵיהֶם', כך יחסרו משנותיך, שלא תחיה כחיי יצחק אביך, והם ל"ג תיבות, ובמנין זה נחסרו מחייו, שהרי יצחק חי ק"פ שנה ויעקב לא חי אלא קמ"ז."

HKB"H takes issue with Yaakov for describing the days of his life as "few and bad." He points out that He saved Yaakov from Eisav and Lavan and returned both Dinah and Yosef to him. As a consequence, HKB"H decrees that He will shorten Yaakov's life by the same number of years as the number of words in these verses beginning from "וַיֹּאמֶר" until **"בְּיָמֵי מַגֻּרֵיהֶם"**. In other words, he will not live to be one hundred and eighty years old as his father Yitzchak did; rather, he will only live to be 147 years old. Just as there are 33 words in those verses, so, too, his life will be shortened by 33 years.

An interesting question is posed in the name of Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, ztz"l. He wonders why Yaakov was punished even for Pharaoh's words which are contained within the 33 words in those pesukim. Seemingly, he should only be held accountable for his own response to Pharaoh. He resolves his inquiry based on the commentary of the *Da'as Zekeinim* (ibid.):

"כמוה ימי שני חייך. בשט לפי שראהו זקן מאוד, ושערות ראשו זקנו לבנות מרוב הזקנה שאל כן, והוא ענהו ימי מגורי שלשים ומאת שנה מעט ורעים, כלומר מעטים הם שנותי, אלא מתוך רעות שהיה לי קפצה עלי זקנה."

Yaakov appeared to Pharaoh to be very old—his hair and beard were white suggesting old age. This prompted

Let us suggest a reason why Rabbi Akiva was the one who merited teaching Yisrael that no matter what happens, we should always believe: **“Everything the Merciful One does is for the best.”** In Likutei Torah (Vayechi), the Arizal reveals to us that Rabbi Akiva was a “nitzotz”—a spark from the neshamah—of Yaakov Avinu. This is alluded to in the passuk where Yaakov Avinu blesses Yosef (Bereishis 49,24): **“מִיַּדֵּי אֲבִיר יַעֲקֹב מִשָּׁם רוּעָה אֲבוֹן: מִיַּדֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל—from the hands of the Protector of Yaakov—from there, shepherd of the stone of Yisroel.** The words **“אֲבִיר יַעֲקֹב”** are an anagram of **“רַבִּי יַעֲקֹב”**, i.e., both sets of words contain the same letters rearranged in a different order.

This fact is described in greater detail in Seder HaDOrOs quoting the Arizal’s Sefer HaGilgulim (p. 25, column 2). Just as Yaakov shepherded his father-in-law Lavan’s sheep, so, too, Rabbi Akiva was a shepherd for his father-in-law, Kalba Savua; just like Yaakov had two wives—Rachel and Leah—so, too, did Rabbi Akiva—Rachel the daughter of Kalba Savua and the wife of Turnusropus after she converted; just as Rabbi Akiva was a “nitzotz” of Yaakov Avinu, so, too, his wife Rachel was a “nitzotz” of Rachel Imeinu, Yaakov’s wife.

So, since Rabbi Akiva was a “nitzotz” of Yaakov Avinu, he had a vested interest in making amends for Yaakov’s ill-fated comment to Pharaoh: **“Few and bad have been the days of the years of my life.”** As we have learned, Yaakov taught all of Yisrael in Egypt that every calamity conceals some benefit; so, too, Rabbi Akiva, Yaakov Avinu’s “nitzotz,” taught all of Yisrael: **“לְעוֹלָם יִהְיֶה אָדָם רָגִיל לֹמֵר כָּל דְּעֵבִיד רַחֲמָנָא לְטַב עֵבִיד”**—**one should always be in the habit of saying, “All the Merciful One does is for the best.”** Both messages are essentially the same. This explains magnificently the deeper significance of Rabbi Akiva’s remarks at the time of his death (ibid. 61b):

“בְּשַׁעָה שֶׁהוֹצִיאֻ אוֹת רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא לְהַרְיִגָה זְמַן קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע הָיָה, וְהָיָה סוֹרְקִים אֶת בְּשָׂרוֹ בְּמַסְרָקוֹת שֶׁל בְּרַזֵּל וְהָיָה מוֹקְבֵל עָלָיו עוֹל מַלְכוּת שָׁמַיִם, אָמְרוּ לוֹ תַלְמִידָיו רַבִּינוּ עַד כָּאֵן, אָמַר לָהֶם כָּל יְמֵי הַיִּיְתִי מִצְטַעֵר עַל פְּסוּקַיִךְ זֶה, בְּכָל נַפְשִׁי, אֲפִילוֹ נוֹטֵל אֶת נִשְׁמַתְךָ, אָמַרְתִּי מוֹתִי יָבוֹא לִידֵי וְאֲקִיִּימוֹ, וְעַכְשָׁיו שָׂבָא לִידֵי לֹא אֲקִיִּימוֹ, הִיָּה מֵאֲרִיךְ בְּאֶחָד עַד שִׁיְצֵאתָ נִשְׁמַתּוֹ בְּאֶחָד, יֵצֵאתָ בְּתַקְוָה וְאָמַרְתָּ, אֲשֶׁרִיךְ רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא שִׁיְצֵאתָ נִשְׁמַתְךָ בְּאֶחָד.”

When Rabbi Akiva was taken out to be executed, it was the time to recite Krias Shema. They were combing his flesh with iron combs, yet he was accepting upon himself “ol malchus Shamayim” (the yoke of heavenly

sovereignty). **His students said to him, “Our teacher, even to this extent?” He said to them, “All my days, I was troubled by this verse—‘with all your soul’—even if He takes your soul. I thought to myself: When will I have the opportunity to fulfill this verse? Now, that I have the opportunity, should I not fulfill it?!” He lingered on the word “echad” until his neshamah departed with the utterance “echad.” A heavenly voice called out and proclaimed, “Praiseworthy are you, Rabbi Akiva, that your soul departed as you said ‘echad.”**

Here is an explanation in keeping with our current discussion. As a “nitzotz” of Yaakov Avinu, he yearned his entire life to sacrifice his life lovingly with the utterance: **“שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד”**—proclaiming the oneness of Hashem sincerely and unequivocally—acknowledging that even Hashem’s “din” is in fact “rachamim.” For, he wished to make amends for Yaakov’s unfortunate remark to Pharaoh: **“Few and bad have been the days of the years of my life.”** Therefore, he lingered on the word “echad” while dying, so that he could accept the torture with ahavah—demonstrating his true love of Hashem. This prompted the heavenly voice to come and proclaim: **“Praiseworthy are you, Rabbi Akiva, that your soul departed as you said ‘echad.”**

ג'ל ע"ד Yaakov Avinu Erected as an Allusion to Krias Shema

Following this line of reasoning, we can now proceed to explain how Rabbi Akiva, a “nitzotz” of Yaakov Avinu, managed to ameliorate the forces of “din” on Lag BaOmer thereby preventing the deaths of his new disciples. We will rely on a fantastic idea presented in the wonderful Derashos of the Chasam Sofer (Part II). There, he explains the allusion inherent in the mound of stones—the **ג'ל ע"ד**—erected by Yaakov Avinu as a barrier between himself and Lavan HaArami. That mound alluded to the declaration of Oneness of Krias Shema: **“שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל הוִי"ה אֱלֹהֵינוּ הוִי"ה אֶחָד”**.

Here is the explanation. The passuk **“שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל”** contains 25 letters; however, the name **Havaya** is mentioned twice in this passuk. As we know, it is prohibited to pronounce this name as it is written; instead, we read it as **אדני**. Thus, if we add the eight letters of the two names **אדני**, the total of letters in the passuk adds up to 33. Additionally, two letters

in this passuk are written as enlarged letters—the “**ayin**” of the word שמ”ע and the “**dalet**” of the word אחד. This then is the allusion inherent in the ג”ל ע”ד erected by Yaakov Avinu. It symbolized the oneness and unity of Krias Shema—which contains ג”ל (33) letters including the enlarged ע”ד—which was subsequently instituted by Yaakov Avinu. Both were meant to protect us from Lavan HaArami and all of his evil forces and cohorts.

We can now understand how Rabbi Akiva succeeded in mitigating the forces of “din” on Lag BaOmer. On that day, the deaths of his 24,000 disciples ceased. Instead of despairing and succumbing to grief over the tremendous loss, he found strength in the declaration of Krias Shema, a form of ג”ל ע”ד. He maintained his sincere emunah that both the name **Havaya**—representing “midas harachamim”—and the name **Elokim**—representing “midas hadin”—both actually represent total “rachamim”—divine mercy. In other words: “הוי”ה אחד”. That sincere emunah transformed the “din” to complete “rachamim,” the understanding and belief that “ה’ אלקינו ה’ אחד”.

Thus, the insights of the Chasam Sofer and the Arizal go hand in hand fantastically. Yaakov Avinu erected the ג”ל ע”ד to prepare for the events that would transpire in the future on ל”ג BaOmer. Since Lavan HaArami, the root of tumah, planned to destroy everything, he triggered the “din” that killed the 24,000 disciples of Rabbi Akiva that died between Pesach and Lag BaOmer. Therefore, Yaakov Avinu preempted him with the expression of unity symbolized by the ג”ל ע”ד. This enabled his “nitzotz,” Rabbi Akiva, to accept his terrible loss while remaining steadfast in his love of Hashem and his

emunah in keeping with the declaration: “שמע ישראל ה’ אלקינו ה’ אחד”. Thus, the effects of the ג”ל ע”ד were revealed on Lag BaOmer by removing the forces of “din” from the new disciples who illuminated the entire world with their Torah.

We now have cause to rejoice, for we have achieved a better understanding of the allusion presented by the Chasam Sofer regarding ל”ג BaOmer. He pointed out that the gematria of the two letters למ”ד גמ”ל equals **147**, the number of years Yaakov Avinu lived. As explained, Yaakov realized that he needed to make amends for the ל”ג (**33**) years that his life had been shortened because of his ill-fated remark to Pharaoh. Hence, he erected the ג”ל ע”ד symbolizing the declaration of unity of “שמע ישראל” in preparation for Lag BaOmer. This tikun was accomplished by Rabbi Akiva, his “nitzotz,” who employed the unity of Krias Shema on ל”ג BaOmer effectuated by the ג”ל ע”ד. Therefore, the 147 years of Yaakov’s life that were rectified on ל”ג BaOmer are alluded to by the two letters למ”ד גמ”ל.

We will conclude with one final thought as to why the disciples of Rabbi Akiva ceased to die on Lag BaOmer. We have learned in the Gemara (Ta’anis 5b): “יעקב אבינו לא מת”—**Yaakov Avinu did not die**. Therefore, on ל”ג BaOmer—when Rabbi Akiva provided the tikun for Yaakov’s life, with the declaration of unity of Krias Shema symbolized by the ג”ל ע”ד—the kedushah of Yaakov Avinu was evoked. Just as he never died, so, too, his descendants, Rabbi Akiva’s disciples, stopped dying. This can be inferred from the language employed by the Chasam Sofer: **The gematria of למ”ד גמ”ל equals the 147 years of Yaakov Avinu, a”h, who never died.**

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