

TorahFax

Rabbi Zalmen Marazov

Monday, Iyar 17, 5783 (Hakhel Year) 32nd Sefirah / May 8, 2023

Tonight (Monday night) and Tuesday is Lag B'Omer – the 33rd day of the counting of the Omer. It is a day associated with two episodes which took place with two of the greatest sages and leaders of their generation, Rabbi Akiva, and his student, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

Lag B'Omer is related to Rabbi Akiva because a plague which claimed the lives of thousands (24,000) of Rabbi Akiva's students, miraculously stopped on Lag B'Omer. As a result, this day is celebrated each year with great joy and festivities. It has special significance for children and students, as the miracle was associated with his students.

Weddings are not held during most of the Sefirah days, between Pesach and Shavuot. However, due to the stoppage of the plague on this day, Lag B'Omer is such a joyous day that weddings are performed on this day.

Rabbi Akiva lived about 2,000 years ago, at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, when the land of Israel was occupied by the Romans. Rabbi Akiva was one of the "Ten Martyrs." He was brutally murdered by the Romans for teaching Torah.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, or as he is commonly called by the acronym of his name, "Rashbi," passed away on Lag B'Omer. He and his son, Rabbi Elazar, are buried in Meron, Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Jews visit Rabbi Shimon's gravesite on Lag B'Omer. Bonfires are lit in Meron and throughout Israel on Lag B'Omer, in honor of

Rabbi Shimon. There are festivities, dancing, and parades in Israel and throughout the world in honor of the Yartzeit (day of passing) of Rabbi Shimon.

Last year, unfortunately, 45 people died and 150 were injured in a stampede at the festivities in Miron,

Israel, on Lag B'Omer. May their souls rest in peace in Gan Eden.

Q. Why is the day of Rabbi Shimon's passing a joyous day? Shouldn't it be a sad day?

A. On the day of his passing, Rabbi Shimon revealed to his disciples the deepest secrets of the Torah and mystical teachings of Kaballah. On his last day in this world, he accomplished the greatest level of holiness a human can accomplish. Rabbi Shimon instructed his disciples to mark the day of his passing as a day of joy and happiness. May the Merit of Rabbi Shimon's holiness bring G-d's blessings to all.

Q. Why are bonfires lit in honor of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai?

A. The Zohar says that on the day Rabbi Shimon died, a great light of endless joy and holiness filled the day because of the Torah secrets he revealed to his students. A fire surrounded the house, preventing anyone but his closest students from approaching, because the level of holiness was so great.

To commemorate this great spiritual light and holiness of this special day, bonfires are lit on Lag B'Omer.

Tuesday, Iyar 18, 5783 (Hakhel Year) 33rd Sefirah / May 9, 2023

Today is Lag B'Omer. It is the day of passing of the great Talmudic sage, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai.

In Israel, especially in Miron, where Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was laid to rest, there are hundreds of thousands of people celebrating on this day his illustrious life and his great accomplishments.

Rabbi Shimon lived in Israel at the time when the Romans occupied it. The decrees against Jews were harsh. Rabbi Shimon spoke out against the Roman government and as a result he was sentenced to death. He and his son, Rabbi Eliezer, hid in a cave for 13 years. No one knew where they were.

G-d performed a miracle, and a carob tree grew at the entrance of the cave and a spring of water which supplied them with sustenance for all these years.

When they came out of the cave and Rabbi Shimon's father-in-law saw him and realized how much he suffered, he said, "Wow is to me that I see you so physically run down." Rabbi Shimon replied, "Fortunate that you see me like this." Rabbi Shimon and his son, during these thirteen years of physical suffering, attained such great spiritual heights in their Torah studies and holiness which no one else was able to achieve.

Q. Why is the day called Lag B'Omer?

A. "Lag" is a combination of two Hebrew letters, Lamed & Gimmel which spell Lag. Each Hebrew letter has a numerical value; "Lamed" = 30 & "Gimel" = 3. Together they add up to 33. Lag B'Omer is on the 33rd day of the counting of the Omer. It is a day of joy and festivities, where children are taken out on parades and outings.

Rabbi Shimon was a student of Rabbi Akiva. It was Rabbi Akiva who said that "Love your fellow like yourself," is one of the greatest mitzvot in the Torah.

Rabbi Shimon said: "There are three crowns: the crown of the Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty; But the crown of a good name excels above them all."

He also said, "One should rather jump into a fiery furnace than offend someone in public."

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai gives the following parable to explain how we are all responsible for each other. A boat filled with people was sailing on the open seas, when one of the passengers took a sharp tool and began making a hole under his seat.

"What are you doing? Stop!" The other people on the boat shouted hysterically. The man replied, "What business is it of yours? I paid for my seat. I'm making a hole under my seat!"

The other passengers replied, "Fool! Don't you realize that by drilling a hole under your seat, you will flood the boat and we all will drown?!" Similarly, said Rabbi Shimon, every good or negative act we do affects not only us but the entire world. May their holy memories be a blessing to all. Amen

Thursday, Iyar 20, 5783 (Hakhel Year) 35th Sefirah / May 11, 2023

This Shabbat we read the last two Parshiot in the Book of Vayikra (Leviticus) – Parshat B'Har & Parshat B'Chukotei.

Parshat B'chukotei begins with G-d telling the Jewish people, "If in My statutes you will walk, and My commandments you will keep, then I will give you rain in the right time, the Land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will produce fruit... you shall eat your bread with satiety and dwell in safety in your land. And I will give peace to the land and you shall not be afraid... You will chase away your enemies and they will fall by their own swords... I will place My dwelling in your midst... I will walk among you. I will be your G-d and you will be My people!"

G-d promises the Jewish people that if they observe the commandments, they will merit His many blessings. Later in the Parsha the Torah details the many sufferings which the Jewish people will experience if, G-d forbid, they do not obey the commandments.

The blessings take up 10 verses and the punishments over 25 verses. In reality, the blessings outnumber the punishments as they are general blessings which include many individual blessings.

The purpose of mentioning the punishments is to impress upon us the importance of obeying the mitzvot, thus avoiding the punishments, as G-d truly wants to bless us always.

G-d says, "And I will walk among you." This is indeed a special blessing to recognize that G-d walks among us at all times – in good times as well as in difficult times.

The following tale explains it beautifully and is worthwhile giving some thought when we go through difficult periods in life, which we all go through one time or another.

A person, who through his lifetime experienced difficult periods, returned his soul to its maker, when the time came. In heaven he was shown a replay of his entire life. He was shown all the steps he took throughout his life; where he went and what he did. To his amazement he saw four footsteps, instead of only two. "But I have only two feet? Why do I always see four footsteps?" he asked the angel.

"Two are yours. The other two are G-d's. He walked with you wherever you went!" replied the angel.

"But why, as I watch the difficult times in my life and the difficult steps I went through, I see only two footsteps? Where was G-d then?"

The angel looked at him and smiled, "You're mistaken. The two footsteps you see during your difficult journeys through life are not yours! They are G-d's footsteps! During those times G-d carried you!"

A powerful message indeed worth remembering!

Friday, Iyar 21, 5783 (Hakhel Year) 36th Sefirah / May 12, 2023

Shabbat we read the two final Parshiot of Leviticus (Vayikra); B'Har & B'Chukotei

Parshat B'Har begins with the mitzvah of letting fields rest during Shemita (Sabbatical year): "And G-d spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai saying: Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: When you come into the land which I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath unto the L-rd. Six years you shall sow your field and six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its produce. But a Sabbath of solemn rest shall be in the seventh year."

In reply to the question, "What shall we eat the seventh year?" G-d promises, "I will command My blessings upon you in the sixth year and the earth will produce food for the three years." Thus, observing the Sabbatical year will in fact give a person more rather than less.

The number seven is significant in Judaism. Shabbat is the seventh day of the week. The seventh year is Shemitah. After seven Shemitah years, there is the year of "Yovel" - "Jubilee". In preparation for receiving the Torah on Shavuot, which is in two weeks, we count Sefirah for seven weeks. Indeed, our sages say, "The seventh is favored". Moshe, who was chosen to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai, and the greatest of all the prophets, was the seventh generation from Abraham.

The patriarchs (Abraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov) and matriarchs (Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, Leah), the foundation of the Jewish people, total seven.

The reason for resting on the Sabbatical Year is not only for the field to have a rest, but for Jews to be able to devote that year to Torah study and spiritual elevation.

Another reason why the Torah prohibits work in the fields during the sabbatical year is to strengthen one's reliance (Betachon) in G-d. During the other six years one may attribute their financial success to their own hard work. By resting during the seventh year, we must rely completely on G-d. Thus, one's faith in G-d becomes stronger.

Also, through the Sabbatical year we can better appreciate the needs of the poor who don't have their own field and must continuously rely on the mercy and generosity of others. This leads the field owner to a better understanding of the importance of helping the needy.

The Parsha ends with the mitzvah of observing Shabbat. "My Shabbat you shall keep... I am the L-rd." Thus, the beginning of the Parsha (Shemittah) and the end of the Parsha (Shabbat) have something in common. By observing the day of Shabbat, and the Sabbatical year, we receive G-d's continued blessings. Our sages say, "A person's livelihood is determined on Rosh Hashana for the entire year, except for the expenses for Shabbat, the holidays and the expenses for the children's Torah education. The more one spends in honor of Shabbat and the holidays and to teach children Torah, the more G-d pays back in return."