

Choosing Life

This week we read Parshas Emor. Most years, Parshas Emor is read right around Lag B'Omer and that juxtaposition can be a bit jarring.

The Parsha begins with Mitzvahs relating to Kohanim, including the commandment that they not come into contact with the dead with the exception of close family members. The Kohen Gadol (High Priest) is not to become impure even for very close family members.

Although the Torah does not explicitly say the reason, it seems that life is associated with Hashem and holiness, and death is related to disassociation with Hashem. Thus, we find that the Torah, when it exhorts us to choose to observe the Torah, frames it as "Choose life!" The Kohanim, who are designated as the ones to serve Hashem in the Mishkan and Bais Hamikdash, are therefore enjoined to maintain their closeness with Hashem by avoiding that which is not "life."

The celebration of Lag B'Omer on the other hand, seemingly has at its core the very opposite.

Last week we "spoke" about the mourning of the Sefira period. On Lag B'Omer, according to some traditions, the students of Rabbi Akiva stopped dying, and, therefore, the mourning comes to an end*¹. This explains why the mourning practices cease on this day, and why it is then permitted to give a three-year-old his first haircut, and it is permitted to hold a wedding. But this explanation does not in itself offer any cause for celebration. It merely explains why celebratory events are once again permitted. When Shiva comes to an end, the mourner is supposed to get up and pull himself together and try get on with life. But, we don't expect him to engage in wild dancing and partying.

¹ *) Actually, there are differing opinions of exactly when the mourning period is meant to be observed, and when the students stopped dying. One opinion is that they started dying on the second day of Pesach and it continued for 33 days until Lag B'Omer. Another opinion is that it began on Rosh Chodesh Iyar and ended 33 days later three days before Shavuos. There are those who follow both opinions and observe the mourning practices from Pesach until just before Shavuos. Everyone observes Lag B'Omer, though. This reinforces the question of what the celebration is about, if according to some opinions it is not the day the dying ended. Well, then, what are they celebrating?



For that we need the other reason for the celebration - the association of this day with Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Lag B'Omer is referred to as Hilula d'RaShBI – the day of the passing of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. This seems to be a strange cause for celebration! We don't celebrate the passing of other great Tzadikim in this way. Why Lag B'Omer. And especially in the week following Parshas Emor which seems to imply that death and serving Hashem are to some degree incompatible, why are we celebrating the passing of Rabbi Shimon? How are we to understand the huge crowds (well, in other years, anyway) gathering at the resting place of Rabbi Shimon to dance all night and to barbeque, on a Yahrzeit? This is not normal cemetery comportment?

There are those who suggest a different explanation of the celebration of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai on this day. It is not only the day of his passing, but also, in a sense, the day of his "birth" The Gemara concludes the story of the dying of Rabbi Akiva's students by saying that Rabbi Akivah then came to the south and with five students whom he found there he reestablished the entire Oral Law of the Torah. Rabbi Shimon is one of the five students listed there. (The others are Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Yosi and Rabbi Elazar Ben Shamua.) Accordingly, they say, Rabbi Shimon's setting out on the path of learning Torah and achieving greatness began on Lag B'Omer when the 24,00 students stopped dying and Rabbi set out to find himself new students.

This explanation has several difficulties with it. 1) We don't find that celebration of the anniversary of the beginning of Torah study of any other great Torah scholar. 2) This explanation requires us to assume that Rabbi Akiva found his new students on the very same day that the students stopped dying, i.e. Rabbi Akiva went to funerals in the morning and by that afternoon he had already lined up five new promising students. The text of the Gemara does not seem to suggest that. It uses wording like "until Rabbi Akiva came to our Rabbis who were in the south.." implying that there was time and travel involved between the two events. Had it been that seamless it probably would have been worded differently.

That leaves with the original explanation that Lag B'Omer is related to Rabbi Shimon's passing, and also brings us back to the question of why celebrate a death?

The answer actually can be found in Rabbi Shimon's own words. He requested that the day be a day of rejoicing for him, because on this day he reached the state of oneness with Hashem in the fullest sense. For him this was the ultimate joy, and he asked that everyone partake in his joy.



Even this, requires further explanation. How does Rabbi Shimon's joy in his achieving great heights of connectedness to Hashem translate to our feeling joyous on this day? We can't even imagine what that state feels like, let alone feel celebratory about someone else having achieved it in the distant past. A fuller appreciation of this requires a more complete understanding of what sets Rabbi Shimon apart from all the other sages of his era and throughout history and how that makes a real difference to us.

We know Rabbi Shimon as the author of the Zohar. What did he accomplish with that? He made it possible (initially for the select few, but ultimately as a result of the Arizal, Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe and the following Rebbes) for people, creatures of flesh and blood, to conceive of G-dliness, to see it as reality in our world and not just an abstract concept, and to synthesize that into our daily material existence.

When the Rebbe RaShaB, the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Sholom Ber, founded the famous Lubavitcher Yeshiva, he appointed to the "faculty" senior Chasidim from whom he expected not only erudition and the ability to deliver scholarly lectures, but that they would be role models and embodiments of the teachings of Torah and Chasidus. On one occasion, a Mashpia ("spiritual guide" is a poor translation) was davening with great deliberation and was in deep meditation on the sublime Oneness of Hashem expressed in Shma Yisroel when he saw a Yeshiva student walk by with a torn shoe. He immediately called him over, gave him some money and told him to buy new shoes. Other students who witnessed this waited for him to finish davening several hours later and asked him, "How could you interrupt your intense davening in middle of reciting Shma to give this student some money?" He responded, "Providing a poor student with the proper shoes that he needs, is the essence of the sublime Oneness of Hashem."

Kabalah and Chasidus teach us that the material world is a veneer and the true reality is the G-dliness that is hidden under that veneer. The goal is to bring that to the surface. G-d is not off in some heaven somewhere; He is here in the act of caring for another person and seeing to it that he has shoes. This is what Rabbi Shimon introduced to the world and what he experienced on that Lag B'Omer. He actually felt that oneness with Hashem. And, he shared with us by inviting, actually demanding, that we celebrate with him.

On Lag B'Omer we are not celebrating a death. We are celebrating the G-dly life which courses through the inanimate "dead" material world. It is always there because it is all being called into existence constantly by Hashem's creative energy. But it was hidden



until the teachings of Rabbi Shimon and those who followed him made it plain to see even for people like us. So, “deadness” uninfused with G-dliness is to be avoided, and for Kohanim it is prohibited. But, life – true life as in “Choose Life!” – that we celebrate with Rabbi Shimon on Lag B’Omer.

Let’s make this practical for our current situation. We are more or less limited to our homes and Shul is closed. Yet the supermarkets are open. As one person put it, “We can go to Jewel, but we can’t go to Shul?” The answer is: Stores exist to feed our body and Shul is there to feed our soul. Our bodies, being physical, want to eat. Our souls, being G-dly, want to do ... what Hashem wants. And, if right now, the message from Hashem is not to go to shul (because He gave us a Mitzvah of guarding our health), our souls want to follow that. Both our Yetzer Tov and our Yetzer Hara are in a rare moment of agreement not to go to Shul. So it is not hard for us to stay out of Shul for the meanwhile. Our bodies care more about eating than what Hashem wants, so keeping the stores closed is not as easy.

Rabbi Shimon empowers us to see our daily lives through this G-dly lens. To see our confinement to home in terms of what Hashem wants from us, and the opportunity to serve Him in this way. If He wants us to celebrate Lag B’Omer this year looking at our friends over Zoom (have you ever tried BBQing over Zoom) and watching a parade out our front windows, great! We’re in! Because we want what He wants! We are one with Him!

See you all on Lag B’Omer as we celebrate together with Rabbi Shimon, who will be with us wherever we are. May our seeing past the veneer and into the true reality help remove the final barriers of Golus and enable us to celebrate in the Third Bais Hamikdash with Moshiach NOW!

