

# LAG BA-OMER - EMBRACING OUR NEIGHBORS

## *Bereshit Rabbah 61:3*

Rabbi Akiba had twelve thousand disciples from Acco to Antifras and all died in the same period. Why? Because they eyed each other as rivals. Eventually he raised seven [disciples]: the Rabbis Meir, Yehudah, Yosi, Shimon, Elazar ben Shamua, Yochanan the Cobbler, and Eliezer ben Ya'akov...

He said to them, "My sons, the first ones died specifically because they eyed each other as rivals. See to it that you do not act as they did." They arose and filled all of the Land of Israel with Torah.

שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר אֲלֵף תַּלְמִידִים הָיוּ לְרַבִּי עֲקִיבָא  
מֵעֵבֹר וְעַד אֲנְטִיפָרְס וְכֻלָּם בְּפֶרֶק אֶחָד מָתוּ.  
לָמָּה? שְׁהִיְתָה עֵינֵיהֶם צָרָה אֵלּוּ בְּאֵלּוּ.  
וּבְסוּף הָעֶמֶיד שְׁבָעָה: רַבִּי מֵאִיר וְרַבִּי יְהוּדָה,  
רַבִּי יוֹסִי וְרַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן וְרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן שְׁמוּעַ  
וְרַבִּי יוֹחָנָן הַסַּנְדֵּלָר וְרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן יַעֲקֹב...

אָמַר לָהֶם, "בְּנֵי, הָרֵאשׁוֹנִים לֹא מָתוּ אֶלָּא  
שְׁהִיְתָה עֵינֵיהֶם צָרָה אֵלּוּ לְאֵלּוּ. תִּנּוּ דְעִתְכֶם  
שְׁלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ כְּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם." עָמְדוּ וּמָלְאוּ כָּל  
אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל תּוֹרָה.

## *The Transformation of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai* by Rabbi Jonathan Muskat (excerpted)

...Many of us are familiar with the story in *Masechet Shabbat* 33b of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yose who were having a conversation about the Romans. Rabbi Yehuda said, "Look what fine projects the nation undertakes. They built marketplaces, bridges and bathhouses." Rabbi Yose didn't respond and Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai replied, "They did everything for their own benefit. They set up the marketplaces for their own pleasure and good. They built bathhouses to indulge in their own pleasure. They built bridges so that they would be able to charge tolls for using them."

Word got back to the Roman government what Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said and he became an enemy of the state and was forced to flee. Again, in this story, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai is portrayed as this extremist who may not be so careful to watch what he says and this gets him in trouble. Eventually he and his son hide in a cave for twelve years. When Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai leaves the cave, he sees some men plowing the soil and planting seeds and he turns to his son and asks, "How can people set aside *chayei ha'olam*, eternal life, and occupy themselves with *chayei sha'ah*, earthly matters?" Everywhere that the two glanced was immediately scorched. A heavenly voice said that, apparently, they don't belong out in the world and they are sent back in the cave for another year, at which point it seems that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai is transformed.

When Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his son Rabbi Elazar left the cave a year later, Rabbi Elazar saw people who busied themselves with material concerns and not with Torah. Rabbi Elazar would punish them, and Rabbi Shimon would heal them. The Gemara then tells a story about how on the eve of the Sabbath, by *bein hashemashot*, as it drew dark, they saw an elderly man hurrying to his home with two bunches of hadasim, two bunches myrtle in his hand.

They asked him, “Why do you have these two bunches of myrtle?” He responded, “I brought them to honor the Sabbath, to enjoy their aroma.” They continued the conversation and after the conversation, Rabbi Shimon said to his son: “Come and see how precious the commandments are to the people of Israel!”

At this point, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai is no longer critical of those who aren't learning Torah day and night. Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai looks for the good in people and doesn't only see their shortcomings. He is a new man, more embracing and more inclusive than he ever was before.

**Lag B'Omer** by Bracha Gewirtz (excerpted)

On *Lag B'omer*, we commemorate two things. We remember that the *talmidim* of Rebbe Akiva stopped dying, and that it's the *Yahrtzeit* of Rashbi, Rav Shimon Bar Yochai. By learning from both of these, I think we can really gain something from the message of *Lag B'omer*.

The Gemara ... tells us that the *Talmidim* of R' Akiva died [because] they didn't honor each other. They each felt that the rest of the students should be honoring them, instead of the other way round.

We know that *Sefira* (counting the omer) is the time when we are meant to be working on ourselves, and developing our ... character. I'd like to suggest that the way we can learn from the deaths of the *talmidim* (Students) is to work on getting rid of *ga'avah*, of arrogance.

I think that the message of *Lag B'omer* lies within this story of Rashbi and the deaths of R' Akiva's *talmidim*. The message is to care for others as much, if not more than we care for ourselves, as we all know that was one of Rabbi Akiva's big things. To understand, like Rabbi Shimon had to do, that sometimes we don't understand what people are doing but that doesn't make it any less right. I'll use a *mashal* (parable) from my *rebbe* in school - life is a twenty-lane highway, and every lane leads to the same exit. There are so many different approaches to *Yiddishkeit*, and the goal is to understand that being in a different lane doesn't make any of us more worthy of honor than another - we're all worthy of *kavod* and love, because at least we are all on the same highway.

I want to leave you with one last piece of food for thought. *Lamed Gimmel b'omer*, 33 days of the *Omer* (begins Wednesday night). In Hebrew, the way you tell someone to pay attention to something is “*Sim Lev*”. The Gematria of *Lev* is 32, and ultimately the message of not just *Lag B'omer* but also the entire *sefira*, is *Sim Lev* + 1. Pay attention to your fellow Jew, but do one more thing, go one extra mile to take care of him. Honor him, as the students of Rebbe Akiva didn't do to each other. Learn from Rashbi, and his ability to shift his perspective to be understanding of his fellow Jew. We're in the final stretch, counting down until we get the Torah. *Chazal* (the Rabbis) tell us *Derech Eretz Kadma L'Torah* (basic decency precedes Torah) - by learning the true message of *Sefira* and *Lag B'omer*, hopefully we'll be ready to personally receive the Torah in just a few short weeks.