
SEFIRAT HA'OMER II

Lag B'Omer and Striving for Spiritual Perfection

In the first class on Sefirat Ha'Omer, we learned that the Torah commands us to count the days from Pesach to Shavuot in order to connect the Exodus on Pesach with the Giving of the Torah on Shavuot. We also learned that there are certain practices of mourning which we adopt during the days of Sefirah (counting) in order to commemorate the deaths of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva, who died in an epidemic that ended on Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of the Omer. In this class, we will learn about Lag B'Omer itself – why it is a festive day, and how it is celebrated. We will also examine how we can use the Sefirah period to achieve personal growth.

This class will address the following questions:

- What is Lag B'Omer and why do we celebrate on that day? Who was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and why is his death a reason for happiness?
- What are the reasons for some of the customs of Lag B'Omer?
- Why is the seven-week period from Pesach to Shavuot especially suited for personal development and growth?

Class Outline:

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Section II.	Using the Sefirah Period to Achieve Spiritual Perfection Part A. Seven Cycles of Seven Midot Part B. Forty-Eight Ways to Acquire Torah Part C. New Heights in Spiritual Attainment

INTRODUCTION. AN UNUSUAL VENUE FOR CELEBRATION

Every spring in Israel, a massive celebration takes place on the 33rd day of the Omer, known as Lag B'Omer for the Hebrew letters *lamed-gimmel*, whose numerical value is thirty-three. (In the Hebrew alphabet, each letter is assigned a numerical value, beginning with the values of one to ten for the first ten letters, followed by twenty, thirty, and so forth for each subsequent letter.) The scope of the festivities is astonishing to a first-time visitor; even those familiar with Lag B'Omer from outside the country are probably used to little more than a bonfire and perhaps a barbecue. But in Israel, excitement builds as the date approaches. The focus of the festivities is Meron, a small village in the north of Israel where the famous sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is buried. Literally hundreds of thousands of people flock to Meron for Lag B'Omer.

In Israel, preparations for the celebration of Lag B'Omer in 2009 began early. The anniversary of the passing of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai has always been associated with special gatherings around the mystical sage's resting place in Meron in northern Israel. Known as the Rashbi, Rav Shimon bar Yochai is credited with authoring the foundational Kabbalistic text of the Zohar. Before his passing, he instructed his students to celebrate the day as heralding the dissemination of the Torah's esoteric teachings. Over the last few decades, an increasing number of Jews of all backgrounds and nationalities have made the trek to the gravesite. According to official Israeli reports, almost half a million people visited Meron in the days leading up to the holiday; more than 250,000 were there as of midnight Monday, the night of Lag B'Omer itself.

What is the significance of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's death on Lag B'Omer and what is there to rejoice about it? Why, in fact, is Lag B'Omer considered a festive day that is commemorated worldwide? An investigation of the relevant sources will reveal that Lag B'Omer is a day of great spiritual significance and astonishing depth.

SECTION I. LAG B'OMER

Lag B'Omer is a day of festivity in contrast to the reduced joy starting from the onset of the Sefirah period. The mourning practices of the Sefirah are suspended or terminated on Lag B'Omer, and it is treated as a quasi-festival. Why is this a happy day?

PART A. RABBI AKIVA'S STUDENTS STOPPED DYING

1. Avraham Ben Natan HaYarchei, *Sefer HaManhig*, Vol. II, p. 538 – On the 33rd day of counting the Omer, the epidemic rampant among Rabbi Akiva's students abruptly ceased.

I heard in the name of Rabbi Zerachiah HaLevi from Gerona that he found written in an ancient book which came from Spain that they [only] died from Pesach until "Pros" Atzeret ... fifteen days before Atzeret, [which is] Lag B'Omer.

ושמעתי בשם ר' זרחיה הלוי ז"ל מגירונדא, שמצאו כתוב בספר ישן הבא מספרד שמתו מפסח עד פרום עצרת...ט"ו יום קודם העצרת וזהו ל"ג בעומר.

To appreciate the significance of this aspect of Lag B'Omer, we must recognize that the deaths of 24,000 great Torah scholars all at once represented a colossal tragedy, one that we are barely capable of imagining. It was the way that Rabbi Akiva responded to that tragedy, the way that he brought Torah back to life after such a devastating loss, that imbued the day of Lag B'Omer with such joy.

2. **Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz, The Editor's View, ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications, p. 271 – The determination and the capacity for renewal demonstrated by Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.**

Rabbi Akiva was the greatest sage of his generation; it is said that he was the *shoresh* (source) of *Torah Sheba'al Peh* (the Oral Tradition). The line of transmission of the Torah from Sinai to future generations ran through him and his students. When his 24,000 students were decimated, it caused a major depression. How would the chain continue? Who would provide the light of Torah to future generations? How could they ever be replaced? How could a grieving people on the run from Roman persecution be consoled for the loss of so many great men so crucial to the spiritual survival of the nation?

The urge to say, "It's all over," must have been overwhelming. The less faithful and more pessimistic among them must have been ready to give up. But Rabbi Akiva recovered from his devastating loss to transmit the Torah through a new group of five students. It was on Lag B'Omer that Rabbi Akiva began teaching Torah to these new *talmidim*. The seeds he planted that day, which ultimately produced the massive rejuvenation of Torah, are the reasons for celebrating on Lag B'Omer. On this day we commemorate the renewal. We celebrate the determination. We cheer the cessation of the plague. We foresee the future bright with hope and determination. As the centuries pass, and as the Romans of every period seek our destruction and annihilation, we look to Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai for inspiration. We note how they looked the enemy in the face and persevered, thus ensuring that our nation and our Torah are alive and flourishing to this very day. In the wake of a tragedy that would have felled lesser people, Rabbi Akiva strengthened himself and set about ensuring that the chain remains unbroken.

PART B. RABBI SHIMON BAR YOCHAI AND THE REVELATION OF THE ZOHAR

Another aspect of the festivity of Lag B'Omer has to do with the fact that the great scholar Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai died on that day. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was the greatest scholar of Kabbalah (mysticism) who ever lived. He was famous for hiding from the Romans for thirteen years in a cave where he studied Torah with his son (see Shabbat 33b, and Ben Yehoyada *ibid.*) Rabbi Shimon died on Lag B'Omer, and on that day he revealed many of the deepest ideas of the Kabbalah to his students. They recorded his teachings in a book known as the Zohar, the Light.

1. **Zohar, Idra Zuta, Devarim, Parshat Ha'azinu, p. 296 – Revelation of the Zohar.**

On the day that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was to leave this world, he organized his teachings. His friends came to his room and he said to them, "Now is a time of favor. I can now reveal to you holy things that have not been revealed until now." ... All that day the fire never left his room, and there was no one who was able to approach as the light and the fire were surrounding him ... [After he passed away, and they came to bury him] the fire flew into the air and danced before him. A voice was heard [from Heaven] saying, "Come and gather [every year] for the *hilulah* (anniversary) of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai."

"אותו יום ביקש רבי שמעון בר יוחאי להסתלק מן העולם, והיה מסדר דבריו. נתכנסו החברים לביתו, והוא אמר להם: עתה שעת רצון היא, מיילים קדושות שלא גיליתי עד עתה רצוני לגלותן ... כל ההוא יומא לא אפסיק אשא מן ביתא, ולא הוה מאן דמטי לגביה, דלא יכילו דנהורא ואשא הוה בסוחרניה... ואשא הוה להיט קמיה שמעו קלא עולו ואתו ואתכנשו להילולא דרבי שמעון.

While this theme of Lag B'Omer seems, on the surface, to be unrelated to the first, it is noteworthy that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was one of the five students whom Rabbi Akiva taught after the initial 24,000 died. Thus, celebrating Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's contribution to the Torah also amounts to celebrating the continuation of Rabbi Akiva's legacy after the devastating plague.

2. **Rabbi Yaakov Chaim Sofer, Kaf HaChaim 493:26 – Reasons for the joy and festivity: after the epidemic ended, Rabbi Akiva continued to teach five new students, one of whom was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.**

Rabbi Chaim Vital wrote that the reason for the rejoicing is for the students that Rabbi Akiva added afterwards, who did not die like those [first twenty-four thousand]...

I wrote this to teach that there is a basis to the custom mentioned above [to go to Meron and celebrate on Lag B'Omer], particularly because Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was one of the five great students of Rabbi Akiva, and therefore his time of happiness is Lag B'Omer.

מיהו הפר"ח ... כתב הטעם שהשמחה היא על אותם תלמידים שהוסיף אח"כ ר"ע שלא מתו כאלו יעו"ש...

וכתבתי כל זה להורות כי יש שורש במנהג הזה הנז' ובפרט כי רשב"י ע"ה הוא מה' תלמידיו גדולים של ר"ע ולכן זמן שמחתו ביום ל"ג בעומר... עכ"ל.

It is interesting to note that the death of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai coincided with the same day that the Jewish people first received the manna in the desert.

3. **Chasam Sofer, Responsa, Yoreh Deah 233 – On the 33rd day following the Exodus from Egypt, when the food provisions ran out, the manna began to fall.**

It says in the Midrash that from the time the Jews finished the food that they brought out from Egypt they went for three days without bread, and afterwards the manna began to fall. [If we calculate the days] the manna therefore began to fall on Lag B'Omer.

וכפי דאי' במדרש שמיום שכלה החררה שהוציאו ממצרים הלכו ג' ימים בלא לחם ואח"כ ירד המן א"כ הי' הורדת המן ביום ל"ג בעומר.

4. **Rabbi Gedalya Schorr, Ohr Gedalyahu, Moadim p. 153 – Connection of the manna to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai: he had risen to the level of holiness of the generation of the Exodus, who ate manna.**

Lag B'Omer is the anniversary of the death of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. He was on the level of those who ate manna, as he resided in a cave for fourteen years and God provided him with water and a carob tree with which he was nourished for all those years. It was through Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai that the Oral Torah was revealed, as he was a student of Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva was the foundation of the Oral Law – every anonymous statement of Tannaim is ascribed to the opinion of Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was Rabbi Akiva's student, and the revelation of the secret part of the Torah came

בל"ג בעומר הילולא דרשב"י, רשב"י הי' בבחינת אוכל המן, שהי' במערה י"ד שנה ונודמן לו מן השמים מים ועץ חרובין שממנה הי' זן כל הימים שהי' במערה, כי רשב"י שעל ידו הי' התגלות תושבע"פ, שהי' תלמיד של רע"ק, שרע"ק הוא היסוד של תושבע"פ, כולה סתימאה אליבא דרע"ק, ורשב"י הי' תלמידו, ועל ידו הי' התגלות חלק הסוד בתורה, ולא הי' אפשר התגלות הזאת רק באופן שהי' בבחינת אוכלי המן, ולכן שייך הילולא דרשב"י דייקא לל"ג בעומר, שבאותו היום התחילה ירדת המן כמו שכבר הבאנו בשם החת"ס, ורשב"י שהי' בבחינת אוכל המן נסתלק בל"ג בעומר.

through him. It was only possible to reveal it through those who ate the manna. Therefore, it is appropriate that the death of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was on Lag B'Omer, as on that day the manna began to fall. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who was on the level of those who ate the manna, left the world on Lag B'Omer.

Just as the Jewish people were sustained in the desert by the manna, a form of sustenance that came directly from Heaven, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai also survived his years in the cave by eating Divinely provided food. This is indicative of a lofty spiritual level, which makes it fitting that the revelation of so much of the mystical part of the Torah came about through him.

PART C. LAG B'OMER CUSTOMS

As a day of great mystical significance and festivity, Lag B'Omer is associated with a number of unique customs and practices.

Since Lag B'Omer is, so to speak, the day of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, there is a common practice to conduct festivities at the location of his grave on this day.

1. **Toldot HaArizal (Sefer HaAri, 219) – Celebrating at Mt. Meron at the grave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.**

In the days of our master (Rav Yosef Karo) they agreed that the Jews would not make a big celebration on Lag B'Omer at the grave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. It seemed to our master and his Beit Din that it was degrading that people ate and danced there. [This decision was] written but not signed. That night our master dreamed about Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who said to him that a great plague would befall the people because of this decision. It was his wish that they celebrate on the anniversary of his death. The following day he tore up the decision.

בימי מרון (ר' יוסף קארו) הסכימו שלא יעשו ישראל הערביים מחול בל"ג בעומר על ציון רשב"י. ונראה למרון וב"ד שהוא זלזול שאוכלים ומרקדים, ונכתבה ולא נחתמה. בלילה חלם מרון עם הרשב"י וא"ל שתבא מגפה גדולה בעבור זו ההסכמה, כי רצונו שישמחו בהילולא, ולמחר קרע את ההסכמה.

There is a widespread custom to refrain from giving a boy his first haircut until the age of three. The first haircut of a three-year-old boy, known as an *upsheren* in Yiddish or a *chalahah* in Hebrew, is a festive occasion and one of the milestones of the child's development. While many perform the *upsheren* on the child's third birthday, it is also a common practice to wait until Lag B'Omer and conduct the *upsheren* at Meron.

2. **Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Sperling, Ta'amei HaMinhagim, p. 269 – Cutting the hair of three-year-old boys.**

Regarding the haircut which is known as *chalahah*, Rabbi Chaim Vital writes that it is "a well-known custom." It seems that this custom dates from even before the times of the Rishonim.

על ההתגלחת הנקראת בפי ההמון "חאלאקע" כותב מהרח"ו שהוא "מנהג ידוע". כנראה מנהג קדמוני עוד מהראשונים. והנה האריז"ל בא ממצרים למירון לאשר ולקיים המנהג הידוע הזה ביום משתה ושמחה.

The Arizal even came from Egypt to Meron to encourage and keep this known custom on the day of feasting and rejoicing.

Other unique Lag B'Omer practices include the lighting of bonfires, which are nearly ubiquitous in Israel on this day, and donating drink to the poor, which is intended to invoke Heavenly mercy on behalf of people who are childless.

3. Letter of Bartenura from Darche Tzion – Lighting bonfires to symbolize the light of Torah that Rabbi Shimon revealed on the last day of his life.

On the eighteenth of Iyar, the anniversary of the death of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, people come from all around and light big bonfires. In addition, they light many candles because many barren women were remembered [and became pregnant] and many sick people were cured on account of the gifts that they pledged to bring to [the grave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai at Mt. Meron].

ביום י"ח באייר יום מיתתו של רשב"י, באים מכל הסביבות ומדליקים עליה אבוקות גדולות, מלבד מה שמדליקים עליה נר תמיד שהרבה עקרות נפקדו וחולים נתרפאו בנדר ובנדבה שהתנדבו למקום ההוא.

4. Letter of Rebbe Ben Tzion of Bobov to Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Shmerler in Sefer HaMinhagim, p. 263 – Custom of *Chai Rotel*: donating drink to the needy to merit the birth a child.

I was asked by one of our people regarding this lofty custom that he heard from people in the Land of Israel that they have a fixed custom for those who have no children. They donate *Chai Rotel* (eighteen) *Rotel* (a *rotel* is three liters, i.e. a total of fifty-four liters) of drink at the grave of the godly Tanna Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai on the anniversary of his death. Therefore, I decided to make him my messenger for this mitzvah to mention these names for a blessing: Meir ben Chaya Leah with his wife Sarah bat Shaindel, that God should give them children speedily without any stumbling or damage. He will donate for this *Chai Rotel* of drink, as is the custom.

נדרשתי מאחד מאנ"ש יחיה בענין נשגב היות ששמע מפי אנשי אה"ק ת"ו שקבלה בידם סגולה לחשוכי בנים רח"ל לנדב ח"י ראטל משקה ביומא דהילולא על ציון התנא האלקי רשב"י זי"ע ועכ"י. לכן בחרתי בו לעשותו שליח מצוה להזכיר לטובה את הזוג מאיר בן חיה לאה עם זוגתו שרה בת שינדל שיפקוד השי"ת אותם בזש"ק במהרה בלי שום מכשול ונזק. וינדב עבורם ח"י ראטל משקה כנהוג.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ☞ Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of the Omer, is a highly festive occasion. One reason for its festivity is the fact that the epidemic that killed the students of Rabbi Akiva ceased on this day. Another reason is that the great mystical scholar, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, died on this day, and before his death, he revealed many secrets of the hidden Torah.
- ☞ Unique customs of Lag B'Omer include: celebrating at the grave at Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in Meron, giving a three-year-old boy his first haircut, lighting bonfires, and donating drink to the needy.

SECTION II. USING THE SEFIRAH PERIOD TO ACHIEVE SPIRITUAL PERFECTION

We have seen that there are many dimensions to the Sefirah period. It is a time of year that links the redemption of Pesach to the Giving of the Torah on Shavuot, and it is also a time to mourn the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students, along with other tragedies that transpired later in history. Both of these aspects of the Sefirah, however, point in one direction: It is a time to engage in spiritual growth and character refinement.

PART A. SEVEN CYCLES OF SEVEN MIDOT

Our mandate during Sefirat Ha'Omer is more than merely a general injunction to improve ourselves. The period of the Sefirah provides a carefully calculated and exactingly engineered framework for self-improvement. The number of forty-nine days is neither random nor coincidental; it is Divinely designed to dovetail with the set of character attributes (*midot*) which we must work on improving during this time.

1. Rabbi Yaakov Haber, Rabbi David Sedley, Sefiros, p. 11 – Mankind was created in the Image of God; the seven weeks of the Omer are dedicated to improving seven aspects of that Image.

Mankind was created in the Image of God. It isn't our physical image but rather our character that has Godly potential ... The *sefirot* are a mystical revelation of God's "Character." The sefirot represent our finite understanding of the Infinite. There are ten sefirot with which God created and interacts with the world. They are *chochmah*, *binah*, *da'at*, *chesed*, *gevurah*, *tiferet*, *netzach*, *hod*, *yesod*, and *malchut*. These ten sefirot are divided into two categories – the three upper sefirot of *chochmah*, *binah* and *da'at*, and the lower seven. It is the lower seven sefirot we focus on during the seven weeks of Sefirat Ha'Omer.

Our knowledge of the seven sefirot has its source in Tanach. Our Sages have explained that the words of the following verse indicate the existence and nature of these sefirot.

2. Divrei HaYamim I (Chronicles), 29:11 – The source for the seven sefirot.

To You, God, are the greatness (*chesed*), the strength (*gevurah*), the splendor (*tiferet*), the eternity (*netzach*), and the glory (*hod*), even everything that is in the heavens and the earth (*yesod*). To You, God, belongs kingship (*malchut*), and You are elevated over every head.

לְךָ יְהוָה הַגְּדֹלָה וְהַגְּבוּרָה וְהַתְּפָאֶרֶת וְהַנִּצְחָה וְהַהוֹד בְּךָ -
לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ לְךָ יְהוָה הַמְּמֹלָכָה וְהַמְתַּנְשָׂא לְכֹל
לְרֹאשׁ:

This verse, however, refers to the sefirot as attributes of God. How does this connect to the idea of man improving *himself*?

3. Rabbi Yaakov Haber, Rabbi David Sedley, Sefiros, p. 15 – Understanding the sefirot provide an understanding of oneself.

For as much as the sefirot reveal about God Himself, they also hold the key to understanding what it means to have been created in God's Image. And just as we must apply a unified understanding to the personality of God, we must strive to round out our own personality with the lesson of each *sefirah*. Therefore, the keys to our opening, maintaining, and repairing our relationship with God are bound up in understanding these sefirot ... Our goal, therefore, during these forty-nine days is to examine

how each of the sefirot affects our connection to God, our relationship with each other, and our understanding of ourselves.

With this understanding, we can explain the significance of the sefirot vis-à-vis the period of the Omer. The seven weeks of the Omer are designed to correspond to the seven sefirot. During each week, we work on the attribute that is associated with that week.

4. **Rabbi Gedalya Schorr, Ohr Gedalyahu, Moadim p. 150 – We grow by working on the particular character traits relative to each day of the Sefirah.**

The days of Sefirat Ha'Omer are a time to rectify character attributes. The first week is to rectify the attribute of *chesed*: to fix [the attribute of] love that it should be appropriate; the love of God and the love of friends. The second week is for the attribute of strength: to fix the attribute of fear [of God]. And similarly with all the weeks.

ימי הספירה הוא זמן לתיקון המדות, שבוע ראשונה לתקן מדת החסד, לתקן האהבה שיהי' כראוי, אהבה להשיי"ת ואהבת חבירים, שבוע שני' מדת גבורה, לתקן מדת היראה, וכן כל השבועות.

Moreover, each day of each week has a specific place within this framework, since each of the seven sefirot contains elements of all seven. Thus, each week of the Omer is a progression of self-improvement relating to the *sefirah* of that week, and the entire seven-week period is a progression that encompasses each of the individual weeks.

5. **Ba'al HaTania, Likutei Torah, Bamidbar (Numbers) – Each sefirah is composed of elements of each of the seven sefirot (e.g. chesed in chesed, discipline in chesed, harmony in chesed, etc.), which correspond to the forty-nine days.**

But in order to get to this high level ... one must count the Counting of the Omer. This is what it means: "Count fifty days" ... that the contemplation of the greatness of the Infinite One, Blessed is He, is forty- nine different aspects, which are alluded to in the verse, "To You, God, are the greatness ..." which are the seven midot [of the upper world of *atzilut*]. Each one of them, in turn, is made up of seven, totalling forty-nine. The fiftieth gate is the upper gate, which includes all the aspects, and everything in this is contained within the forty-nine aspects, which are united to a single unity.

אך כדי להגיע למעלה ומדרגה זו ... צריך לספור ספירת העומר; והוא שהכתוב אומר 'תספרו חמשים יום' ... להיות בחי' התבוננות בגדולה אין סוף ברוך הוא הם מ"ט בחינות והם מרומזים בפסוק לך ה' הגדולה וגו' שהם ז' מדות עליונות וכל אחד כלול מז' הרי מ"ט; ושער החמשים הוא שער העליון הכולל כל הבחינות שבשער הוא כלולים כל המ"ט בחינות והיו לאחדים באחדות אחד.

The significance of the sefirot as the framework for our self-improvement during the Omer is manifested by a prayer that appears in siddurim to be recited after counting the Omer. In this prayer, we beseech God to help us achieve the necessary self-improvement relating to the specific *sefirah* of each individual day.

6. **Siddur, Sefirat Ha'Omer – Prayer to focus on improving our nature.**

Master of the Universe ... therefore may it be Your Will ... that in the merit of the counting of

רבנו של עולם ... ובכן יהי רצון ... שבזכות ספירת העומר שספרתי היום יתקן מה שפגמתי בספירה

the Omer that I have counted may everything that I have damaged in the *sefirah* of (mention the *sefirah* of the day) be fixed and may I be purified and sanctified with holiness from above ...

(השייך לאותו הלילה) ואתה ואתקדש בקדשה של מעלה...

PART B. FORTY-EIGHT WAYS TO ACQUIRE TORAH

There is an additional dimension to the forty-nine days of the Omer. Our Sages teach us that there are forty-eight attributes which we must perfect in order to acquire the Torah. As a prelude to Shavuot, the days of the Omer are also designed for us to acquire these attributes.

1. Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 6:6 – The Torah is acquired with forty-eight qualities.

The Torah is acquired through forty-eight qualities which are: Study, attentive listening, saying one's studies aloud, intuitive understanding, discernment, awe of teachers, fear of Heaven, humility, joy, purity, serving the wise, being close with fellow students, evaluative discussion with fellow students, calmness, knowledge of Tanach, knowledge of Mishnah, moderation in business activity, moderation in worldly activity, moderation in physical pleasure, moderation in sleep, moderation in speech, moderation in merry-making, slowness to anger, having a good heart, faith in the Sages, accepting suffering, knowing one's place, being happy with whatever one has, making a fence around one's words, not boasting, endearing oneself to others, loving God, loving His creatures, loving righteousness, loving justice, loving to have one's mistakes corrected, keeping far from honor, not being arrogant about one's knowledge, not enjoying making halachic decisions, sharing another person's troubles, judging others positively, setting them in the path of truth, setting them in the path of peace, teaching calmly, asking and answering, listening and adding insights, studying in order to teach, studying in order to do the mitzvot, making one's teacher wiser, reflecting over one's lessons, and repeating an idea in the name of the person who said it first. For we learned that whoever repeats an idea in the name of the originator brings redemption to the world – as it says in the Megillah, “And Esther told it to the King in Mordechai's name” (Esther 2:22).

...והתורה נקנית בארבעים ושמונה דברים בתלמוד בשמיעת האוזן בעריכת שפתים בבינת הלב בשכלות הלב באימה ביראה בענוה בשמחה בשמוש חכמים בדקדוק חברים ובפלפול התלמידים ביישוב במקרא במשנה במיעוט שינה במיעוט שיחה במיעוט תענוג במיעוט שחוק במיעוט דרך ארץ בארך אפים בלב טוב באמונת חכמים ובקבלת היסורין המכיר את מקומו והשמח בחלקו והעושה סייג לדבריו ואינו מחזיק טובה לעצמו אהוב אהב את המקום אהב את הבריות אהב את הצדקות אהב את התוכחות אהב את המישרים מתרחק מן הכבוד ולא מגיס לבו בתלמוד ואינו שמח בהוראה נושא בעול עם חברו מכריעו לכף זכות מעמידו על האמת מעמידו על השלום מתישב לבו בתלמודו שואל ומשיב שומע ומוסיף הלומד על מנת ללמד והלומד על מנת לעשות המחכים את רבו והמכוין את שמועתו והאומר דבר בשם אומרו הא למדת שכל האומר דבר בשם אומרו מביא גאולה לעולם שנאמר: (אסתר ב:כב) ותאמר אסתר למלך בשם מרדכי.

2. **Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Mishnas Rabbi Aharon, Vol. III, p. 13 – Prepare for receiving the Torah by practicing the forty-eight ways through which Torah is acquired.**

The days of counting the Omer are days of preparation for the giving of the Torah. Since acquiring Torah depends on the forty-eight ways that the Torah is acquired (Pirkei Avot, Ch. 6), it is like all other things which can only be acquired through the appropriate mechanism, like Rav Chaim elaborated. Therefore, it is clear that the way to prepare is through these forty-eight ways. [The forty-nine days corresponds to the forty-nine gates of understanding and also to the forty-nine faces of the Torah, as explained elsewhere.] The forty-eight days correspond to the forty-eight ways that the Torah is acquired. The forty-ninth day is the day of completion for purity and preparation for receiving the Torah...

The reason that this preparation is connected to the Omer is to entrench and implant within us the recognition that everything comes from God, which is the meaning of the Omer, the offering of the first crops.

ימי הספירה הם ימי ההכנה למתן תורה. וכיון שקנין התורה תלוי במ"ח דברים שהתורה נקנית בהם (אבות פ"ו) הרי הוא כשאר דברים הנקנים רק בקנינים המועילים להם, וכמו שהאריך בזה הגר"ח זצוק"ל, וא"כ מובן שמדרכי ההכנה להתאמן מ"ח דברים אלה. [והמ"ט יום הם נגד מ"ט שערי בינה וכנגד מ"ט פנים שבתורה כמבואר במק"א]. והמ"ח ימים הם כנגד מ"ח הדברים שהתורה נקנית בהם, ויום המ"ט הוא יום שלם לקדושה בהכנה לקבלת התורה....

והא דהכנה זו למתן תורה נתלית בעומר, היינו להשריש ולנטוע את ההכרה כי הכל מהשי"ת, שזהו ענין העומר, הקרבת הראשית.

PART C. NEW HEIGHTS IN SPIRITUAL ATTAINMENT

1. **Chemdas Yamim (quoted in Sifsei Chaim, Vol. III, p. 43) – The days of Sefirat Ha'Omer are days of incredible spiritual potential, as well as critical significance.**

It is important to know that the days between Pesach and Shavuot are greatly sanctified. During these days, the sanctity increases continuously until the day of the Giving of the Torah, and during [these days] every Jew will find Divine assistance in fixing his soul, to sanctify and purify it ... They are awesome days, at the heights of the world, as we have explained ...

Ancient sources tell us that these days are a sign for the rest of the year. If a person learns much Torah and does many mitzvot, then he will act that way from the beginning of the year until the end – and the opposite holds true also, God forbid ...

והנה ראוי לדעת כי הימים האלה אשר בין פסח לעצרת הנזכרים ונעשים להתקדש בקדושה עליונה אשר בקרב הימים האלה הקדושה רבה והולכת עד יום מתן תורה ובהם ימצא כל איש ישראל עזר וסיוע לתקן את נפשו לקדושה ולטהרה ... והמה ימים נוראים ועומדים ברומן של עולם כמו שנתבאר ...

ואמרו הקדמונים כי הימים האלה המה לאות ולמופת לכל השנה כולה כי אם ירבה בהם בתורה ובמצוות כן יהיה מראשית השנה ועד אחרית השנה וכן בהפכו ח"ו. ...

While mourning the loss of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students, we should also be awed by the rebuilding process which followed that devastating plague. The legacy that was meant to be carried on by those 24,000 scholars was now transmitted by *five* Torah scholars – a marked illustration of the power of the individual.

2. **Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Mishnas Rabbi Aharon, Vol. III, p. 14 – The tremendous potential of the individual: the five individual students of Rabbi Akiva were able to replace and continue the spiritual work of twenty-four thousand.**

It is worth thinking about it from the other side – how great was the merit of the Rabbis from the South (who re-established Torah). The Torah should have been passed on through the twenty-four thousand students of Rabbi Akiva, and instead was passed on through these five students. Those who toil in Torah in our generation have a similar reward. [Without them] the world would be desolate, and through these few individuals, remnants [of the Holocaust] whom God calls, “Those who toil in Torah,” the Torah is not forgotten from the Jewish people.

כדאי גם להתבונן מאידך גיסא, בגודל הזכות של רבותינו שבדרום, דהתורה שהיתה ראויה לימסר ע"י כ"ד אלף תלמידי רבי עקיבא נמסרה ע"י חמשה תלמידים אלו. וכן הוא לפי ערך גודל זכותם של עמלי התורה בדרונו, שהוא בבחינת והיה העולם שומם, וע"י היחידים, השרידים אשר ה' קורא, העוסקים בתורה, אין התורה משתכחת מישראל.

Of course, the five new students of Rabbi Akiva were great sages whose names were eternalized in the Talmud; they lived on a level of greatness and accomplishment beyond our ability to imagine. Nevertheless, there is still a message here for every person today.

The following is a more contemporary example of what an individual can achieve; in fact what two individuals accomplished: a mother, and her son ...

Daf Yomi – Studying a page of Talmud each day. It is a movement that has swept the entire world. Learning the daily daf has become almost as ingrained in our daily routine as our daily prayers. Synagogues throughout the world have well-attended daily Daf Yomi classes. We have Daf Yomi on the Long Island Railroad, a special car set aside for a daily shiur for commuters. Daf Yomi shiurim are readily available on the Internet, Dial-a-Daf call-in lines, MP3's and interactive DVD's. They are even piped into the sound systems on EL AL flights.

Many tens of thousands of people filled both Madison Square Garden and Nassau Coliseum for the last Siyum HaShas cycle – completion of the entire Talmud after seven years. A world without Daf Yomi is unimaginable to us, yet one century ago it did not exist. Just over one century ago, the founder of the Daf Yomi movement, Rav Meir Shapiro, the Lubliner Rav, was just a little boy.

In the year 1894, the day after Passover, when young Meir Shapiro was only seven years old, he saw that his mother was crying.

“Mamme, why are you crying?” he asked.

“Because your teacher did not come today,” she replied. “He was supposed to come today, but he is not here yet.”

“So why are you crying?”

“You don't understand, Meir'l. You are too young. If you miss a day of learning, it can never be replaced.”

This answer penetrated deep into his heart, and when he grew up, it became one of the fundamental ideas of the Daf Yomi movement. Daf Yomi is about the constancy of learning. The consistency of doing something day in day out, year in and year out over the span of an entire lifetime. (Based on Rabbi Yissocher Frand, “Thank You Rebbitzin Shapiro,” in Listen To Your Messages, ArtScroll Publications, pp. 239- 240.)

However, we must add a caveat: The Jewish view of “accomplishment” does not require a person to produce results that will dazzle the world. A person is considered “accomplished” by virtue of the mere fact that he is engaged in the process of striving toward a goal, of doing his best to produce. Even a person who doesn't

produce what the world considers to be stellar results is considered by the Torah to be an accomplished individual as long as he is doing his best. The following heart-warming story illustrates this point.

When the time came to choose the eighth grade valedictorian and the other honors at graduation, the teacher, Mrs. Ruchoma Shain, found herself in a quandary. There were five titles to be given out, and there were five girls who were unquestionably at the head of the class. Their grades were impeccable, their schoolwork flawless. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that they deserved to receive the highest honors at graduation.

On the other hand, there were another five girls in the class whose grades were nothing but average, even low. These were students who struggled to keep up with their studies, some of whom barely managed to pass their tests. But Mrs. Shain knew that all five of them poured tremendous energy into their studies. It seemed unfair that their efforts should not be recognized at graduation, as well.

Mrs. Shain decided that the only course of action open to her was to share her thoughts on the issue with her students. She revealed her dilemma to the entire class: the girls with the highest grades deserved to receive the honors, but so did the girls who poured so much effort into their studies. Then she made an unprecedented suggestion: that the high-ranking girls in the class voluntarily give up their honors so that the other girls could receive them instead.

*And so it was that at the class graduation, the highest honors were presented not to the girls whose averages were between 95 and 100, but to those whose marks were usually in the low seventies – but whose efforts were outstanding. (From *Reaching the Stars*, Ruchoma Shain, Feldheim Publishers).*

When we reach the end of Sefirat Ha'Omer, we should be energized by the messages of this period of the year; and we should be able to look back and marvel at the spiritual heights that we succeeded in scaling. If we really use the Sefirah period properly, then we truly will be ready to receive the Torah on Shavuot.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ☞ The seven weeks of the Sefirah represent the seven sefirot, or fundamental attributes, that constitute the mystical revelation of God's "Character." Since man was created in God's Image, these sefirot guide us how to work on our character traits. Each week of the Sefirah corresponds to one of those attributes, and each day of each week corresponds to a specific subsection of that attribute.
- ☞ The forty-nine days of Sefirah also parallel the forty-eight qualities which must be developed in order to acquire the Torah. The first forty-eight days of the Sefirah should be used for working on each of those qualities, and the 49th is a day to complete the process.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHAT IS LAG B'OMER AND WHY DO WE CELEBRATE ON THAT DAY? WHO WAS RABBI SHIMON BAR YOCHAI AND WHY IS HIS DEATH A REASON FOR HAPPINESS?

Lag B'Omer is the 33rd day of the Omer. We celebrate because it is the day that the students of Rabbi Akiva stopped dying, and also because it is the anniversary of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's death. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was one of the greatest scholars of the Kabbalah who ever lived. When the Romans decreed that the Jews could not learn Torah, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai hid with his son in a cave for thirteen years and continued to study the Torah with great self-sacrifice. When he died, he revealed many secrets of the hidden Torah in a great, awe-inspiring revelation.

WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR SOME OF THE CUSTOMS OF LAG B'OMER?

The Arizal related that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai communicated from the heavenly spheres that the day of his death should be a day of celebration. Consequently, it is observed as a festive occasion at his burial site in Meron. The custom of lighting bonfires alludes to the light of the Torah that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai disseminated upon his death.

WHY IS THE SEVEN-WEEK PERIOD FROM PESACH TO SHAVUOT ESPECIALLY SUITED FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH?

During the period of Sefirah we embark upon a process of self-improvement and purification by striving to emulate God's character traits as defined by the sefirot. It is a Divinely designated time in which a person can scale vast spiritual heights. Concurrently, one of the messages of the laws of mourning for Rabbi Akiva's students is that one individual is capable of attaining the same spiritual heights as thousands of people – considering the fact that the 24,000 scholars who died were replaced by only five others.

**This class was prepared by Rabbi David Sedley
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