

LESSON IN A BOX

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ToraH Cafe

LESSON 6 // SERIES 3

LAG BAOMER

JEWISH HOLIDAY - THURSDAY, MAY 3, 2018

S **EFIRAT HAOMER** (49 day count between Passover and Shavuot) is a time period for transformation and self-improvement in Preparation for Shavuot, the Holiday we commemorate and re-experience, Matan Torah (receiving the Torah).

Kaballah explains that the universe is a product of seven Divine characteristics, or attributes. We humans, mirrors of G-d, are made from the same seven attributes, called Sefirot. (ex. Chesed-kindness, Gevurah-severity and constriction, etc.) During the Sefirah period we process on a deep internal level each of these attributes in all their details $7 \times 7 = 49$. Shavuot is the 50th day when we are prepared and ready for receiving the Torah.

The Midrash compares this to a king who was out riding and found a man who had been cast into a pit. The king told the man that he will pull him out of the pit and then on a particular day will give him his daughter as a wife. In fact, the king fulfilled his promise. Similarly, the Jews in Egypt were as if in a pit. After our redemption from Egypt we are in the process of preparing for the wedding day, the Torah is G-d's daughter. This time period is not simply a time of counting down days but preparing to be worthy of marriage and sharing with someone else. Being married to the Torah requires commitment, selflessness, and the ability to realize that it's not all about me, rather to share everything with the other.

The 33rd day of the Omer count, known as Lag Ba'omer is the Yahrzeit (anniversary of passing) of the great sage and mystic, the principal author of the Zohar, The Rashbi-Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai.

The first to disseminate the teachings of Kabbalah to a wider group of disciples was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who lived in the 2nd century CE. The most significant revelation came about on the day of Rabbi Shimon's passing, on which he expounded for many hours on the most intimate secrets of the divine wisdom. That day was Lag BaOmer. Rabbi Shimon said, "Now is an auspicious time. I wish to enter the "World to Come" without shame. For the holy matters that I did not reveal until now, I wish to reveal in the presence of the Shechinah, so that no one will say that I left the world without fulfilling my task, and that I concealed [these secrets] in my heart until now so that they would come with me to the "World to Come". In fact it is recorded in the Zohar that the overwhelming deluge of spiritual light had such a potent effect on the world that the sun did not set until Rabbi Shimon had finished conveying his wisdom and passed on, and that a spiritual fire surrounded his deathbed the entire day. We light fires to commemorate the spiritual revelation that occurred on this day.

In addition, many have a custom to give children toy bows and arrows at Lag Baomer picnics. As a result of Rabbi Shimon's great merits no rainbow was seen during his lifetime. **The Lubavitcher Rebbe** explains that the bow-and-arrow symbolizes the power of inwardness — the power unleashed by the mystic soul of Torah.

The first weapons devised by man were designed for hand-to-hand combat. But a person's enemy or prey is not always at arm's-length away, or even within sight. Soon the warrior and hunter felt the need for a weapon that could reach a target a great distance away, or which lies invisible and protected behind barriers of every sort.

With a bow and arrow, the tension in an arched bough of wood is exploited to propel a missile for great distances and slash through barriers. The inventor of this device first had to grasp the paradox that the deadly arrow must be pulled back toward one's own heart in order to strike the heart of the opponent, and that the more it is drawn toward oneself, the more distant an adversary it can reach.

The external body of Torah is our tool for meeting the obvious challenges of life. Do not kill or steal, it instructs us; feed the hungry, hallow your relationships with the sanctity of marriage, rest on Shabbat, eat only kosher foods — for thus you will preserve the order that Gd instituted in His world and develop it in accordance with the purpose towards which He created it.

But not everything is as up front as the explicit do's and don'ts of the Torah. Beyond them lie the ambiguities of intent and motive, the subtleties of love and awe, the interplay of ego and commitment; the taint of evil that shadows the most holy of endeavors, and the sparks of goodness that lie buried within the darkest reaches of creation. How are we to approach these challenges, so distant from our sensory reach and so elusive of our mind's comprehension?

This is where the mystical dimension of Torah comes in. It guides us in a retreat to our own essence, to the very core of our soul. It illuminates the selfless heart of the self, the spark of Gdliness within us that is one with its Creator and His creation. From there we unleash the power to deal with the most distant and obscure adversary; from there we catapult our redeeming influence to the most forsaken corners of Gd's world.

ON LAG BAOMER, the *yahrzeit* is celebrated with great joy in accordance with the recorded express wishes of Rebbe Shimon himself. Written accounts from more than five hundred years ago cite the tradition and the great virtue of attending the tombstone in the village of Meron, situated in the northern Galilee of Israel. Sages and common folk alike attest that anyone who prays to Gd sincerely there on Lag B'Omer will surely be answered in Rebbe Shimon's merit. The barren, the poor, and the critically sick have all made the pilgrimage there and found salvation.

This lesson was gleaned from JLI classes taught at Aleph Learning Institute throughout the year.

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