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News

Parashat Behar-B'chukkotai 5780

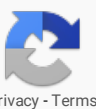
Rabbi Igor Zinkov – 15 May 2020

How will we tell future generations about Coronavirus? What will we choose to hide, what will you choose to emphasise? What will change in our lives after? What can we learn from this experience?

These questions have always been in the heart of our tradition. Sometimes our sages chose not to tell an unpleasant story about their lives and replace it with something metaphorical, something more useful for future generations. The story of *Lag Ba-Omer* is a good example of such a story. It is a minor holiday that falls on the 33rd day of *Omer*, the seven-week period between Passover and *Shavuot*. This year it falls on Tuesday, 12th May 2020.

The 49 days of *Omer* is a semi-mourning period, when weddings and other celebrations are forbidden, and as a sign of grief, some Jews do not cut their hair. How relevant for us today – I am sure many of us cannot wait to get a *Lag Ba-Omer* haircut.

Anthropologists say that many peoples have similar periods of restraint in the early spring to symbolise their worries about the growth of their crops. Most likely, *Lag Ba-Omer* has the same origin, but the most popular explanation for the Jewish practice comes from the Talmud. The Talmudic sages tell a story that during this



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season a plague killed thousands of Rabbi Akiva's students because they did not treat one another respectfully. The plague ceased on the 33rd day of the Omer – Lag Ba-Omer. As a result, Lag Ba-Omer became a happy day, interrupting the sadness of the Omer period for 24 hours.

According to rabbinic stories, the mourning behaviour is in memory of those students and their severe punishment. We read in *BT Y'vamot* 62b that they died because they did not treat each other with respect ("Sh'lo nahagu kavod zeh la-zeh"). *B'reshet Rabba* states that they treated each other with jealousy ("Sh'hay'ta eineihem tzara ehlu v'ehlu"). *Kohelet Rabba*, explains that Rabbi Akiva's students were so competitive with one another that they refused to share their *chidushim* (novel intellectual/textual insights) with one another.

The Talmudic explanation makes most sense when put into historical context. The outstanding sage Rabbi Akiva became a loyal supporter of Shimon bar Kos'va, known as Bar Kochba, who in 132 C.E. led a revolt against Roman rule in Judea. Akiva not only had hopes on a political victory over Rome but believed Bar Kochba to be the Messiah. Many of his 40,000 students joined him in backing the revolt and were killed along with thousands of Judeans when it failed. Perhaps, the Talmudic rabbis, still suffering under Roman rule and cautious about referring openly to past rebellions, may have been hinting at those deaths when they spoke of the plague. Possibly, Lag Ba-Omer marked a respite from battle, or a short-term victory.

If you try to put yourself in shoes of those who survived and their descendants, you can understand why they did not want the story about the revolt to be written down as the 'official' Jewish version. Instead, Rabbis transformed it into a lesson of a respectful behaviour towards others and possible negative consequences of unethical conduct – treating each other with disrespect and jealousy.

A completely different reason for the holiday concerns one of Rabbi Akiva's few disciples who survived the Bar Kochba revolt, Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai. He is said to have died on *Lag Ba-Omer*.

Rabbi Shimon continued to defy the Roman rulers even after Bar Kochba's defeat and was forced to flee for his life and spent many years in hiding. Legend places him and his son Eleazar in a cave for 12 years, where a miraculous well and carob tree sustained them while they spent their days studying and praying. When they finally emerged, Shimon and his son criticized everybody around them, insisting

that people should engage only in the study of *Torah* and not in temporal activities. We use cookies to ensure that we give you the best experience on our website. If you continue to use this website without changing your cookie settings, you consent to our use of cookies. [Accept](#) [Reject](#) [Privacy policy](#) (https://www.liberaljudaism.org/legal-privacy/)

For this God commanded the two to their cave for another year, accusing them of destroying the world with their rigid asceticism.

Our world has been in the lockdown for 6 weeks now. This experience may change the world in a very significant way. After Boris Johnson's announcement this Sunday, this *Lag Ba-Omer* will become the day when the semi-mourning period of the lockdown will slightly ease. Regardless whether you will emerge from your 'cage' soon or not, I think it is time for all of us to ask important questions:

How will we tell future generations about Coronavirus? What will we choose to hide, what will you choose to emphasise? What will change in our lives after? What can we learn from this experience?

May this *Lag Ba-Omer* be a time for us to reflect on the historic and unprecedented time we are living in and help us to look positively at the world around us and to become better individuals, better friends, better families, better people, better society, and better world.

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May this be God's will!

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