

LAG BAOMER 5778

This week will be Lag Ba'omer. It has a number of different aspects to it.

One aspect is an interruption of the aveilus of sefiroh and it has nothing to do with the other aspects of Lag Ba'omer. Sefiroh is a period of mourning for the deaths of the talmidim of Rabbi Akiva. It is a sober reminder to us regarding what tragedy can happen as a result of not giving respect to another Jew trying to understand the Torah.

Lag Ba'omer is also the yahrzeit of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. He was one of the greatest of the tanoim. Because of his fearlessness in denouncing the evil of the Romans, the Romans viewed him as a danger and wanted to kill him and his son. So they hid in a cave. They survived for many years in complete isolation as the gemara in Shabbos relates.

Rabbi Shimon represents many things. Sometimes people get carried away with some of the externals of Lag Ba'omer, the bonfires, the gathering in Meron. They expect over a half a million people to visit this year. Which percentage of people know about, care about, and appreciate who Rabbi Shimon was, is questionable.

Rabbi Shimon stood for truth and spoke the truth without fear. He felt it was worth putting his life in danger. Torah was all truth and all truth is Torah.

The tanoim were discussing the Roman conquest—the good and the bad. Rabbi Shimon was able to see through the façade and notice that even the good parts were only because of the self-interest of the Romans. They had no real interests in Torah and Klal Yisroel.

But why couldn't Rabbi Shimon just keep quiet?

We have to see Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai as a totality.

He spent all those years in the cave learning Torah with his son. Hashem arranged it so that they were able to sustain themselves with just carobs and water without any effort on their part. As a result they were able to devote themselves exclusively to learning and achieved the deepest understanding of the Torah.

Then they came out of the cave when the decree was rescinded. It was now safe to join Klal Yisroel again. They saw someone plowing—Rabbi Shimon couldn't understand how someone could abandon activity that would grant him olam haboh and engage in things whose goal is this temporal world. For all those years in the cave, he didn't think of this world at all. He only thought about being connected to Hashem's Torah and achieving a portion in olam haboh. Seeing a Jew plowing a field was simply baffling. Don't you understand that you have a choice in this world between pursuing this world and the next? Rabbi Shimon had a single-minded devotion to the truth of Torah and couldn't fathom anything different.

Hashem asked—are you coming here to destroy my world? Go

back to the cave! After 12 months he left again and saw a Jew running on erev Shabbos with two haddasim. Why? Lekovod Shabbos was the answer. Why two? One for zachor and one for shamor. Rabbi Shimon remarked: See how dear the mitzvos are to Klal Yisroel! This is the gemara in Shabbos.

The gemara in Brochos talks about the second parsha of Kriyas Shema where it says ve'osaftoh digonechoh. We have a mitzvah to love Hashem and serve Him with all our hearts and all our souls. If we are deserving, then we will have rain in its time and be prosperous. We will harvest our grain, oil and wine. There is a disagreement between Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Shimon. Rabbi Yishmael says Jews can live a normal human life which includes engaging in regular earning of a living. Rabbi Shimon challenged: if so what will become of the Torah? Who will be devoted to passing it on to the next generation?

Rabbi Shimon had a view that Klal Yisroel's goal is to serve Hashem exclusively and not engage in earning a living. What about surviving? Don't we need to eat? He answered that if we are doing the will of Hashem, then it will work out. Hashem will guarantee that our livelihood will come from elsewhere. If we don't do the will of Hashem, we will unfortunately have to do it ourselves.

Rabbi Shimon had two separate reasons for Klal Yisroel to exclusively devote their lives to learning. One, this is how one acquires olam haboh; we need to use this world to prepare ourselves for olam haboh. It can't be wasted as an end in itself. This is the gemara in Shabbos. But there is another reason—what will be with the future of Torah? This is the gemara in Brochos.

In Shabbos, he answers the problem he posed in Brochos—that for the continuation of Torah, it is enough if a small elite group takes it upon themselves to devote themselves exclusively to learn and teach Torah. But the first question he asked in Shabbos remains—how can one give up olam haboh for this world? He told his son that the masses show their dedication to mitzvos. But how can each individual justify getting a second-rate olam haboh?

The Midrash compares the two parshiyos of Kriyas Shema and asks a number of questions:

- 1) Why is the first parsha written in singular and the second is in plural?
- 2) Why does the first parsha have bechol me'odechoh and the second doesn't?
- 3) Why does the first parsha use the phrase veshinantom levonechoh and the second use the phrase velimadetem?
- 4) The first parsha doesn't talk about any reward in this world, and the second parsha talks about getting reward in this world.

The answer to all the questions starts with the first question. The first parsha talks to individuals like Rabbi Shimon, and the second

parsha talks to the masses.

The Rambam at the end of Hilchos Shemita Veyovel says there are a certain people who have thought through this world and understand what is really important. They have a vision of living a life of spirituality and focus on eternity and are deeply inspired by it.

Bechol levovecho means serving Hashem with both yetzorim. We have to serve Hashem with our yetzer tov and our yetzer hora. Bechol nafshechoh—serve Hashem with your very lives. We have to be willing to give up our life for Hashem. This mesiras nefesh exists in both groups. Throughout the ages, Jews have shown a willingness to give up their lives for Torah and Hashem. But an even bigger nisoyon is bechol meodechoh—giving up your money. Only the first group—the individuals—are able to do this. The second group—the masses—can't. Even though they are willing to give up life! This is why in the first parsha there is no promise of reward in this world. For such a person, you can't motivate him with reward in this world—he gave it up already by affirming bechol me'odechoh.

All Jews have to connect to Torah and pass it on to their children. This is how we connect to Hashem. No one is exempt. But veshinantom means to learn Torah as a part of your neshomo—it just pours out of you. You are preoccupied with it and it is always on your fingertips. The second parsha says learning is essential for everyone—even the masses. But there are two types of people.

Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Shimon are referring to two types of Jews. There are two options of which type you want to be. The choice is yours. You can focus exclusively on spirituality. But we know that not everyone is willing to give up a comfortable life. It is hard for people to look far ahead to their eternal future. The Rambam says only people who have really thought through to know what is valuable and what counts in this world are able to leave luxuries behind. Once you do that you get inspired to live a higher life of ideals and eternity.

Rabbi Shimon has become a big folk hero. People forget what his message was. He mastered the Torah because of the dedication that he had. He didn't understand how people could neglect Torah learning in order to indulge in physical comforts. That is why his opinion is found all over Shas. He mastered the entire Torah.

Lag Ba'omer is peculiar in Jewish history because it has become a massive folk festival even though it is based on a fundamental idea of how Klal Yisroel is built. Even though there was a churbon, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai knew the only way to rebuild was to strengthen the yeshivos. Rabbi Akiva rebuilt it through making thousands of talmidim. But Torah has to transform the individual. If the Torah doesn't correct your bad middos, Hashem isn't interested in your Torah.

On Lag Ba'omer, Rabbi Akiva's talmidim stopped dying. There was complete devastation. But Rabbi Akiva didn't give up. He kept building through Torah and got that message through. He kept going and Klal Yisroel survived.

After the Holocaust, people had different ideas of how to keep Klal Yisroel and Torah from becoming extinct. Some thought we have to make Jewish universities. Some thought we have to make Jewish settlements and kibbutzim in Israel, build Jewish Community Centers, etc. There was a small group of survivors who said the only way we rebuild Klal Yisroel is through Torah. They were right. But there is a message—we must rebuild Klal Yisroel through Torah. But the immersion has to change one and create a different human being.

How does one gauge what it means to be in yeshiva?

It means: have your ideals of life changed, your aspirations? Your attitudes, your hashkofos? The immersion in Torah has to uplift you and make you a superior and more moral and more spiritual human being. Yeshiva isn't a way to kill a year before college and experience Israel. It is to escape all the distractions and absurdities of the western world and immerse yourself in Torah. There is an image and a vision that a person has to have—the vision of Rabbi Shimon. He understood very well that the power of Torah is the most important tool we have to live a successful Jewish life.

There are two keys to olam haboh according to the Rambam—middos and the learning of Torah. A person's neshomo is impacted directly by these two things to make him fit to enter olam haboh and be connected to Hashem. Whatever level you reach, you need to access the power of Torah to transform your personality and uplift your neshomo.

Not everyone achieves the level of Rabbi Shimon. But the image you have to have when you learn Torah is to be totally immersed in Torah so that it can transform you.

Sefiras HaOmer is counting to kabbolas haTorah. For 49 days we are supposed to be thinking how we can accept the Torah this year all over again. Just like the Jews who left Egypt needed 49 days to rid themselves of all the uncleanness of Egypt, this kabbolas haTorah needs 49 days of ridding ourselves of foreign ideas and instilling Torah ideas.

There may be no better way to prepare for kabbolas haTorah than by focusing on the story of Sefiroh: the rebuilding of Klal Yisroel after the churbon, and the churbon of those who learned but were not changed. Rabbi Akiva who transformed himself personally and eventually his talmidim through the power Torah has to change a human being. Finally, Rabbi Shimon's single-minded dedication to the truth of Torah and the absolute value of Torah that is second to none. Everyone has his own degree of immersion—we need to change ourselves and make ourselves worthy of receiving the Torah.