



Around the Shabbat Table

Shabbat Acharei Mot - Kedoshim / Lag B'Omer 5764 May 2004

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Introduction

From Pesach to Shavuot there is a fifty-day period identified as *Sefirat HaOmer* or the Counting of the Omer. An Omer is a measure of barley that was brought daily to the Temple during the barley harvest cycle. The biblical injunction is found in this week's Torah portion – Emor. Leviticus 23: 15 - 16 states: And from the day on which you bring the Omer offering – the day after the Sabbath – you will count off seven weeks. They must be *complete*: you must count until the day after the seventh week – fifty days; then you will bring an offering of new grain to Adonai. (This new grain is the beginning of the wheat harvest.)

Although the Torah does not give a specific reason for counting the days, during rabbinic times Shavuot became associated with the revelation of the Torah at Sinai, and the Omer period as one that reminds us of the link between the Exodus from Egypt and the events at Sinai. Later in tradition, the Omer period became a time in which the observance of mourning customs were mandated. This tradition comes from the belief that many tragedies befell the Jews during the Roman occupation of Judea at this time of the year as well as other disastrous events over the centuries including massacres during the First Crusade and pogroms. During *Sefirat HaOmer* marriages customarily do not take place, except on *Rosh Chodesh* and Lag B'Omer (18 Iyar). Some people choose to not indulge in any type of celebration or entertainment.

Lag B'Omer, or the 33rd day of the counting of the Omer, is a minor Jewish holiday. The word Lag comes from the Hebrew letters ל (lamed) which corresponds to the number 30 and ג (gimel) which corresponds to the number 3. Its origins are not biblical, but rather historical in nature, related to the Roman occupation mentioned above. In contrast to Tisha B'av which is remembered for the tragedies that befell our ancestors, Lag B'Omer has come to symbolize a day when joyous events occurred during our history.

In particular this date is linked to our sages Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Bar Kochba and Rabbi Akiva led a revolt against Rome in 132-135 C.E. It is recorded in the Talmud and Midrash that there was a terrible plague that killed many (it has been noted anywhere from 12,000 to 24,000) of Rabbi Akiva's students that seemed to end on Lag B'Omer. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was a scholar who hid in a cave to avoid the edict from Rome that no one was to study Torah. His disciples would dress as hunters carrying bows and arrows and go out into the wilderness to study with him. It is believed that on the day of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's death he revealed the light of the Torah to his students – the Zohar. He asked that the anniversary of his death be one of happiness rather than with mourning. It is said that he died on Lag B'Omer.

From these traditions the customs we celebrate today arose. Lag B'Omer is a day to celebrate with picnics and outdoor events. In Israel many people go to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's grave in Meron, light bonfires, play with bows and arrows. Some say that marriages can either take place or even resume on this thirty-third day of the counting of the Omer.



Questions for Your Family's Discussion

When your family sits down together this Shabbat, here are some questions for you to wrestle with:

1. Both Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai continued to teach Torah despite the possibility of death at the hands of the Romans. Why do you think they took this risk? Would you have been willing to teach or learn Torah at this time knowing the danger?
2. At other times in the history of the Jewish people we have been told that we cannot teach Torah. Why did people continue to teach and learn Torah during all of these times?
3. What is something that you have recently learned from your Jewish studies? Share why you think this is interesting or important to you and your family.
4. Lag B'Omer is the 33rd day of the counting of the Omer. The counting culminates at Shavuot – a pilgrimage/harvest festival. Yet it has also been linked with the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. It is said that we were all standing at Sinai and that we are still receiving the Torah to this day. Pretend that you

are standing at the foot of Mount Sinai and Moses is sharing with you the words of Torah. What are you hearing? What are you feeling?

Some Texts to Wrestle With

She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, and whoever holds on to her is happy. (Proverbs 3:18)

The “she” in this text is the Torah.

- What does it mean that the Torah is a “tree of life”?
- How is the Torah a tree of life for you?
- How can a person be happy by holding onto the Torah?

In our liturgy there is a prayer at the beginning of the service that we say:

“Blessed are You, Adonai our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, who sanctifies us with Your commandments and commands us to be immersed with the work of the words of Torah.”

- What do you think it means “to be immersed with the work of the words of Torah?”
- How are you immersed with this work?
- Why does God command us to do this work?

The blessing over the Torah that follows the Torah reading says:

Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Sovereign of the Universe,
who has given us a teaching of truth, implanting within us eternal life.
Blessed are You, Eternal One, who gives the Torah.

This blessing refers to the idea that G-d implants within us eternal life (by implication) giving us Torah.

- What does this mean?
- How are we connected to the past and the future by studying Torah?



Towards an Action Agenda

1. For some families this holiday is a new and an exciting time to create new family traditions, for others it is a time of long held celebration. Take time to plan a Lag B'Omer observance for your family. What are some of the things you will do? If you generally celebrate Lag B'Omer, what is something new you could add to your holiday?
2. Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai continued to teach Torah in the face of incredible danger so that our laws and traditions would continue to this very day. In honor of these scholars add a new tradition of learning for your family. You might want to register for Ten Minutes of Torah (<http://www.urj.org/torah/ten/>). Or find a family learning opportunity in your community.



Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

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