

## “Maimonides 613 Series”

### The Omer and Lag B'Omer

#### Leviticus 23:15

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמִּקְרַת הַשַּׁבָּת...

"And you shall count for yourselves from the day following the [first day of Passover]"

#### Maimonides Positive Commandment #161

We are commanded to count the Omer. Each individual is commanded to count 49 days [from the day when the Omer offering was brought to the Temple, on the second day of Passover], counting both the days and weeks that have elapsed.

#### Counting the Days to Freedom

The Chinuch in Mitzvah 306 writes that the essence of the Jews is Torah. The reason for the world's creation, the reason that G-d took the Jewish people out of Egypt, is so that we could “serve [Him] on the mountain” – so that we could receive the Torah and implement its precepts in the world. When the Jews in Egypt heard that G-d was going to be freeing them from their bondage to give them the Torah, they began to count each day until they would receive it. This is the basic idea of the mitzvah of *Sefiras haOmer* – Counting the Omer – to have a tremendous desire and burning passion and receive the Torah anew from G-d, as we do each year on Shavuot.

In a letter to Reb Shlomo Carlebach, the Rebbe writes that in *Mitzrayim*, Egypt, the Jews were in both physical and intellectual bondage. They had sunk so low that when Moses brought them the message of redemption, they did not listen to him. However, in a short period of time, the fifty days of the Omer, they rose from the lowest abyss to the highest spiritual level possible to attain! This transformation was because of their passionate desire to receive the Torah, manifested in their eagerly counting every day until its giving. Every Jew, no matter how low he has sunk, even to the coldest, darkest abyss, can pull himself up physically and spiritually and attain the highest levels. If one truly has the desire, G-d will remove all obstacles and make it so one will reach that high place in a very short time. Any time a person truly desires to change themselves, they have the ability to do so.

#### Lag B'Omer

The thirty-third day of the Omer, called Lag B'Omer (spelled in Hebrew *lamed-gimmel*, which has the numerical value of thirty-three) is a special day of celebration. There are two reasons:

- 1) In the second century CE, 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva's disciples passed away during the first thirty-two days of the Omer. On Lag B'Omer, they stopped dying.
- 2) Lag B'Omer is the *yartzeit* of Rabbi Akiva's greatest disciple and the author of the holy Zohar, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the Rashbi. On the day a person passes, all their Torah and good deeds come together. As the Rashbi had reached the highest level, his Torah and good deeds cause a massive illumination in the world each Lag B'Omer. Even though there were many great sages during the Rashbi's time who studied both the revealed and the hidden Torah, his uniqueness is that he removed the barriers between the revealed and hidden parts of the Torah. The other sages studied these things as separate entities, but the Rashbi brought them together and unified them. Reflecting this unity, the Rashbi became truly one with G-d on the day of his passing.

The fact that Rashbi passed on this day and similarly that Rabbi Akiva's students stopped dying on this day means that the essence of the day brought about these great phenomena. What is so great about this day?

### **Giving of the Esoteric Dimension of Torah**

Lag B'Omer always falls on the same day of the week as Purim. This parallel gives insight to the quality and uniqueness of the day. When the Jews received the Torah on Sinai in 2448, G-d hung a mountain over their head to coerce them to accept it. For the next 1000 years, we complained, saying that we were forced into the relationship. But when the events of Purim happened, everything changed. Every single Jew refused to bow down to Haman and his idol. For an entire year, all of the Jewish people stood ready to sacrifice their lives. The Megillah says that at this point, the Jews accepted upon themselves what they had started at Sinai. On Purim, the inner dimension of the soul was revealed. On Shavuot, only the external dimension of the soul was revealed, so their connection to G-d was only on an external level. This is because at Sinai, only the external dimension of the Torah was revealed, not its inner part. Lag B'Omer is the day of the giving of the esoteric dimension of Torah. The word *lag* backwards is *gal*, as in the verse, *Gal einai...* - Open my eyes and I will behold the wonders of Your Torah. Received through the Rashbi, all barriers between the external and internal parts of Torah were removed, and they became one in this world. Because of the revelation of this oneness, the barrier between Rabbi Akiva's students, who were plagued because of their disrespect for one another, came down, and they stopped dying. Their eyes were opened, and they saw that they were all truly one.

### **Customs of Unity**

On Lag B'Omer, parents and children together go out into the fields and play. All barriers are removed – there is no generation gap. It is also customary to have a parade on Lag B'Omer, with all of us marching together. Angels are called “Static Ones”, but humans are called “Ones Who Are Always Moving”. Lag B'Omer reminds us that we must move from level to level constantly and break all barriers that hinder our movement and growth.

On Lag B'Omer, it is also customary to play with bows (*keshes*) and arrows. This is because in the days of Rashbi, a rainbow (*keshes*) never appeared in the sky. The Talmud says that when we see a rainbow, we must worry – it reminds us that our shortcomings and sins would bring a flood upon us if not for G-d's promise to Noah that he would never again flood the world. Rashbi was so great that his merit washed over every person's demerits, protecting the entire world. Playing with bows and arrows reminds us of this.

A deeper interpretation of this custom has a more positive spin: the Zohar says that when Moshiach will come, the prelude will be a gorgeous, giant rainbow in the sky, the likes of which has never been seen on Earth before. When we see a rainbow, we should await the coming of Moshiach! The introduction of the Zohar states that with this holy book, the Zohar, the Jews will be redeemed with mercy - therefore with the merit of studying kabbalah and chassidus, we will prepare the world for Moshiach.

There is a halachic question whether or not to make a blessing when we see a rainbow. Is a rainbow a good thing or a bad thing? If it is a bad thing, we shouldn't make a blessing on it. The Chabad custom is to say the blessing – a chassid, who studies the esoteric Torah, knows that when he sees a rainbow, it means Moshiach's coming is imminent. The Hebrew word for blessing, *brocha*, means “to draw down”. By saying this blessing, we draw down Moshiach!

## A Story

The Rebbe instituted the custom of Lag B'Omer parades here in America. As a child, I had the merit to be at many of these parades. My grandfather, Rabbi JJ Hecht, OB”M, was the emcee of the parades. He would introduce the Rebbe and translate his talks into English for the crowd. At the parade, there were also many floats, made by each school, yeshiva, and seminary. My uncles were in charge of my school's float one year, which was designed around the theme, *B'chol derechcha dea'hu* – In all our ways, know Him. The float featured one boy saying the *Modeh Ani*, washing his hands in the morning, one davening, one playing baseball with his yarmulke and tzitzis on, one eating lunch, one davening Mincha, and one going to bed and saying the *Shema* – me! I was more excited to show off my pajamas to everyone than about anything else in the parade. Each float went by the Rebbe, and as our turn came, I began miming the saying of the Shema and hoping that the Rebbe was looking at my great pajamas. The Rebbe looked right at me, turned to my grandfather, and told him something. Later, I learned that he had said, “Where is his pillow?” I have two ideas about what this statement meant:

- 1) The Rebbe loved every Jew, and all mankind. He was concerned about our needs – not just that we had the essentials - a bed and pajamas, so to speak, but also the luxuries - pillows. We are princes and princesses - we deserve the best.
- 2) The greatness of Rashbi is that we can rely upon him in times of difficulty. The Rebbe was the Rashbi of our generation. He was saying, “You should know that there are times when life is not so smooth and you may fall spiritually, but I am here to pick you up. I am your pillow to catch your fall. You can *lie* on me and *rely* on me. I will lift your head, inspire you, give you the purpose you need to move on.”

It's time we go out into the field, remove all barriers between G-d and mankind, between the exoteric and esoteric, between parents and children, Jews and the Nations. During the Counting of the Omer, we can lift ourselves from the lowest level of Egypt to the highest level of Sinai. May we all celebrate the great parade with all who came before us - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca, and Leah - and march all together to Jerusalem with the coming of Moshiach. May it be immediately, amen!