



### **New Beginnings: Insights on Emor and Lag Ba'omer**

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*“And you shall count for yourselves, from the morrow of the rest day from the day you bring the omer as a wave offering seven weeks; they shall be complete. You shall count until the day after the seventh week, [namely,] the fiftieth day, [on which] you shall bring a new meal offering to the Lord (Vayikra 23:15-16).”*

God commands us to count the days from Pesach until Shavuot. Why the need to count? The commentaries provide many layers of insight. Yet, on the most basic level, God was teaching us an important lesson; the exodus was not an end; it was a means towards establishing a life of holiness and meaning. We left Egypt in order to accept the Torah at Mount Sinai. The Torah, with its plethora of commandments and life lessons, provides us the ability to find the holiness within ourselves and our world. As such, God commanded us to count these days in order to link the events of Pesach and Shavuot, in order to establish a connection between our freedom and Sinaitic revelation. God tells us, *“I took you out of Egypt so you could receive the Torah. I gave you the Torah so you can change yourselves and the world.”*

This past Thursday night and Friday, we celebrated the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the Omer, a day we simply refer to as, *Lag Ba'omer*. The Shulchan Aruch in reference to this day says, *“U'marbim bo k'tzas simcha, we enhance the day with a bit more joy.”* Why is this day unique? And if it is indeed special, why only *“k'tzas simcha, a bit more joy”*?

The Talmud (Yevamos 62b) tells us that Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of students, and they all died, *“al shelo nahagu kavod zeh la'zeh, for they did not give proper honor one to the other.”* The Talmud goes on to explain that these deaths occurred between Pesach and Shavuot, and according to many, the deaths ceased on the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the Omer. But the question is obvious, *why celebrate the cessation of the plague?* We celebrate events and occurrences which are truly joyous because of their positive, dynamic momentum. The plague stopped because all of the students had died; there was no one left. I understand that we can stop our mourning practices on *Lag Ba'omer*, but to celebrate (even just a little bit) seems out of place.

The Pri Chadash (Rav Chizkiya Silva, 1659-1698) explains this dynamic by examining the end of the previously quoted passage:

*“... the (Torah) world was desolate (as a result of the death of the 24,000 students) until Rabbi Akiva went to the Rabbis of the south (of Israel) and began to teach them. Who were they? Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yossi, Rabbi Shimon, Rabbi Elazar ben Shamuah. These new students re-established the world of Torah in this turbulent time (Yevamos 62b).”*

When did Rabbi Akiva go and find these new students? Right after he attended the funeral of the final student who had passed away. My dear friends, let's take a moment to reflect on these powerful words. In the span of just a few weeks, Rabbi Akiva had to bury 24,000 students. But the tragedy didn't end there. He cared for their widows and orphans; he was tasked with the overwhelming responsibility of helping tens of thousands to rebuild their lives. And what of his personal loss? Rabbi Akiva devoted his life to building his students and his yeshiva. His entire life's work was intertwined with the lives of his students, and now it was all gone. No students, no yeshiva, and immeasurable amounts of pain and heartbreak. Rabbi Akiva would have been within his right to say, *“I'm done. I tried, I devoted my life to my people and to my God, but alas my efforts were not meant to endure. I am an old man; someone else will need to find the strength and courage to rebuild. I did my share.”* And who would have faulted Rabbi Akiva had he chosen to “retire,” learn in his local Beis Midrash, spend time with his family, and leave the work for others? But he didn't. Rather, immediately following the last funeral, he dried his tears, dusted himself off, said goodbye to his family, and began the journey to the south of Israel to find new students and begin the process of rebuilding. And when did all of this happen? On *Lag Ba'omer*. This day, *Lag Ba'omer* is not simply another day in the *sefirah* count. This day is a testament to the strength of the human spirit. It is this day that reminds us that we can all be a Rabbi Akiva. It is on *Lag Ba'omer* that we understand that although we may be faced with incredible challenges, we need not yield to or buckle beneath them. Sometimes, we need to dry our tears, pick ourselves up, and figure out how to keep moving forward.

This is the meaning of the Shulchan Aruch's statement, *“U'marbim bo k'tzas simcha, we enhance the day with a bit more joy.”* *Lag Ba'omer* does not possess the almost childish joy of Purim, nor does it possess the reverential happiness of our *Yomim Tovim*. *Lag Ba'omer* is the day on which we confront our challenges and recognize that for many of us, life is filled with much adversity and difficulty. Yet it is on this sacred day that we pledge to be like our ancestor, Rabbi Akiva, and find a way to regroup and rebuild. This is the *little bit of simcha* of *Lag Ba'omer*. Perhaps, our responsibility is to take this *simcha* with us into the remaining days of *Sefira*. We celebrated our freedom on Pesach. Pesach was a new beginning, an opportunity to start fresh and begin to actualize our goals and dreams. Truthfully, over the last few weeks, I may have fallen short. The taste of Matzah is long gone and perhaps, the inspiration from the beautiful Yom Tov has begun to fade. I have gone back to “business as usual.” *Lag Ba'omer* reminds us that we can always start again. The verse in this week's Parsha, *U'sfartem Lachem*, reminds us that we can make each and every day count, and we can begin anew whenever we desire. May the courage of Rabbi Akiva and the holy words of *Parshas Emor* inspire us to do more, be more, and when necessary, start again. (Originally published 5778)

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