

Tuesday was Lag b'Omer, the 33rd day of the Omer counting. In Hebrew, the number 33 is written with the letters לָ (lamed) – ג (gimel), which sound like *lag* when pronounced together. On Lag b'Omer (for Sephardic Jews, the day after) the semi-mourning tone of the Omer is interrupted to permit weddings, haircuts, parties, and music. Families go on picnics, there is singing and dancing, bonfires are lit, and children play with toy bows and arrows. There are two explanations for the change in mood on this day. Talmud Tractate Yevamot 62b relates: "Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students in an area of land that stretched from Gevat to Antipatris in Judea, and they all died in one period of time, because they did not treat each other with respect. ... It is taught that they all died in the period from Pesach until Shavuot. ... Rav Nachman said [they died] of diphtheria." This plague is said to have ended on the 33rd day of the Omer. Of course this story is a bit farfetched, but it is likely based on the many deaths that occurred during the disastrous Bar Kokhba revolt from 132-136, the last of the three Jewish wars against the Romans. Akiva believed so strongly in Bar Kokhba's ability to defeat the Romans that he regarded him as the promised Messiah. There are at least three versions of Akiva's death, but they agree that he was executed on orders from Roman consul Turnus Rufus for defying the Roman prohibition against teaching Torah. While he was being flayed alive, he recited the *shema Yisrael* prayer, and is said to have died saying the final word *echad*. Lifting the mourning restrictions on this day may have marked a small victory or a temporary lull in the hostilities. However, this day also honors the death of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, one of the few Akiva students who survived the Bar Kokhba revolt. There are many legends surrounding him, mainly about his dealings with the Romans and his otherworldly holiness. On the day he died, he is said to have revealed the *Zohar*, a mystical work actually published by Spanish kabbalist Moses de León in the 13th century. On Lag b'Omer, thousands of pious Jews visit his tomb on Mount Meron in northern Israel, and some bring their 3-year-old sons there for their first haircut. Sometime during the 16th or 17th century Lag b'Omer became a minor holiday, likely due to Isaac Luria's initiative to honor Shimon bar Yochai. The bonfires commemorate his fiery passion and the light with which he imbued the Torah. They also represent the watchfires lit by Bar Kokhba's troops during the war. Children's activities with toy bows and arrows commemorate a midrash that teaches that because of Shimon bar Yochai's great spiritual merit, HaShem did not need to provide rainbows during his lifetime. (*Keshet* means both archery bow and rainbow.) But of course they also harken back to the Bar Kokhba revolt. In addition, this date usually falls midway between the spring equinox and the summer solstice, the time of Mayday, Beltane, and similar festivals featuring bonfires, picnics, and shooting arrows at demons. Whatever its origin, Lag b'Omer offers a welcome break in this somber time.

Our parashot bring to a close the book of Leviticus, the body of statutes that defines our part of our eternal covenant. The laws of *shmitah* and *yovel*, which are "Sabbaths to the Lord," are the main focus of Parashah Behar. Although *yovel* was only in effect when the Israelites lived in the land according to their tribes, *shmitah* is still observed in Israel and its principles guide agricultural practices today. But the prohibition against idolatry (26:1) and the commandment to observe HaShem's Sabbaths (26:2) not only sets forth the rationale for them, it elevates their practical significance to an act of worship. "The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land belongs to Me, for you are strangers and temporary residents with Me." (25:23) We humans love to win, to own things, and to be in control. Have our ambitions and our possessions become our idols? Do we take the earth and its inhabitants so much for granted that we forget that we are sojourners here, and only a small part of a greater whole? Have we sacrificed our integrity on the altar of personal gain? With climate change ever more apparent, the message of our double-parashah, encapsulated in the 2nd paragraph of the *shema yisrael*, has never been timelier. *Shmitah* and *yovel* are even reflected in the Omer counting. Instead of counting years and cycles of years, we count days and weeks in our progression from the drudgery of being slaves to Pharaoh to the responsibility of being servants of HaShem. Lag b'Omer falls on the 5th day of the 5th week – *hod* within *hod*. The *sephirah* of *Hod* is the attribute of majesty, splendor, acknowledgement, gratitude, and humility – not as diverse and contradictory as these terms seem once we realize how they are interconnected. Humility is the key to being able to acknowledge HaShem's majesty, which leads to appreciation and gratitude for the multifaceted splendor of HaShem's Creation. Humility gives us the ability to surrender (another attribute of *hod*) to Divine plan and acknowledge that everything we have ultimately comes from HaShem. We simply use materials that are already here, and it is our divinely ordained duty to use them wisely, not only for our own benefit, but for the welfare of all that share Creation with us now, and all that will come after us. We are free to partake of HaShem's bounty, not in greed, but with an eye to the future. Indeed, Lag b'Omer falls on 18 (יח) Iyar, and *chet-yud* pronounced together is *chai*, which means LIFE.

Shabbat shalom!