

Tuesday was Lag b'Omer, the 33rd day of the Omer counting. In Hebrew, the number 33 is written with the letters ל (lamed) – א (gimel), which sound like *lag* when pronounced together. On Lag b'Omer 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 this. 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. Modern scholars propose that the plague may be a euphemism for Roman persecution or battlefield deaths during the disastrous Bar Kokhba revolt (132-136 CE), the last of the three Jewish wars against the Romans. Lifting mourning restrictions on this day may have marked a small victory or a temporary lull in the hostilities. Akiva was a major supporter of Bar Kokhba, even calling him "King Messiah" (Jerusalem Talmud Ta'anit 4:5). If we remember how the Talmud sages reframed the Chanukah story, this explanation is indeed plausible. After the revolt's failure, praising or even mentioning Jewish participation in it was dangerous, and later sages may have wanted to distance themselves from a failed messianic uprising. 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 holiness. On the day he died, he is said to have revealed the *Zohar*, a mystical work actually published by the 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. The custom of toy bows and arrows stems from a Talmudic teaching that no rainbow was necessary during the lives of very righteous individuals. (*Keshet* means both archery bow and rainbow.) But of course it also harkens 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 other festivals featuring bonfires, picnics, and shooting arrows at demons. Whatever its origin, Lag b'Omer offers a welcome break in this somber time. Our parashiot bring to a close the book of Leviticus, the centerpiece of the Torah, that outlines and structures the Israelites' covenantal responsibilities and defines holiness in daily life, sacred time, and community. Parashat Bechukotai, the final parashah, contains the first *tocheicha* (warning, rebuke), a grim, escalating series of consequences that the Israelites will face if they treat HaShem's covenant with indifference. It is preceded by the blessings they will receive for honoring the covenant and followed by promises of remembrance and restoration. Enclosing the consequences inside a frame of blessings and return is the Torah's groundbreaking teaching that covenantal relationship is the desired goal. Other law codes of the time were built on fear, but our eternal covenant is built on loving relationship. HaShem's *mitzvot* are not arbitrary demands; they are designed to help us flourish in holiness, justice, and dignity. When we count the Omer using the Kabbalistic tree we see that the *sephirah* of *chesed* (mercy) precedes the *sephirah* of *gevurah* (judgement). This same principle permeates the laws of *shmittah* and *yovel*, "Sabbaths to the Lord," which are the heart of Parashat Behar. "The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land belongs to Me, for you are strangers and temporary residents with Me" (25:23). The laws of *shmittah* and *yovel* are the Torah's culminating vision of an equitable society grounded in mercy, release, rest, and restoration – a rhythm reflected in the days and weeks of the Omer counting as we journey from Pharaoh's dehumanizing slavery to the sacred responsibility of serving HaShem. In essence, the Omer cycle functions as a sort of spiritual *yovel*, a seven times seven journey that releases us step by step from the bondage of our personal *mitzrayim* and prepares us to receive the Torah and relearn how to be truly free. Lag b'Omer falls on the 5th day of the 5th week – *hod* within *hod*. The *sephirah* of *Hod* encompasses the attributes of majesty, splendor, responsibility, acknowledgement, gratitude, and humility – outwardly contradictory terms that are actually interconnected. Humility is the key to acknowledging HaShem's majesty, which leads to appreciation and gratitude for the multifaceted splendor of HaShem's ongoing work of creation. Humility gives us the ability to surrender (another attribute of *hod*) and recognize that everything we have ultimately comes from HaShem. Only HaShem creates *ex nihilo*. We can only create using 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 everything that shares our world with us now, and everything 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* spells *chai*, which means LIFE.

Shabbat shalom!