

Lag B'Omer & The Secret History of the Zohar

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Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of the Counting of the Omer, is celebrated as the anniversary of the death of the master Kabbalist and author of the Zohar, the Tana (Mishnaic teacher) Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai. Now, historically speaking, whether or not this is the actual date of his passing has been a subject of Rabbinic discussion for centuries. However, the historicity here is mostly irrelevant. Lag B'Omer has come to symbolize many things and thus has come to represent something vital and alive. It has grown beyond any actual, but limited historical event of the past.



In commemoration of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva who died one year from a plague during the first 33 days of the Omer, Jewish Law dictates that during this period we observe certain rites of mourning and thus we are prohibited from doing certain things (haircuts, marrying, etc.). However, not all of Rabbi Akiva's students died at this time. Rabbi Akiva's greatest student, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, survived this epidemic. Rabbi Shimon was not only Rabbi Akiva's student in areas of Halakha, he was only Rabbi Akiva's most trusted student to receive from him the sacred secret traditions of the Torah. In other words, Rabbi Akiva is the one who taught Rabbi Shimon the Kabbalah.

Years later, Rabbi Shimon and his son were forced into hiding from the Romans. It was during this period of isolation, hiding as they were in a cave that Eliyahu HaNavi came to them and taught them the Zohar. However, this could never have happened if Rabbi Akiva did not first teach Rabbi Shimon the methods and techniques necessary to call upon Eliyahu HaNavi to have him come to him. Most think that Eliyahu just appears "out of the blue." This is not so. Eliyahu is summoned by a specific and special formula that Rabbi Shimon learned from Rabbi Akiva. This formula is not recorded in the Zohar, but it is recorded in other sacred literature.

Now, when did Rabbi Shimon receive this formula from Rabbi Akiva? No one knows for sure. However, there is a recorded tradition in the writings of the HiDA (Rabbi Haim David Azulai), that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai received the sacred traditions of the Kabbalah from Rabbi Akiva specifically on the thirty-third day of the Omer, Lag B'Omer.

When we call this day the "Hillulah" (ascent) of Rabbi Shimon, the ascent spoken of is not necessarily his death (i.e., the ascent of his soul), but rather the Hillulah is his ascent in the learning of Torah. Lag B'Omer celebrates the day when the sacred traditions of the Kabbalah were

saved from being lost forever. Lag B'Omer, therefore, has always been considered the "Kabbalist's holiday." For on this day Rabbi Shimon became possibly the most important link in the chain of Kabbalistic succession.

Rabbi Shimon saved the Kabbalah from oblivion. More than just save the Kabbalah, he used well the knowledge he received and thereby received ever so much more. However, tradition teaches us that while Rabbi Shimon was most worthy of receiving these secrets, not everyone else was. Therefore, due to the collective sins of the nation, an edict from Heaven was proclaimed that the Zohar and its teachings were to be concealed for over 1,000 years. Not until the year 1290 was the Zohar finally made public. Nevertheless, the editor of the Zohar, Rabbi Moshe DeLeon never publicly revealed any of the original Zoharic manuscripts.

Because of this lack of public witness to the original manuscripts certain so-called "scholarly" types have endeavored to claim that the teachings in the Zohar are not the work of Rabbi Shimon. This argument, however, can never be conclusively supported. In truth, there are to be found within the Zohar many teachings clearly from a period after the days of Rabbi Shimon. Again, the so-called "scholarly" types attempt to use this as "proof" to dismiss Rabbi Shimon's authorship. Yet just because there were later additions by no means dismisses the antiquity of the original teachings.

The existence of clear post-Tana material in the Zohar only goes to prove that the Holy Zohar was and is a living and vibrant body of teachings. Like the Torah itself, the Zohar is far more than a mere book. It is alive; it breathes because it has a soul. It is a large compilation of many teachings covering numerous mystical topics. It should not surprise anyone that there could have been a number of authors over the centuries who have been guided by Heaven to compliment the body of Zoharic teachings. Even the Zohar itself states that Rabbi Shimon himself did not write it. It was originally a set of oral teachings that Rabbi Shimon gave to his Talmidim in the years after he and Rabbi Eliezer came out of hiding.

Before his death, Rabbi Shimon charged his talmid (student) Rabbi Abba, to transcribe his teachings to writing. Rabbi Abba, therefore with the help of the other talmidim and most assuredly under the tutelage of Eliyahu HaNavi composed the Zoharic texts. These include the major body of the Zohar along with the two Idarot, the Sifra D'Tzniyuta, the Ra'aya Mehemna, the Saba D'Mishpatim and many other works including the Tikunim of the Zohar and the Zohar Hadash.

For centuries access to these sacred texts was limited to small circles of trusted students. Yet, as guided by Ruah HaKodesh (prophetic inspiration), students in successive generations were guided to compliment the Zoharic texts, by adding to them. This is why we find much post-Tana references in a text ascribed to the Tana, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai. Nonetheless, we must realize that any such additions were channeled from Heaven through Eliyahu HaNavi and by the neshama/soul of Rabbi Shimon himself. Therefore, although the hands that wrote these later additions were not those of Rabbi Shimon, nonetheless, the teachings were still his and revealed from Shamayim (Heaven) in the same way as was the original Zohar.

Before I return to discuss the significance of Lag B'Omer to us today let me also mention one further point from history.

Most are familiar with the Christian-Moslem wars known as the Crusades. During the century or so that the Christians held sway over Jerusalem, a certain group of mystic Knights took control over the Temple Mount. These knights, the legendary Templars allegedly frantically searched the Temple Mount, all of Jerusalem and as much of Eretz Yisrael that they could. Legend tells us that

they were looking for secret ancient treasures. Some say they were looking for the lost gold of King Solomon; others claim they were looking for the mythical cup of the so-called “last supper,” the Holy Grail. Whatever it was they were looking for one thing history records loud and clear and that is they were definitely looking for something and protecting many secrets at the same time. The true inner secrets of the Knights Templar to this day remain a secret and a mystery. Yet, this short-lived group of pseudo-Christian Knights may very well have indeed stumbled on to a treasure of immeasurable worth. They may or may not have recognized it. Maybe what they found was what they were looking for.

In one of the Jewish history books, whose name I will leave to be safely anonymous there is recorded the event of the discovery of the Zohar. The text records that it was found in the Land of Israel by Moslem workers who were serving Christian masters. Being that such an event could have only happened in a very narrow period of time we can isolate the period. Now the story proceeds and records that the Moslem worker unearthed some clay jars, inside of which were some ancient scrolls. This sounds like how the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. The worker then took the scrolls to his Christian master who could not decipher them. The Christian master then went to a local, but trusted Rabbi who was indeed able to recognize and decipher the scrolls, and thus the Zohar was discovered. The scrolls were then smuggled out of the Holy Land in Jewish hands who travelled on a Templar ship. They made their way to Spain and into the hands of Rabbi Moshe DeLeon. It is allegedly he who then transcribed the scrolls and published the Zohar.

If we look at this story in the light of honest history, the Christian masters of those days were none other than the Knights Templar. They were the only ones who had such cordial relations with both the Muslims and the Jews in the Holy Land during that period. The Templars were on a quest. Apparently they did find something and instead of keeping it or passing it on to the Church, they instead allow for it to fall into Jewish hands. In 1290 the Zohar was published in Spain. Almost immediately, without any noticeable objections this body of teachings was embraced by the entire Torah world as the authentic teachings of the Tana Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai. In just a few years, the Zohar went from being totally unknown to becoming the third most important set of texts in Judaism, surpassed only by the Bible and Talmud.

More than this, the Zohar infused back into Judaism a good strong “shot” of mysticism, that was lacking for a very long time. The impact of the Zohar on Judaism cannot be underestimated. And we owe all this to some Knights Templar who diligently searched and somehow found these great ancient secrets. Why they handed the Zohar over to the Rabbis instead of to the Church may be a question that cannot be answered. All we do know is that 14 years after the Zohar reached Spain and the revitalization of Judaism has picked up steam, forces within the Church dealt a crushing death blow to the Templar movement. Although history records no such connection between the discovery of the Zohar and the downfall of the Templars, I wonder if there is more in this story than will ever be publically known.

Now, back to Lag B'Omer. Thirty-three is a very special number in its own right. Not for naught was this day chosen by Rabbi Akiva to transmit to Rabbi Shimon the keys of the Kabbalah.

The secret of the Omer is the rebuilding of the Sefirotic lights that were revealed all at once on Pesah night. On Pesah G-d revealed the fullness of His Light all at once with obvious results. Yet, such an act of Divine mercy cannot continually be given to mankind. G-d has ordained that we must merit His Light. This is why He gave us Torah and mitzvot. By our observance of these, we enable the sefirotic paths to open and G-d's Light to flow down to us and to our world. This builds for us merit and thus reward in the world to come.

Omer therefore provides for us the building of the sefirotic vessels in order to receive the Divine Light. Seven times seven weeks. This is the secret of the rectification of the seven days of the week, created corresponding to the seven sefirot. When these are rectified, a new world begins. Thus the fiftieth day, is the day of Matan Torah, the time when we receive the Torah.

Now, remember, Pesah, the Omer and Shavuot are not merely holidays commemorating events of the past. They are much more than this. For every year, with the cycle of time, we relive these experiences and revive them, year after year, as we travel through the cosmos. As we move through the cosmos we bring rectification and revelation to the places in the universe that we touch anew as our earth, its sun and galaxy revolve and move through new space at every second.

The fifth week (from Days 29 - 35) corresponds to the sefirah Hod. Hod is the sefirah opposite to Netzah. Both Netzah and Hod are the “thighs” upon which “stands” the Tiferet. Tiferet is the Torah. Tiferet is the definition and source of Justice in the universe. Tiferet is the principle of the Name YKVK, which reveals G-d’s grace and mercy into the severe and unyielding laws of nature represented by G-d’s name Elokim. For there can be no justice without mercy and grace.

Netzah means victory. Netzah is the force, the motivation to impose the value of justice upon the world. Netzah is an outgoing force of the Right Column. Therefore, it is the force that seeks to conquer the world and to impose on it the Justice of Tiferet. Hod is Netzah’s equal and “feminine” opposite. Unlike Netzah, Hod is an inward moving force of the Left Column of the sefirot.

Hod means glory. Hod is the force that gathers in and benefits from the imposition of Tiferet-Justice brought about by Netzah. Hod is often referred to as the decorations of beauty of the wife. Hod in essence is “her jewelry.” Hod is the force that receives the benefit of the proper order and alignment of balance in the universe brought about by Torah observance. Hod gathers this benefit and wears it “as jewelry.” The benefit of Torah is thereby seen by all and admired by all, thus reinforcing the value of Torah/Tiferet/Justice.

Hod is the value and benefit of Torah. Rabbi Akiva recognized that in order to pass on the secrets of the Torah to Rabbi Shimon, he would have to do so in accordance to the alignment of the sefirot. Rabbi Akiva therefore chose the one day when the power of benefit and appreciation would be its strongest.

Rabbi Akiva chose the one day when the powers of gathering would be their strongest. He chose the sefirotic day of Hod within Hod, which corresponds to the fifth day of the fifth week of the Omer, specifically the thirty-third day Lag B’Omer. On this sefirotic day, the Hod of Hod would dominate and Rabbi Shimon would thus gather in the all the benefits of the Kabbalah.

As it was then so is it today. Lag B’Omer is the time to receive. It is a day of ascent. For our souls ascend on this day in joy and singing. The forces of severity are thereby broken. On this day we not only celebrate a most important event of the past, we celebrate what we have today, a living and vibrant Kabbalah. We rejoice with Rabbi Shimon, for on this day did he receive the Kabbalah from Rabbi Akiva. We also rejoice on this day because, if our souls are open to it through our observance of Torah and mitzvot, then we too become links in the chain of the Kabbalistic transmission.

Thirty-three is also special in that it is the number that unites the Name YKVK (26) with the seven (7) days of creation, created by Elokim. In other words, this 33, is the secret union of the Names YKVK and Elokim. These two Names together equal 112. This number is three times 33, showing

the unity of the Three Sefirotic Columns (right, left, and center) with a remainder is 13, the number of Ehad, One, which signifies and seals the sefirotic unity.

The number three always signifies the three sefirotic Columns. Thus, thirty-three is actually $3 \times 1 = 3$ and $3 \times 10 = 30$. Single numbers corresponds to the world of Asiyah under the Name Elokim. Tens correspond to the world of Yetzirah under the Name YKVK. Thus, 33 again signifies the union of YKVK and Elokim. This is the union of G-d's severity in Malkhut, corresponding to Asiyah and Elokim, with His grace, corresponding to Yetzirah and YKVK.

This is the secret that Rabbi Akiva passed onto Rabbi Shimon. For Rabbi Akiva was under the powers of severity and judgment. Soon after passing on the Kabbalah to Rabbi Shimon, Rabbi Akiva was horribly executed by the evil Romans. Rabbi Shimon also fell under the edict of the death penalty but he transmuted the severity of Elokim and infusing it with YKVK. He thus saved his own life and the life of the Kabbalah. You might ask why Rabbi Akiva did not do the same? Alas, he had a different destiny.

Therefore, in conclusion, Lag B'Omer celebrates the survival of the Kabbalah. It celebrates the mitigation of Divine severity to those who are willing to receive the benefits (Hod) of Torah (Tiferet) observance. May we all be so worthy, so blessed and so graced, Amen.

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