

# Parsha Encounters

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Parshas Bechukosai - Rabbi Moshe M. Willner

## Torah Focus

*"Im Bechukosai Taylaychu – If you will follow my decrees..."*

The Midrash explains this *Passuk* to mean: If you will toil in my Torah, you will merit the blessings enumerated in the Parsha. Many commentaries question why the word '*talaychu*' is used which literally means to go or walk. The usual expression used by the Torah to demand obedience is "If you will carry out my decrees." Why the deviation here?

To answer this question let us examine an idea expressed by R' Shlomo Wolbe on the Gemara in Megilla 6b. "R' Yitzchok said, 'If someone tells you I labored in Torah study but did not find it (was not successful) do not believe him. If he tells you, I have not labored in Torah study yet I did find it, do not believe him. "*Yagati Umatzasi Taamin.*" However, if one says I have toiled and have found it, believe him."

The Gemara states that this refers to one's understanding of Torah, but in regard to retaining one's learning, success is dependent on heavenly assistance.

The Vilna Gaon explains that the word "*Matzasi*", "I have found" teaches us that even after all the hard work one puts in to the study of Torah, the understanding is not a natural outcome. Rather, one works and toils until Hashem opens up his eyes and one comes to understand what he has learned. The question then arises, according to the Gaon of Vilna, what is the difference between understanding and retaining Torah, if they both are dependent on Heavenly assistance, *Siyata Dishmaya*.

We can understand the difference by learning a Gemara in Eruvin 54a. R' Masna asks – What is the meaning of the *Passuk* that deals with the travels of Klal Yisrael in the *Midbar* which says that the Jews traveled – "from *Midbar* to *Matana*?" This teaches us that if one makes himself like a *Midbar*, a desert that everyone treads upon, he will receive the Torah as a gift, a *Matana*. R' Wolbe points out that concerning "understanding" the Gemara in Megilla had used the term '*Matzasi*,' as if one has found an object. When speaking about "retention," the term 'gift' is used. He explains that there is a basic difference between acquiring a gift and acquiring a lost object. To acquire a gift one needs the consent of the owner to transfer ownership. Acquiring a lost object, on the other hand, is accomplished entirely by the finder. Unlike a gift, no help is needed for its acquisition.

We can now understand the difference between attaining understanding and the retention of Torah. To achieve either one, *Siyata Dishmaya*, Heavenly assistance, is essential. However, the degree of assistance necessary to retain one's

Torah is much greater than the assistance needed for the initial 'understanding' of Torah. Just as a *metziah* is acquired by the finder alone, likewise, when one learns Torah, Hashem only needs to reveal the Torah which is then acquired and understood through the effort of study. When it comes to retention, however, greater assistance is needed. Hashem must give it to us as a present, otherwise we would be unable to acquire it ourselves. To merit such *Siyata Dishmaya*, merely toiling to study Torah is not enough. In order to retain Torah, one must make himself like a desert - totally subservient to the goal of acquiring Torah.

How does one go about achieving this goal? He must push all personal aspirations to the side and make room for one ambition only - to acquire Torah. However, the concept of *ameilus b'torah*, toiling to acquire Torah, is not limited to the time one spends studying in the Beis Medrash, but extends to all activities as well. This is why the Torah chose the expression of *taylachu*, to go, in connection with Torah study. Our efforts towards acquiring Torah must encompass every aspect of our lives. If we pursue Torah with this attitude, we will successfully acquire it, and merit all the blessings mentioned in the Parsha.

It may seem difficult to make Torah our sole ambition in life, since most of us are busy with our careers and other worldly pursuits. An example that can make this concept of *ameilus B'Torah* easier to understand is one of hobbies and sport. There are people whose main enjoyment in life is golf. Although they may actually spend most of their time doing other activities, getting back on the golf course is always on their mind. They are constantly thinking about how they can improve their swing, which club to use, and so on. This is definitely a level to strive for, *lehavdil*, in Torah. Through toiling in Torah and coming to a clear understanding one can come to feel immense enjoyment from his learning. Thus he will want his life to revolve around the study of Torah. When we reach this level we will receive the Torah as a present. Not only as a *Metzia*, but as when one receives a gift and a bond is created between the giver and the recipient. May we be *zocheh* that our efforts should bring us to understand Torah and form a strong relationship with the One who gives us Torah.

Rabbi Willner learns full time at the kollel.

# Halacha Encounters

## Lag B'Omer!

Rabbi Ari Friedman

**L**ag B'Omer is a day in the Jewish calendar which often passes by leaving some of us groping to appreciate its significance and scrambling for its laws and customs. This week we will attempt to explore the meaning of Lag B'Omer and discuss some of its practices.

Two of the most well known reasons for the "yom tov" of Lag B'Omer are the cessation of the death of Rabbi Akiva's Talmidim and the *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. Many express amazement that these are reasons for celebration. After all, the Gemara (Yevamos 62B) describes the world as being desolate as a result of the death of Rabbi Akiva's Talmidim. The Pri Chadash explains that in essence it is the rebirth of Torah that we are celebrating on this day. It was on this day that Rabbi Akiva gathered five new Talmidim, including Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, and began transmitting the Torah anew. We are celebrating the strength and spirit of these great men who, despite their pain and sorrow, rose up and rebuilt the Torah.

The celebration of the *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai is another subject with which some express wonder. As mentioned above our usual feelings on a *yahrzeit* are feelings of loss (see Chasam Sofer YD 233). In addressing this difficulty, one must first appreciate the significance of Rabbi Shimon. The *sefarim* teach us that Rabbi Shimon brought the hidden light of Torah down to the world, and compare his greatness with none other than Moshe Rabbeinu. His teachings, referred to as *Toras Hanistar* or *Kabbalah*, are considered the true secrets of the Torah and on the day of his death some of the most esoteric and profound secrets were revealed. Indeed Rabbi Shimon himself referred to the day of his death as a day of celebration. The *seforim* write that the aura of his soul visits the world on Lag B'Omer and it is an auspicious time for understanding the depths of the Torah and for one's prayers to be answered. Admittedly, these ideas are more appreciated by those involved in the study of *Kabbalah*.

### The Suspension of Mourning

The day of Lag B'Omer brings a suspension or an end (depending on the particular custom) to the mourning period observed during *Sefirah*. Although normally observance of holidays begin with the previous night, on Lag B'Omer the laws of mourning are not suspended until the following morning. Therefore, shaving and haircuts are not permitted until the morning. The reason for this is that since Lag B'Omer is counted as one of the 33 days of mourning, we must partially observe mourning on this day. We then apply the principle of "Miktzas HaYom Kichulo" (part of the day is counted as the whole day). Regarding weddings, the Mishna Brurah writes that if Lag B'Omer

falls out on Friday, weddings may be made on Thursday night if necessary. HaGaon Rav Moshe Feinstein *zt"l* is more lenient and permits weddings on Lag B'Omer eve in all cases and many follow this ruling (Igros Moshe OC1-159). Although many do not observe mourning after Lag B'Omer, the custom is not to make weddings until Rosh Chodesh Sivan. Thus weddings held on Lag B'Omer day must start before nightfall. The music and festivities may continue even after dark (Taz OC 493-2, Igros Moshe EH 1-97, and OC 1-159).

The prevalent *minhag* in Klal Yisroel is to light bonfires and rejoice in singing and dancing even on Lag B'Omer evening.

### Assorted Practices

Tachanun is not recited on Lag B'Omer, nor by *Minchah* the day before. Regarding *Lamenatzeach* by Shacharis, there is a difference of customs (see PRMG 493-3 and Pri Chadash 131-1).

Aside from the celebrations held at Meiron (the gravesite of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai), there are customs to visit graves of other *Tzadikim*. Such places include the *kever* of the Rema in Krakow, whose *yahrzeit* is on Lag B'Omer, as well.

The *poskim* tell us that on the evening of Lag B'Omer, one should be cautious not to mention the day "by name" prior to having counted *Sefira*. By saying "It's Lag B'Omer" or the like, one may have unwittingly fulfilled his *mitzvah* of counting that night's Omer and may not be able to count that night with a *bracha*. [See Nit'ei Gavriel]

### Upsherin

One of the more well known customs is to give a boy his first haircut on Lag B'Omer. In Eretz Yisrael thousands bring their boys to the *Kever* of Rabbi Shimon in Meiron and many bring their boys to the *Kever* of Shimon Hatzadik in East Yerushalayim.

### Bonfires

As Lag B'Omer is a day when we celebrate the greatness of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, there are different customs which relate to the *Kabalistic* nature of his teachings. One such custom is to light bonfires and candles, which represent the hidden light of the Torah. It is also customary to sing songs composed in honor of Rabbi Shimon, which are replete with *Kabalistic* references.

### Bows and Arrows

In Chasidic circles, many great leaders would go outdoors and make use of a bow and arrow. This symbolized the tradition that as long as Rabbi Shimon lived, rainbows, which are a symbol of Hashem's oath of restraint in destroying the world, were not seen. This, according to the *Zohar*, is a sign of a truly righteous person since his merit alone was enough to save the world, thereby not needing to rely on Hashem's restraint. The bow and arrow also symbolizes that Rabbi Shimon's merit took the place of the bow in protecting Bnei Yisrael.