

ל"ג בעומר - Lag Baomer

It is the wish of the Conservative Movement, represented by Masorti, MERCAZ, Marom and Noam in its affiliates in Latin America, that the light that guided our ancestors during Lag Baomer, shows our People the way.

The period of days between the holidays of Pesach and Shavout, It is well known, among the people of Israel to be referred to, according to the Torah, as SE-FIRAT HAOMER.

The Omer was a measure of volume of grain, a small amount of barley which was offered in the Temple of Jerusalem. At the beginning this count allowed the people to provide a special meaning for nature's rhythm. People would enjoy the transition from the Holyday of Spring (Jag Haviv), with the first harvest, to Jag Habikurim when the grains from the new harvest would arrive. This period would also show the process of transformation for the People of Israel, who, following the physical emancipation from Egypt, had to find and embrace Freedom (Torah, Israel).

Since for a very long time, the period of the Omer has been, for the people of Israel, a time of mourning, without a precise explanation for this tradition. Nevertheless, when the 33rd day of the count, "Lag Baomer", arrives the mourning is lifted.

When and why did "Lag Baomer" become a holiday? Many reasons were developed throughout history:

According to the Talmud, the great Rabbi Akiva had "twelve thousand pairs of students" and all of them died within the same period of time; between Pesach and Shavout. However, in Lag Baomer the plague was lifted, something which was unexpected. And this was a reason for celebration.

The increasing oppression, the heavy taxes and the expulsion of the farmers from their lands impoverished the people of Israel. Adriano's proclamations, which prevented the people from keeping the mitzvot, caused a rebellion between the years 132 and 135. Shimon Bar Coziba (named after the city where he was born, Coziba) became the leader of the people. It is said that Rabbi Akiva was the one who changed his

name to Bar Cojba (Son of the Star), as he believed that the time for Redemption was near. Rabbi Akiva, together with his students, joined the rebellion.

Many of them were captured or died in battle. It is possible that the Talmud was referring to them when speaking about the "12 thousand students of Rabbi Akiva who died in that time". According to the same tradition, it was during the 33rd day of the Omer that an unexpected turn occurred in favour of the rebels.

Rabbi Shimon Bar lojai, one of the most brilliant students of Rabbi Akiva, was also among the rebels. He had to escape from the romans, who were chasing him to kill him. It is said that, together with his son, Rabbi Shimon Bar lojai, lived for 13 years hidden in a cave until the rebellion was over. He, one of Rabbi Avika's most remarkable students, had managed to survive, but, years after, he died during "Lag Baomer". From this retail there is a tradition, nowadays, of gathering around his tomb, in Meron, during "Lag Baomer".

There are many and very different concepts we can extract from this episode, but I will only concentrate on one.

When Rabi Akiva's students died, we might think that the message of the Torah could have disappeared for the people of Israel, but, nevertheless, it managed to start again. Their passion, their love and their willingness to embrace their faith and their values together with their ability to pass them on was much stronger.

Lag Baomer arrives, this year, during a very particular time for our movement and for our institutions. The multidimensional aspect of the values of this day is shaped by the strength of the continuity of the message, the wholehearted love for the task and the belief in education.

We should follow Rabbi Akiva's example and become truly worthy of this celebration by making his behaviour, ours.

Rabbi Sarina Vitas



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