

Laughter, music, Israeli dancing (*rikudim*), playing with bows and arrows, bonfires and roasted potatoes are some of the memories that we associate with this chag, which comes right in the middle of *Sefirat haOmer* - the counting of the Omer, which we began to count on the second day of Pesach and count each day for seven weeks right until Shavuot. Hence its name "*Lag*", (the Hebrew letters equivalent to the number 33) "*B'Omer*" of the Omer.

Returning to the celebrations of Lag B'Omer, we associate this date with one of the greatest rabbis of all time, Rabbi Akiva, as well as another very special character, Bar Koziba, better known as Bar Kochva, as he was named by Rabbi Akiva, due to his Messianic image.

At that time, life was complicated; the People of Israel were dominated by the Roman Empire, the Holy Temple of Jerusalem having been destroyed in the year 70 B.C, together with the implementation by the Romans of a number of prohibitions, including the study of the Torah! As if that was not enough, at the beginning of the year 135 BC, a pagan city called Elia Capitolina, as well as a temple dedicated to Roman idols, were built in honor of the Roman Cesar Adriano on the ruins of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple, in an attempt to erase all vestiges of the Jewish presence in the Land of Israel.

This not only infuriated and angered the Jews, especially Rabbi Akiva, who had seen the Beit-Hamikdash with his own eyes, but they understood that the possibility of rebuilding the Temple and Jerusalem was becoming more remote.

These events triggered the Bar Kochva Revolution, with the support of Rabbi Akiva. They made the decision to confront the most powerful empire of those times in order to preserve their ideals and principles, to keep alive the flame of Judaism and its historical and spiritual connection with the Land of Israel.

Rabbi Akiva fought for the Torah not to be erased from Israel, as the Talmud relates, risking his own life to teach secretly in caves, in the worst conditions imaginable. Although this seems crazy, he took this risk because he believed in what he was doing for the sake of the Torah and Jewish education. He supported the armed revolt because he believed in freedom and the independence of the Jewish people.

Lag B'Omer is a date to celebrate, to remember and to revitalize the light of the Torah, but there are underlying shadows and a darkness that affects our feeling the complete joy of the festivities and invites us to reflect.

The Talmud tells that Rabbi Akiva's students were struck by a plague during the days of the counting of the Omer at the time of the Bar Kochva revolution, during which thousands of them were killed. However, on the thirty-third day (*Lag B'Omer*), a miracle occurred, the plague ceased and no students died on that day. Our sages z"l wondered why this plague was sent and they received a striking response. "Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students all of whom died during a single period, because they did not treat one another with respect" (Lebamot 62b). It is an interesting thought that a lack of respect led to their deaths. If we analyze this pragmatically, many of the soldiers of Bar Kochva were also students of Rabbi Akiva, and despite my lack of knowledge of army protocol, common sense tells me that in an army where the soldiers do not respect each other, their fate is very clear. However, what the Talmud is saying is even more

serious, infinitely deeper and more dangerous, since we are talking about Torah scholars, leaders and future spiritual leaders of the Jewish people, who don't respect each other. Clearly, arrogance, intolerance, individualism and personal conflict were traits of Rabbi Akiva's students, which lead to disrespect for one another. As said in Pirkei Avot 6:5: *"Do not seek greatness for yourself, and do not court honor"*, He who seeks honor, honor escapes him; he who escapes from honor, honor pursues him. During that period, the lack of respect of the Torah scholars to one another, led to the deaths of thousands upon thousands.

Possibly, as a result of this scenario, Rabbi Akiva emphasized a teaching: "Love your neighbor as yourself, as a fundamental principle of the Torah". As he learned from Hillel, the Elder, all the rest is commentary. The message is clear: if we do not behave with respect towards each other, regardless of our beliefs and opinions, the Torah's light will be consumed until it is extinguished. Respect above all!

This Lag B'Omer, let us light many fires and allow their light to inspire us to elevate the values of our Torah and Am Israel, sustained by love and respect for each other, in order to build lasting relationships with those same values of love and respect.

***Lag B'Omer Sameach!!***

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