

LAG B'OMER

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

5.6.15

THIS IS THE holiday that could finally stump me. I've barely heard of the Omer, other than the phrase "Counting the Omer," though I never knew what we were counting.

Now I see the Omer is the forty-nine days from the second day of Passover to the eve of Shavuot (which is the holiday that marks the giving of the Torah).

We're also counting the forty-nine days from the start of the barley harvest, when people would bring a sheaf of the newly harvested grain to the Temple to thank God. An "omer" is a sheaf (some say a certain measure) of grain. This holiday is the thirty-third day of the forty-nine. Lag B'omer, translated literally, means: thirty-third day of the Omer.

That's all I got.

So with that blank slate, I delve into the backstory and stumble into meaning along the way. If I've learned anything this year, it's that resonance affixes itself to a holiday depending on what's happening in your life. Yom Kippur took on a strange poignancy because Ben was applying to college. Hanukkah candles flickered differently because we were losing Milt. The Fast of Esther became a referendum on whether I had the nerve to sign on for the shul presidency. What will

emerge as Lag B’Omer’s news peg? Robin and I just celebrated a “significant” birthday. My close friend Michael is marrying his longtime partner, Daniel, in a Jewish ceremony on the day the Omer ends. Two days later, Molly will join thirty-five fellow tenth-graders for Central’s confirmation service—the ceremony that signifies the next step for a teenage Jew.

I’m not sure where I’ll find the holiday hook, but then it appears; what at first had seemed like forced pertinence becomes pertinent, at least to me.

But first the legend that underpins the holiday: in the second century, 24,000 students who studied with the famed Rabbi Akiva (venerated because he learned Torah late in life, yet mastered it) were killed by a vicious plague.

What sin made Akiva’s students deserve such a wipeout? “They did not treat each other with respect.” That’s the sole explanation in the Talmud.

Really? That’s it? I mean, disrespect is bad, but a capital offense? I’m intrigued. Before investigating any further, I pause to appreciate the idea that Judaism might take mutual respect *that* seriously. The website Kabbalah.info sums it up without mitigation: “Kabbalists saw [the students’] plague as a result of their growing egoism, which led them to unfounded hatred. This was the opposite of their teacher’s rule, ‘Love thy friend as thyself.’”

They ignored their teacher’s golden rule and died for it.

But what do 24,000 dead Akiva students have to do with Lag B’Omer? Answer: the holiday marks the *end* of the plague that killed them, and also heralds the *yartzheit* (death anniversary) of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, one of Akiva’s new crop of students, a group that turned out some of the greatest rabbis of the next generation.

The fact that Shimon Bar Yochai, or “Rashbi,” as he’s known, was taken on as a new student must, in some part, be due to his respect for fellow Jews. The nice guy did not suffer the same fate as his selfish predecessors. That’s a moral many would hold up today.

And then, by chance, I’m asked to write a blessing for Michael and Daniel’s wedding. A blessing for laughter. The grooms have asked

seven close friends to compose seven homemade blessings to be recited before their vows—one for creativity, one for honesty, one for adventure, etc. Their wedding lands on the last day of the Omer—on Shavuot, when weddings are technically not supposed to take place because it constitutes mixing one joy with another, which is forbidden on any *Yom Tov*—biblical holiday.

But my friends' nonconformity feels fitting: they will stand under the huppah on Shavuot when Orthodox weddings are verboten; they are two men taking vows when gay marriage was recently unthinkable and remains unsanctioned by Orthodox Judaism. They are defying traditions, yet also embracing them. And they represent, for me, the kind of respect that's often missing: for individual choices. For difference. For one another. That's my Lag B'Omer spark, as far-flung as it may seem.

And in odd symmetry, just a week before this holiday, gay marriage is debated before the Supreme Court in a landmark case, *Obergefell v. Hodges*. As I scroll through Facebook's proverbial town square, a Reform rabbi has posted a brusque document I've never seen before: the 2011 *Declaration on the Torah Approach to Homosexuality*, which says gay children are victims of "emotional wounds" and should receive psychological help to eschew sin and return to God. It was signed by more than a hundred Orthodox rabbis, including several esteemed faculty at New York's Yeshiva University.

"We emphatically reject the notion that a homosexually inclined person cannot overcome his or her inclination and desire. Behaviors are changeable. The Torah does not forbid something which is impossible to avoid. Abandoning people to lifelong loneliness and despair by denying all hope of overcoming and healing their same-sex attraction is heartlessly cruel."

It is this document, in my view, that reads as "heartlessly cruel," echoing exactly the ancient error of Akiva's students: profound disrespect, forgetting Akiva's teaching to "*love thy friend as thyself*."

I learn that this statement was written in reaction to a much more compassionate one in 2010—the "Statement of Principles," considered at the time to be a major step for the Orthodox community, signed by a different list of a hundred-plus Orthodox rabbis:

All human beings are created in the image of God and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect (kevod haberiyot). . . . Embarrassing, harassing, or demeaning someone with a homosexual orientation or same-sex attraction is a violation of Torah prohibitions that embody the deepest values of Judaism.

But it fell short of full tolerance:

Halakhah [Jewish law] sees heterosexual marriage as the ideal model and sole legitimate outlet for human sexual expression. . . . Halakhic Judaism views all male and female same-sex sexual interactions as prohibited. . . . But it is critical to emphasize that halakhah only prohibits homosexual acts; it does not prohibit orientation or feelings of same-sex attraction, and nothing in the Torah devalues the human beings who struggle with them.

For this wondering Jew—trying always to find the current idea in the ancient story, these two statements exemplify modern tensions around respect.



The rules of Lag B’Omer require us to suspend marriages and all happy occasions starting on Passover until the thirty-third day of the Omer. No joy is allowed during that time because we are supposedly in mourning for Akiva’s students. That extended “shiva” lifts on Lag B’Omer. All picnics, live music, haircuts, and weddings may recommence on this holiday.

But when that Torah Declaration appears on my Facebook stream just four days before nuptials can resume, I can’t help but think about the prejudices still ingrained and the gay marriages still prohibited. Some might say the sin of disrespect is doomed to repeat itself.

I compose my blessing for Michael and Daniel: “May you laugh in that particular way you laugh together—not just the chuckles but the doubled-over, not-breathing variety. May you remember—especially when there are hurdles, how easily you make each other smile, how uniquely you let each other be your silliest selves, how your sons make you beam. . . .”

Marriage is on my brain, true, but it's also in the holiday's DNA. I follow the crumbs that Rashbi left. I have to trace the wedding trail, and hope I don't lose you:

The anniversary of Rashbi's death, celebrated on Lag B'Omer, is called a *Hillula*, which means "wedding celebration." That's because Rashbi announced that when he died, he would *marry God*. More specifically: he'd wed the *feminine* aspect of God—the "shekhinah."

The emphasis on God's feminine nature, a radical idea when it was introduced in the Middle Ages, first gets explored in detail in the *Zohar*, the mystical Torah commentary that is the chief text of Kabballism—Jewish mysticism. Rashbi, one of Akiva's students, is said to be the *Zohar*'s composer, but the byline belongs to a rabbi named Moses de Leon in thirteenth-century Spain, whom I'm not going to go into because he would be one too many characters to keep straight. Since Rashbi is the primary rabbinic figure who appears in the *Zohar*, heading a group of fellow rabbi-mystics, the myth endures that he's the author, and that he revealed its "deepest" secrets on the day he died, the day he wed God.

To understand the *Zohar* (which I don't), I turn to the expert: Kabbalah scholar Daniel Matt, based in Berkeley, California, who has devoted eighteen years to translating the *Zohar* from the Aramaic to the English, with elucidating commentary and a ton of patience. He is currently completing the ninth volume of his series, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*.

"Rashbi sees his own death as his union with the shekhinah," Matt explains in scholarly, calming tones. "He said, 'I see God is coming and the souls of the righteous are coming and they're all coming here to participate in my hillula.'"

Rashbi's marrying God means the righteous can, too. It appears that "the righteous"—those who do good deeds, follow the commandments (mitzvot), and live ethically—are the ones who get to walk down the symbolic aisle with God. "By performing the mitzvot," says Matt, "we stimulate the divine union."

Put plainly: if you're good, you get to marry God, too.

I protest to Matt on the phone: Does God, masculine or feminine, really *need* us in marriage or partnership?

Yes. To borrow from *Jerry Maguire*, we complete God. Says Matt, “The Zohar’s notion is that God cannot be whole or manifested in the world without human ethical behavior—living virtuously. That’s one of its main teachings.”

It reminds me of the Passover discussion about Elijah, the prophet—how he needs our participation to repair the world. We open the door at the end of the seder to symbolically usher in the Messianic time; Elijah can’t achieve it without us. Similarly, in this holiday, God needs the righteous (i.e., Rashbi), those who understand mutual respect, to partner and complete creation.

But was Rashbi righteous? Rabbi Jill Jacobs, executive director of the Manhattan-based T’ruah, which organizes rabbis and cantors on behalf of human rights, tells me the story of Rashbi in the cave, which reveals a darker side of the hero of Lag B’Omer, Akiva’s respectful student.

Here’s the Talmudic legend (it’s another detour, but worth it): Rashbi was dismissive of the accomplishments of the Roman government—the markets, the roads, and the bathhouses—stating that they were all done not for the sake of the people, but to serve the government’s needs. For that outspokenness, Rashbi was sentenced to death. He and his son-in-law escaped to a cave for the next twelve years, studying Torah so intensively that when Rashbi emerged, he was judgmental of any Jew who wasn’t studying just as hard.

He punished the farmers whom he observed working the fields instead of hitting the books, vaporizing them with his mere gaze. God disapproved of that. “God chastised him,” Jill Jacobs recounts, “saying to Bar Yohai, ‘Are you out to destroy the world? Go back in your cave.’ So Rashbi has to go back for another year until he’s able to deal with human beings. For me, that’s a reminder that it’s not just about living this perfect, wholly religious life that is separated from humanity, but that we actually have to be able to live *with* humanity, and engage with the human world. That’s actually what God wants from us. Not just a life of Torah.”

It's yet another lesson in respectful coexistence: a person should be deepened by Torah, not blinded by it. Rashbi may have been righteous in his piety, but he had to *learn* righteousness when it came to his fellow human beings. The Declaration on Homosexuality has a whiff of Rashbi's initial fiery gaze—so consumed with Torah that it overlooks humanity.



As I mentioned, Lag B'Omer doesn't offer many rituals or prayers. In Israel, the Orthodox gather in the thousands to dance and light bonfires in Meron—thought to be Rashbi's gravesite. I can't justify a long flight to Israel to build bonfires. And I wouldn't feel right joining in the mirth anyway. The revelers will be marking Rashbi's hillula—his wedding—when others still cannot marry. They will be focusing on Rashbi's mystical union with God, rather than on those students who failed to show mutual respect and who commit a similar offense today. They will be lifting up a great teacher of Torah without acknowledging that, at one point, he took Torah too far.

Maybe it's overly convenient to connect all these threads for Lag B'Omer—the students' ancient sin and its current manifestation; the Zohar's message that only an ethical life leads to God's love; the Torah Declaration that appeared on Facebook—just before Lag B'Omer and my friends' gay wedding scheduled for Omer's end.

But Matt says this holiday invites our own interpretations. "One of the attractive things about Lag B'Omer is its undefined character," says Matt. "There's not really a clear specific reason for it. It's not mentioned in the Torah or Tanach or Talmud. . . . So it invites creativity."

That makes me feel a little better. Though I don't yet feel entitled to be "creative" about these holidays, I am open to where they might take me. And on this Lag B'Omer, I choose to focus on the Talmud's plain phrase about Akiva's students: "*They did not treat each other with respect. And the world was desolate.*" The world *is* desolate when people are intolerant or disrespectful of others.

I dissected my first Lag without an inkling of what was to come in terms of the election circus of 2015–16. But Lag B’Omer will, each year, be a yardstick for me of whether civility is in peril. And though I can’t cry for Akiva’s solipsistic and ill-mannered students, or admire the self-important Rashbi—who believed God chose *him* to marry, who dismissed humanity when he emerged bleary-eyed from the cave—I can hold on to the *ideal* of righteousness in a world where goodness is not at all a given.



Michael and Daniel’s wedding is called for 5:30 p.m. in Prospect Park under the trees, where we all sit on backless benches, huddling because of the unusual spring cold. Dave keeps his arm around me to warm us both. Some of my college buddies are shivering alongside, all of us giddy to be celebrating this. The huppah finally appears with the couple walking under it. The four poles are held aloft by parents, siblings, and closest friends, a moving parasol over Michael and Daniel and their adorable little boys. I can’t stop smiling at the sight of their foursome, not just because they’re a handsome tableau in their smart suits and boutonnieres, but because they’ve chosen to cement a fifteen-year relationship with ceremony and witnesses, despite having already been a family for so long. Daniel holds the older son’s hand; Michael carries the younger one in his arms.

The vows bring tears because they’re so specifically loving. The reception afterwards is jubilant in an airy, beautiful hall in the park called the Picnic House, with blond wooden floors, white steel ceiling beams, a fireplace, and flowers festooning the long banquet tables. I eat a lot, dance hard, and toast the grooms with a spoof song that my friends and I wrote to the tune of “Summer Lovin” from the musical *Grease*.

The whole night heralds more than mutual respect; it heralds much-deserved joy. The shiva for Akiva’s students ended a little early this year.

Rabbi Brad Hirschfeld

ON LAG B'OMER

What caused 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva's disciples to behave so disrespectfully toward each other, as the Talmud describes, that they died? Not what was the sin which makes this punishment reasonable in the rabbinic mind, but what justified the behavior in the minds of those students? They didn't all die at once, after all, so what kept them at one another, persisting in the same hurtful and shaming behavior even as they were dying for doing so? What keeps any of us locked in such behavior even as we, and those we love, so often pay a heavy price for it?

It often comes down to valuing correctness over compassion. Correctness, truth, accuracy. Don't get me wrong; without them we are lost. But we are just as lost if they are all we have, or all we fight over, as is so often the case, especially when animated by deep faith and conviction, as the 24,000 surely were. Perhaps the path to balancing correctness and compassion can be found in prayer—not ours, but God's.

What does God pray? According to the Talmud (Ber. 7a): "Let it be my will that my loving kindness suppresses my anger and that I deal with my children beyond the letter of the law." Perhaps God's imagined prayer could be our lived lives. It's certainly hard to imagine those 24,000 dying had they believed as much. Imagine what believing it could do for us.

Rabbi Jill Jacobs

ON LAG B'OMER

The punishment for Rabbi Akiva's students is a bit of a warning . . . what God doesn't want from us. That we're so deep in what we think is our own truth that we can't engage with each other. There have to be relationships. It can't just be, "I know my truth and therefore I'm not going to engage." Akiva's students didn't behave respectfully to one another, and it was actually destroying the world.