



Service times

Friday 7 PM

Shabbos 9:30-11:30 am

# INSPIRE

LAG BOMER - EMOR  
19TH IYAR - 1 MAY 2021

## ATTAINING IMMORTALITY

Shabbat Times

Candle Lighting 8:07pm

Shabbos ends 9:28pm

By Natali Silberberg

What is the Jewish perspective on death? What is the proper way to commemorate a person's passing? Today it is fashionable to pay homage to the deceased by "celebrating their lives," instead of focusing on mourning. Is this a correct approach?

The Omer period seems to offer conflicting messages on this subject. On one hand, the Omer features restrictions on revelry and festivities, a sign of mourning for the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 disciples who lacked proper respect for each other. On the other hand, we shelve all vestiges of mourning for one day, Lag BaOmer. The primary reason? Because we joyously celebrate the yahrtzeit (anniversary of the passing) of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai! Why the double standard?

Every person consists of a body and soul. The body eventually fades and returns to dust, while the immortal soul lives on for eternity. But with what is the "person" identified? Does the person die together with the body, or does he share the soul's immortality? This depends on the person's lifelong "affiliation." The person whose life was affiliated with the soul, whose focus was spirituality and love of G-d, doesn't die. He merely moves on to a different dimension, where unencumbered by physical needs and distractions he is free to continue his pursuit of spirituality. Conversely, for the person who prioritized the desires and aspirations of the body, physical demise brings "life" to a crashing halt—his life's focus is now forever gone.

On a deeper level, Torah and mitzvot, too, consist of a body and soul. The "revealed" side of Torah—largely comprised of the Talmud and Jewish law, the dos and don'ts—is the body of G-d's wisdom. The esoteric teachings of the Torah, the teachings of Kabbalah, are the soul of Torah. It is possible to be completely immersed in the brilliant minutiae of Talmudic logic, or to be meticulous in the observance of every nuance of the mitzvot, but to be as spiritually lifeless as a soulless body. The teachings of Kabbalah introduce the soul into Torah and mitzvot, explaining the profound spiritual meaning of every mitzvah in its supernal source, as well as the "spiritualization" of character which that mitzvah is intended to achieve in the heart and mind of its observer.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was the embodiment of the soul-ful person. The Zohar, which he authored, is the fundamental Kabbalistic treatise, the most definitive work on the soul of the Torah. Many years of his life were spent in a cave, where he was hiding from the Roman authorities. While there, he was incapable of performing the "body" of most mitzvot; he did not have access to matzah on Passover or the Four Species on Sukkot. Instead, the holy books explain, he focused on the "soul" of the mitzvot: bathing in the G-dly light which pervades every commandment. No words can better describe Rabbi Shimon's soul-ful life than those he himself uttered on the day of his passing: "All the days of my life, I was knotted to Him in one knot . . . With Him my soul is one; with Him [my soul] is ablaze; with Him I am united." Such a person does not die. The yahrtzeit of such a person is duly celebrated—a celebration of the person's immortality.

Rabbi Akiva's students were deficient in their "soul-fulness". Their disrespect for their colleagues stemmed from a preoccupation with externalities—body-related features and qualities. At the core, the soul of a Jew is intrinsically united with the soul of every other Jew. Thus, the soul-ful person loves and respects every Jew as naturally as he loves and cares for himself. This critical flaw led to the demise of these promising scholars. And, unlike Rabbi Shimon, their death was real—a tragedy mourned by our nation to this day.

Lag BaOmer's lesson for us is exceedingly clear: we must choose the path which leads to immortality. This includes:

- Focusing on the soul: heeding her call and quenching her thirst for more spiritual life. The first step in this process is allowing her to express her fiery passion through daily meaningful prayer.
- Focusing on the soul of Torah: studying the teachings of Kabbalah, specifically as they are applied and explained in the teachings of Chassidut. Join a class on the subject known as the "Tree of Life."
- Focusing on the soul of the mitzvot: not sufficing with the physical act of any given mitzvah, but allowing the message of the mitzvah to impact our character and attitude.

You can be a Soul Survivor.

In its account of the festivals of the Jewish year, this week's Parshah contains the following statement:

You shall dwell in thatched huts for seven days. Everyone included in Israel must live in such thatched huts. This is so that future generations will know that I caused the Israelites to live in sukkot when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the L-rd your G-d.

What precisely this means was the subject of disagreement between two great teachers of the Mishnaic era, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva. According to the Talmud Bavli, Rabbi Eliezer holds that the reference is to the clouds of glory that accompanied the Israelites on their journey through the desert. Rabbi Akiva maintains that the verse is to be understood literally (sukkot mamash). It means "huts"—no more, no less.

A similar difference of opinion exists between the great medieval Jewish commentators. Rashi and Ramban favor the "clouds of glory" interpretation. Ramban cites as proof the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the end of days:

Then the L-rd will create over all of Mount Zion, and over those who assemble there, a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over all the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain.

Here the word sukkah clearly refers not to a natural but to a miraculous protection.

Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, however, favor the literal interpretation. Rashbam explains as follows: the festival of Sukkot, when the harvest was complete and the people were surrounded by the blessings of the land, was the time to remind them of how they came to be there. The Israelites would relive the wilderness years, during which they had no permanent home. They would then feel a sense of gratitude to G-d for bringing them to the land. Rashbam's proof-text is Moses' speech in Devarim 8:

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the L-rd your G-d for the good land He has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the L-rd your G-d . . . Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the L-rd your G-d, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery . . . You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the L-rd your G-d, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth, confirming his covenant which He swore to your forefathers, as it is today.

According to Rashbam, Sukkot (like Pesach) is a reminder of the humble origins of the Jewish people, a powerful antidote to the risks of affluence. That is one of the overarching themes of Moses' speeches in the book of Devarim, and a mark of his greatness as a leader. The real challenge to the Jewish people, he warned, was not the dangers they faced in the wilderness, but the opposite—the sense of wellbeing and security they would have once they settled the land. The irony—and it has happened many times in the history of nations—is that people remember G-d in times of distress, but forget Him in times of plenty. That is when cultures become decadent and begin to decline.

A question, however, remains. According to the view that sukkot is to be understood literally, what miracle does the festival of Sukkot represent? Pesach celebrates the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt with signs and wonders. Shavuot recalls the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, the only time in history when an entire people experienced an unmediated revelation of G-d. On the "clouds of glory" interpretation, Sukkot fits this scheme. It recalls the miracles in the wilderness, the forty years during which they ate manna from heaven, drank water from a rock, and were led by a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. (In 1776, Thomas Jefferson chose this image as his design for the Great Seal of the United States.) But on the view that the sukkah is not a symbol but a fact—a hut, a booth, nothing more—what miracle does it represent? There is nothing exceptional in living in a portable home if you are a nomadic group living in the Sinai Desert. It is what Bedouin do to this day. Where, then, is the miracle?

A surprising and lovely answer is given by the prophet Jeremiah:

Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem:

"I remember the devotion of your youth,  
how, as a bride, you loved me  
and followed me through the desert,  
through a land not sown.

Throughout Tanach, most of the references to the wilderness years focus on the graciousness of G-d and the ingratitude of the people: their quarrels and complaints, their constant inconstancy. Jeremiah does the opposite. To be sure, there were bad things about those years, but against them stands the simple fact that the Israelites had the faith and courage to embark on a journey through an unknown land, fraught with danger, sustained only by their trust in G-d. They were like Sarah, who accompanied Abraham on his journey, leaving "his land, birthplace and father's house" behind. They were like Tziporah, who went with Moses on his risk-laden mission to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. There is a faith that is like love; there is a love that calls for faith. That is what the Israelites showed in leaving a land where they had lived for 210 years and traveling out into the desert, "a land not sown," not knowing what would befall them on the way, but trusting in G-d to bring them to their destination.

Perhaps it took Rabbi Akiva, the great lover of Israel, to see that what was truly remarkable about the wilderness years was not that the Israelites were surrounded by the clouds of glory, but that they were an entire nation without a home or houses; they were like nomads without a place of refuge. Exposed to the elements, at risk from any surprise attack, they nonetheless continued on their journey, in the faith that G-d would not desert them.

To a remarkable degree, Sukkot came to symbolize not just the forty years in the wilderness, but also two thousand years of exile.

Following the destruction of the second Temple, Jews were scattered throughout the world. Almost nowhere did they have rights. Nowhere could they consider themselves at home. Wherever they were, they were there on sufferance, dependent on a ruler's whim. At any moment, without forewarning, they could be expelled, as they were from England in 1290; from Vienna in 1421; Cologne, 1424; Bavaria, 1442; Perugia, Vicenza, Parma and Milan in the 1480s; and most famously, from Spain in 1492. These expulsions gave rise to the Christian myth of "the wandering Jew"—conveniently ignoring the fact that it was Christians who imposed this fate on them. Yet even they were often awestruck at the fact that despite everything Jews did not give up their faith, when (in Judah Halevi's phrase) "with a word lightly spoken" they could have converted to the dominant faith and put an end to their sufferings.

Sukkot is the festival of a people for whom, for twenty centuries, every house was a mere temporary dwelling, every stop no more than a pause in a long journey. I find it deeply moving that Jewish tradition called this time zeman simchateinu, "the season of our joy." That, surely, is the greatness of the Jewish spirit: that with no protection other than their faith in G-d, Jews were able to celebrate in the midst of suffering, and affirm life in the full knowledge of its risk and uncertainty. That is the faith of a remarkable nation.

R. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev once explained why the festival of Nissan has two names, Pesach and Chag ha-Matzot. The name "Pesach" represents the greatness of G-d, who "passed over" the houses of the Israelites in Egypt. The name "Chag ha-Matzot" represents the greatness of the Israelites, who were willing to follow G-d into the wilderness without provisions. In the Torah, G-d calls the festival "Chag haMatzot" in praise of Israel. The Jewish people, however, called it "Pesach" to sing the praise of G-d.

That, it seems, is the argument between R. Eliezer and R. Akiva about Sukkot. According to R. Eliezer, it represents G-d's miracle, the clouds of glory. According to R. Akiva, however, it represents the miracle of Israel—their willingness to continue the long journey to freedom, vulnerable and at great risk, led only by the call of G-d.

Why then, according to Rabbi Akiva, is Sukkot celebrated at harvest time? The answer is in the very next verse of the prophecy of Jeremiah. After speaking of "the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me," the prophet adds:

Israel is holy to G-d,

The first fruit of His harvest.

Just as during Tishri the Israelites celebrated their harvest, so G-d celebrates His—a people who, whatever else their failings, have stayed loyal to heaven's call for longer, and through a more arduous set of journeys, than any other people on earth.

The Torah section of Emor ("Speak") begins with the special laws pertaining to the kohanim ("priests"), the kohen gadol ("high priest"), and the Temple service: A kohen may not become ritually impure through contact with a dead body, save on the occasion of the death of a close relative. A kohen may not marry a divorcee, or a woman with a promiscuous past; a kohen gadol can marry only a virgin. A kohen with a physical deformity cannot serve in the Holy Temple, nor can a deformed animal be brought as an offering.

A newborn calf, lamb or kid must be left with its mother for seven days before being eligible for an offering; one may not slaughter an animal and its offspring on the same day.

The second part of Emor lists the annual Callings of Holiness—the festivals of the Jewish calendar: the weekly Shabbat; the bringing of the Passover offering on 14 Nissan; the seven-day Passover festival beginning on 15 Nissan; the bringing of the Omer offering from the first barley harvest on the second day of Passover, and the commencement, on that day, of the 49-day Counting of the Omer, culminating in the festival of Shavuot on the fiftieth day; a "remembrance of shofar blowing" on 1 Tishrei; a solemn fast day on 10 Tishrei; the Sukkot festival—during which we are to dwell in huts for seven days and take the "Four Kinds"—beginning on 15 Tishrei; and the immediately following holiday of the "eighth day" of Sukkot (Shemini Atzeret). Next the Torah discusses the lighting of the menorah in the Temple, and the showbread (lechem hapanim) placed weekly on the table there.

Emor concludes with the incident of a man executed for blasphemy, and the penalties for murder (death) and for injuring one's fellow or destroying his property (monetary compensation).

Ezekiel 44:15-31.

This week's haftorah discusses various laws that pertain to the kohanim, the priests, a topic also discussed at length in the first part of the week's Torah portion.

Ezekiel prophesies about the service of the kohanim in the third Holy Temple which will be rebuilt after the Final Redemption. The prophet describes their priestly vestments, their personal care, whom they may and may not marry, and their special purity requirements which preclude them from coming in contact with a corpse unless it's for a next of kin. He also discusses their calling as teachers and spiritual leaders.

The prophet conveys G-d's word: "You shall give them no possession in Israel; I am their possession." The kohanim do not receive a portion in the Land of Israel, instead, they partake of the sacrifices as well as various tithes.

### WISHING ALL THOSE WITH YARTZEIT THIS WEEK CHAIM ARUCHIM

Davis, Lila father Younesi, Feizollah Yedidya ben Sholom Monday 3/5/21 Iyar 21, 5781  
Bermange, Josephine father (Bermange), Yisrael Meir Yisrael Meir ben Thursday 6/5/21 Iyar 24, 5781

### JEWISH HUMOUR

#### The Israeli Tailor

Itzik works in Israel's high tech sector and before a business trip overseas, he takes his trousers to a tailor in Jerusalem named Epstein. But after he returns from his trip, Itzik forgets all about his pants. Years go by, until one day Itzik reaches into a jacket pocket and to his surprise finds the tailor's receipt. He goes straight to the tailor, hands him the receipt and asks, "Epstein, are my pants still here?"  
"Yes of course," the tailor replies. "They'll be ready next Tuesday."

### RIDDLE OF THE WEEK

Find the four digit number in which the first digit is one fourth of the last digit, the second digit is 6 times the first digit, and the third digit is the second digit plus 3. What is it?

last weeks answer  
American Football



## STORY TIME

On Lag B'Omer it is customary for children to go out into the fields and play with bows and arrows. For adults, there is a custom of visiting the local cemetery on Lag B'Omer. In the town of Homil, every year on this day, all the Jews would pay their respects to the dearly departed: parents, Chasidim, Torah scholars and other beloved members of the community.

The Chevra Kadisha, or Burial Society, would also make its annual visit to the cemetery on the afternoon of Lag B'Omer. Notebook in hand, its members would make the rounds of all the graves and check on the condition of the tombstones. Anything requiring repair was duly noted.

Towards evening, their inspection over, the members of the Chevra Kadisha would gather together for a communal seuda (festive meal). It was always an inspirational event, dedicated to furthering the observance of "acts of true kindness" (as Jewish burial practices are called, as the dead cannot be expected to reciprocate).

It was also customary for the famous Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac of Homil (1770 - 1857) to participate in the gathering, joining the Chevra Kadisha in their celebration. Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac, one of the greatest followers of the early Chabad leaders, would make a "l'chaim" and deliver some appropriate words of Torah.

Before he arrived, however, Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac would always conduct his own pilgrimage to visit the grave-sites of his predecessors. Year after year he would follow the same schedule, until one time, something most unusual occurred.

That Lag B'Omer it was already growing late when Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac began his rounds, accompanied by the cemetery caretaker. The setting sun elongated his shadow, accentuating his long white beard. At each grave the Rabbi whispered something audible only to him before moving on to the next one.

At the very end of the cemetery, in the newer section where the most recently deceased were interred, the rabbi paused in front of an obviously new marble monument. Bending down, he read the inscription to make sure it was the one he was looking for before nodding his head slightly.

"Quickly!" he suddenly turned and called to the caretaker. "Go back to town and bring an ax. A strong one, with a heavy blade." The caretaker did as he was told, and few minutes later he was back.

"Now I want you to obliterate everything it says here," the rabbi instructed him. "Take off all the words of praise, all the flowery eulogies and tributes. Leave nothing but the name of the deceased and the date he died."

The caretaker hesitated, frozen in place. But Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac was insistent. "Please, just do what I tell you," he implored him.

With trembling hands the caretaker lifted the ax and demolished the engraving, erasing the litany of good deeds the deceased had accomplished during his lifetime. When the deed was done, a look of satisfaction could be seen on the face of the rabbi. "Good," he told the astounded caretaker. "Now I can attend the seuda with the Chevra Kadisha."

The news of what had happened quickly spread throughout Homil. Indeed, the rumor reached the ears of the members of the Burial Society even before Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac arrived at their celebration.

"Thank G-d I was able to do an act of kindness for a Jewish soul," the rabbi announced as he walked in the door. It was obvious from the way everyone was looking at him that they were completely mystified by his behavior.

The rabbi sat down and made a blessing over a glass of spirits. "L'chaim - to life!" he wished the assemblage before launching into an explanation:

"A few weeks ago," he began, "a simple Jew passed away in Homil. His funeral was small and unassuming. Only a few members of his family were present, plus representatives of the Chevra Kadisha. Like many others, despite the fact that he wasn't particularly learned or saintly, he was a warmhearted Jew who had many mitzvot to his credit. On the other hand, he also occasionally faltered like everyone else. In other words, he was your average Jew.

After he died, his soul went up to the Heavenly Court, where his good deeds and bad deeds came under intense scrutiny. The judgment was about to be issued when, all of a sudden, an angel stood up holding a glistening white marble tablet. It was the tombstone that the deceased's children had erected over his final resting place.

"It seems that the man's children had decided to bestow upon their father - or upon themselves - a number of undeserved honors. The lengthy inscription described a lifetime of devoutness and piety, which, in reality, was only a fabrication. The Heavenly Court was disturbed by this miscarriage of justice.

"Today I did a very great favor for the soul of the departed," the rabbi concluded. "When I erased all of the undeserved words of praise, the Heavenly Court ruled that the man's soul could now receive the true reward it was legitimately entitled to."

## FOOD 4 THE SOUL

The laws of agricultural charity are located in our Torah portion of Emor, in the midst of a discussion about the holidays. Passover and Shavuot are on one side, and Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Sukkot on the other. They are placed in the middle of the holiday sacrifices to teach us that these laws - leaving the gleanings and the corner of the field - are equivalent to building the Temple. We must sweat and toil to produce the harvest, and yet leave the gleanings and corner simply because G-d commanded it. We must sweat and toil to build the Temple, without a thought of personal satisfaction. We must sweat and toil to change our natures, thus bringing redemption to the world with Moshiach speedily in our days.