

Beha'alotcha: Lag B'Omer

- Nisson Shulman. Combining halakhah and history. Why mourn for Rabbi Akiva's students so long afterwards when we have so many other things to mourn in between? Why do the minhagim of Sefirah emphasize mourning on the early part and on the later part of Sefira respectively? Lessons from history appropriate to this period of time, Lag Baomer, Sefira, Yom Haatzmaut that was past and Yom Yerushalayim to come.

Beha'alotcha: Lag B'Omer - Sefira

1. Let us combine a little halakhah and history.

It is sixty years since the concentration camps were liberated, and fifty-seven years since the State of Israel was declared. Two weeks ago we celebrated Yom Haatzmaut. This week we celebrate Lag Baomer. In little more than a week we will celebrate Yom Yerushalayim, the day of the reunification of Jerusalem.

Can we connect these events? I think we can and should.

2. And Halakhah: this is a time when we maintain customs of mourning. Rabbi Joseph Caro, the Sefardic author of the Shulhan Aruch, suggests that these observances should go from Pesach to Lag BaOmer. The Ashkenazic Rabbi, Moses Isserles (Ram"i), requires a longer period, till just a few days before Shavuot. Can we include these customs in our discussion? Again, I think we can and should, especially since, in early times this period between Pesach and Shavuot was actually a joyous one.

3. Why, then, this mourning period? Why is Lag Baomer a turning point for some and not for others? Because of a tragedy that struck Rabbi Akiva's students almost 2000 years ago? Isn't it strange that we should institute sefira customs, observance of mourning for Rabbi Akiva's students who died almost two thousand years ago, and not for the more recent tragedies, even the holocaust itself with the loss of six million, a loss which was many more times the number of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva who were lost? For the Holocaust we have one day of Shoah remembrance, for Rabbi Akiva's students, semi-mourning for an entire period of time. Isn't this strange? I submit that it is not so strange.

4. First, because the loss in Rabbi Akiva's time, was - according to some scholars - not a plague of illness, but possibly battle setbacks in the revolt which led to the defeat of Bar Kochba and which was actually the final blow that sealed the destruction of the Temple and the galut of all these years, so that we are actually mourning more than Rabbi Akiva and his students.

5. Second, because the aveilut is for the great Master and his students, and Jewish survival depends on the transmission of Judaism from Master to students.

6. But also, because in the sorrow for Rabbi Akiva's students are bound up many sorrows that we mourn through history. For if we examine Jewish history we realize that there are many reasons to mourn at this time.

During Sefira, in 1096, the Crusades, which left a path of murder and desolation in every Jewish community they crossed, began their massacres in all the great communities of Ashkenazic Jewry, such as Spiers, Worms and Mayence.

Again during Sefira, almost 300 years later, in 1348, Jews were accused of causing the Black Plague in Europe by poisoning the wells from which Christians drank. The pogrom that followed totally desolated European Jewry. It destroyed its culture and books as well as its people.

Exactly 300 years later, in 1648, during Sefira, the Cossack uprising under Bogdon Chmielnicki began in Poland and raged against the Jews of Central Europe until almost a million Jews perished in its fury.

About 300 years later, in 1933, "The Book burning of Berlin", when 20,000 volumes of sacred books were burned at Goebles' command, took place on the 5th day of Iyar.

Ten years later, again on the 5th of Iyar, the last vestige of resistance was crushed in the Warsaw Ghetto, and it was totally given over to the flames, which raged a few days longer.

All of these tragedies began during Sefira.

7. Lest it is thought that only Ashkenazic Jewry suffered during this period of time, the order by Ferdinand and Isabella, finally and irrevocably expelling the Jews from Spain during the Spanish Inquisition, was signed on the 5th of Iyar, 1492. It seems likely that the Sefardic tragedies took place during the earlier part of Sefira. The author of the Shulhan Aruch, Rabbi Joseph Karo, was a Sefardi. He was therefore content to follow the custom ending the period of sorrow with Lag Baomer.

But the Ashkenazic tragedies, like the Cossack rebellion, the Black Plague pogroms, the Crusades, all began during the later part of Sefira. So the Ram"za, who interprets Jewish law of the Shulhan Aruch for Ashkenazic Jews, favoured maintaining the spirit of sadness as long as possible, and not to celebrate in joy again, until just before Shavuoth. So the Ram"za accepts the second custom. And halakhah encourages us to accept either custom, whatever community we come from, for Jews are brothers and responsible all for each other.

8. But consider too, that during this very tragic time, even on the most tragic days of this period of time, has come the modern redemption, have come the anniversaries of Israel's birth and triumph.

The 5th of Iyar, when in 1933 Hitler burned our books and Goebles threatened the mass murders to come, and when in 1492 the order was signed making Spanish Jews homeless wanderers over the face of the earth, has now been changed to the day of Israel's independence, celebrating that very day in 1948 when our State was reborn.

And the 28th of Iyar, during the later part of Sefira, when in 1096 the Crusaders packed communities of Jews into their synagogues and burned them alive, and when 300 years later

Europe's masses did the same during the Black Plague, and when yet again in 1648 the Cossacks under Chmielnicki did the same; that day has changed to the holiday when we celebrate the liberation of Jerusalem from the hands of the enemy.

“Vehafachti evlam lesason”. “Their mourning shall change to joy”.

9. So it isn't strange at all that all of this history coalesces into the one symbolic event of the loss of the students of Rabbi Akiva. For our survival depends on the Torah, and thus, ultimately, on its teachers and students. The death of Rabbi Akiva's students is the ultimate Jewish tragedy and the revival, renewal of Torah the ultimate secret of Jewish survival, so that no tragedy can ever fully destroy us as long as Torah lives. None of the tragedies of Jewish life in history would mean the end of Judaism as long as there were teachers and students of Torah. Destroy that, and the greatest most glorious freedom would not save us from the kiss of death, and at no time is this more clearly demonstrated than today.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)