YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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YHE-ABOUT: UPDATES AND SPECIAL MAILINGS

LAG BA-OMER AND THE "SEFIRAT HA-OMER JEW"

Asher Meir, Iyar 5758

THE HOLY FIRES OF RAV SHIMON BAR YOCHAI

The gemara in Shabbat relates how Rav Shimon bar Yochai disturbed the Roman authorities, and was compelled to go into hiding in a cave, accompanied by his son and closest student, Rav Elazar. A carob tree and a spring miraculously appeared to provide them with food and water. The gemara continues:

They stayed twelve years in the cave. Then Eliyahu came and stood at the opening of the cave, and said "Who will let Bar Yochai know the Caesar has died and his decrees are nullified?" They went out [of the cave] and saw people who were plowing and sowing. He [Rav Shimon] said, "These people are neglecting eternal life and occupying themselves with transient life?!" Every place they gazed was immediately burned up. A Bat Kol [heavenly voice] declared to them, "Did you go out to destroy My world?! Go back to your cave!" They went back in and lingered twelve months, saying, "The wicked are judged in Gehinnom for twelve months." Then a Bat Kol declared, "Go out of your cave." (Shabbat 33b)

Another famous story, regarding the end of Rav Shimon's life, is related in the Zohar:

[When Rav Shimon died], all that day, the fire did not desist from the house, and no one approached it, since they could not as the fire was all around. (Zohar Ha'azinu, Idra Zuta, volume III page 296b)

According to tradition, the day that Rav Shimon bar Yochai passed away was Lag Ba-omer, the eighteenth of Iyar. Even though the death of such a great sage is a sad event, there is also joy surrounding the fact that he attained his final reward (as the Zohar explains), and the fact that he revealed many deep secrets of the Torah to his students on his dying day. The fire which surrounded the house, preventing any but Rav Shimon's closest students from approaching, serves as a basis for the custom of lighting bonfires on Lag Ba-omer.

The fire surrounding the house as Rav Shimon departed this world seems in an eerie way to recall the firey glance of Rav Shimon as he departed his cave the first time - the same firey gaze which aroused the ire of the Almighty and condemned Rav Shimon and his son to another year of isolation and privation in their cave. Just like the earlier fire, the fire surrounding the house threatened to consume anyone who was not totally devoted to Torah study, "like Rav Shimon bar Yochai and his colleagues, whose Torah was their entire livelihood" (and therefore exempted them from regular prayers - Shabbat 11a, Shulchan Arukh OC 106:2). Could it be that Rav Shimon and Rav Elazar failed to internalize the message of the Bat Kol?

A parallel question regarding Rav Shimon's zeal to devote all of the Jewish People's strength to the study of Torah, seems to arise from an interesting passage in Berakhot (35b). There we find a dispute between Rav Shimon bar Yochai and Rav Yishmael. Rav Yishmael asserts that the tidings of Keriat Shema, "and you will gather your grain and grapes and oil," is a blessing. But according to Rav Shimon, it is at best a mixed blessing. If we were REALLY doing God's will, we would not have to disturb our Torah study even to gather in the bounty of the land of Israel!

The passage concludes: "Many acted according to Rav Yishmael [by dividing their time between Torah study and earning a livelihood] and were successful; many acted according to Rav Shimon bar Yochai and were unsuccessful." Since the approach of exclusive devotion to study seems to be rejected by the gemara, we can ask: how can the gemara exempt "Rav Shimon bar Yochai and his colleagues" from prayer, on the basis that their utter devotion to study places them on a higher level than other scholars?

THE "SHTEI HA-LECHEM JEW" AND THE "OMER JEW"

A careful look at the meaning of the mitzva of counting omer will give us a hint about the meaning of Lag Ba-omer. Why indeed do we need to count the days from Pesach to Shavuot?

In the Torah, the counting of the omer is primarily not the count from Pesach to Shavuot, but the counting from the bringing of the omer of barley - hence the name - to the offering of the shtei ha-lechem - the two wheat loaves brought at Shavuot. What is the significance of this countdown?

The bringing of the omer is in many ways parallel to the separation of teruma. Like teruma, the omer is called "reishit" - the first (Vayikra 23:10). Like teruma, in which even one kernel makes the entire silo permissible, the tiny amount of omer makes permissible the entire year's crop, which until that time is forbidden as "chadash." And teruma is also called "avoda" - like omer which is a true Temple offering (Pesachim 72b).

Now, one of the things which characterizes teruma is that it must be brought from the best part of the crop (see Mishna Terumot 2:4). We would likewise expect that the omer, which makes ALL grains of the wheat family permissible, should come from the choicest grain - namely wheat. But this is not so - actually, the omer comes from barley, which is generally animal food and (except for the offering of the sota and the omer itself) is never permitted for Temple offerings! What can we learn from this commandment?

There are many fine punctilious Jews whom we could characterize as "shtei ha-lechem" Jews. Every aspect of God's service must always be "le-khatchila," in the best possible way. Any other kind of service has no value in their eyes. According to this approach, we would never dare bring mere barley as a Temple offering.

Yet what can we do - "first" means not only "best" but also the temporal first, and barley just happens to ripen months before wheat. In commanding the bringing of the omer, the Torah seems to be telling us: Don't be a "shtei ha-lechem Jew." Of course, God's service demands the best, but the best is determined in practice according to what is possible and practical. If the only grain available at Pesach is barley, then by all means bring barley to the altar!

But does this mean that we should be "omer Jews" - settling for second best, reconciling ourselves to a bedi'avad situation? The Torah rejects this extreme also. We ARE allowed, and even commanded, to bring barley - on the condition that we IMMEDIATELY begin counting the days towards the time when we will be able to fulfill the mitzva of bringing the new grain crop to the Temple in its fullest glory - the "first fruits" of the wheat crop represented by the two loaves. God's forbearance towards us should never be an excuse for indolence.

THE "SHAVUOT JEW" AND THE "PESACH JEW"

Of course, the offerings stand in a direct relationship to the holidays themselves: Pesach, the holiday of redemption, and Shavuot, the holiday of Torah. The "shtei ha-lechem Jew" also tends to be a "Shavuot Jew" - he sees the relationship of God to the Jewish people only through the prism of the giving of the Torah. Our connection to God is mediated through the performance of the commandments, which we received at Mount Sinai on Shavuot. Judaism conceived in any other terms has no value in his eyes.

Yet, the Torah gives us another holiday - Pesach, commemorating our redemption from Egypt solely on the basis of our family identity - the fact that we are the progeny of the Patriarchs, to whom God promised the land of Israel. Were not the Jews at the time of the Exodus almost indistinguishable from their Egyptian neighbors, sunken in forty-nine gates of impurity? Even so, God saved them amidst wonders and signs!

Does this then mean that we should become "Pesach Jews" - seeing the special nature of the Jewish people solely in terms of our national identity, our Israelite birthright, without regard to keeping the Torah? Again, the Torah rejects this extreme too. God DID save us from Egypt despite our lowly spiritual status - on the condition that we IMMEDIATELY start counting the days, climbing the ladder, towards the PROPER status of the Jewish people - the receiving and the performance of the Torah!

WHAT DID THE BAT KOL TEACH RAV SHIMON?

Now, we can better understand what Rav Shimon learned from the Bat Kol. As they left the cave, Rav Shimon bar Yochai and his son were "Shavuot Jews." Anything less than total devotion to Torah study was unacceptable to them - to the extent that even innocent activities like plowing and sowing seemed to them a horrible neglect of God's service. They were rebuked for this, and went back into the cave.

Yet, Rav Shimon bar Yochai and Rav Elazar did not make the mistake of becoming "Pesach Jews." They internalized the message of the Bat Kol and became - "Sefirat Ha-omer Jews!" There IS a place for ordinary Jews, engaging in the study and performance of Torah according to their mundane level. But these Jews themselves draw spiritual sustenance from their inner connection to the supremely righteous, to whose level they can compare themselves and aspire.

Therefore, the fire surrounding Rav Shimon's house WAS appropriate: not everybody has to be totally devoted to Torah study, but there is a need for the fire which delineates those chosen few who are able to maintain this level. And the gemara's ruling regarding prayer IS appropriate: MANY acted according to Rav Shimon and were unsuccessful, but there need to be a FEW who act this way, who will achieve great spiritual heights through their utter devotion to Torah.

How appropriate it is that the "hilula" of Rav Shimon bar Yochai comes during the period of the counting of the omer! This period symbolizes that our mandate to perform the commandments and to maintain our identity as God's special people according to what is possible and practical is made acceptable by our striving for ascent and our connection to those stubborn few who are able to conceive of our connection to Torah and to the Holy One in rarefied, idealized terms.

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