

The *Omer*, *K'vod Habriyot*, and the Big Picture

In case you haven't noticed this, Judaism has many holidays. Sometimes I show up at the Lexington Interfaith Clergy Association monthly meeting reporting on a Jewish holiday and my non-Jewish colleagues will say, "Come on! There is a holiday for planting trees in the winter!"

Well, actually there is. And it's usually springtime in Israel when it falls.

Once a Christian colleague thought I was bluffing about *Shmini Atzeret*: "Well, if it is a real holiday, what do you do on it?"

"Ummm, ehhhh, nothing. I mean, it's a holiday and I don't work, but there are no specific rituals. It's kind of just another day after *Sukkot* and somehow the Torah doesn't give us anything special to do, except to not work. It's, it's hard to explain!"

This week, we enjoyed celebrating the semi-holiday of *Lag Ba'omer*. It's another holiday that's hard to explain; the reality is that many of us do not know what it's all about. In fact, the tradition itself is a bit complicated.

The roots of *Lag Ba'omer* are actually found in this week's Torah portion: *Parashat Emor*. *Emor* has this amazing chapter which some call: "the Calendar of Sacred Time."



In it, we learn a summary of all the *hagim*, of all the holidays. While most of this overview deals with specific days like Shabbat or the Harvest Festival, which we call *Sukkot*, there is one very different command.

We are taught to count the days from *Pesah* until *Shavuot*. From the beginning of the barley harvest, we are commanded to bring an *omer*, a bundle of stalks that are bound together after reaping. Being the first grain to ripen in the spring, barley was brought to the *Kohein*, to the Priest, in the *Beit Hamikdash*, to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.



Seven Weeks of Days



But then the Torah tells us to count the days from this moment falling at the start of spring on *Pesah*. We are instructed to count seven weeks. Seven is significant since it is the number of perfection, the “magical” number in our tradition. We have seven divine days of creation, seven days in the week, seven days to *Pesah* and *Sukkot*, seven circles at a wedding, seven times the *tefillin* is wound around the arm, seven years until the Sabbatical year and so on and so on.



So, we count seven sevens and then, the fiftieth day is *Shavuot*, the festival of weeks, when the first fruits would have ripened, ready to be brought as another offering in the *Beit Hamikdash*.

But our sages, wisely wove a bit more to this narrative. They explained that these holidays related to our spiritual ancestors' journey in the wilderness. If the Children of Israel left Egypt on *Pesah*, they would have reached Mount Sinai seven weeks later on *Shavuot*.

So, each year we count down the days from redemption until revelation, from freedom until receiving the core of God's gift to us: the Torah.

It is such a perfect way to highlight the importance of Torah and its values and the primacy of learning in our community.

But the *Omer* period morphed from its agricultural and historical roots during rabbinic times into other directions as well. The Talmud explains that it became a time of mourning, as 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died due to a plague during these seven weeks of the *Omer*.

And so this time of counting, of agricultural expectation and anxiety, and Torah-itic anticipation became a time of sadness when Jews have traditionally not celebrated weddings, gotten haircuts, shaved, listened to live music, etc.

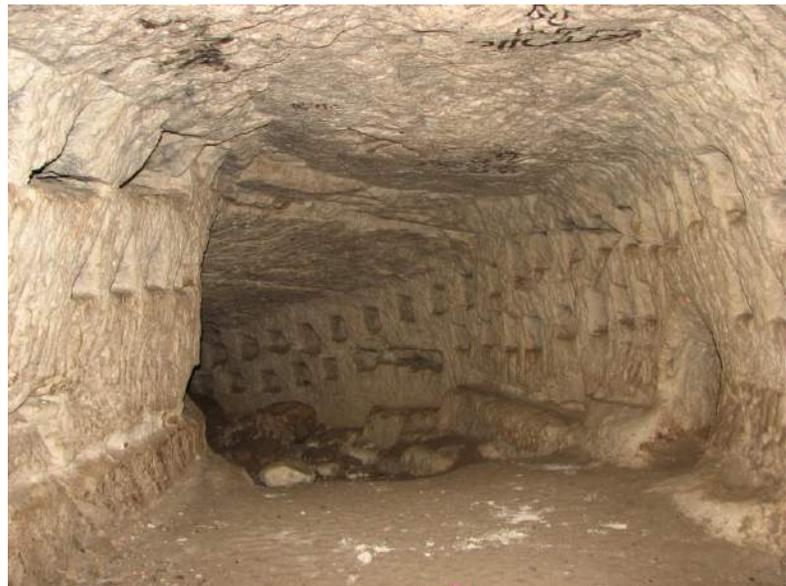
Historically, we know that Rabbi Akiva's students and followers were active in the Bar Kochba revolt against the Roman Empire in the years

132-135 of the Common Era. Just sixty years after the first Great Revolt against Rome, the Jewish people desperately yearned to be freed from Rome's oppressive rule.

However, the Bar Kochba revolt did not go well. While they had some initial successes, it ended poorly for the Jews and the leaders, including Rabbi Akiva; the leaders were tortured and killed by the Romans in particularly gruesome ways which we recall each year in the Martyrology Service on *Yom Kippur* afternoon.

Therefore, the most likely scenario was that these students died in battle with the Romans.

While they fought bravely utilizing caves and other guerilla tactics, they were overcome. When you visit Israel, you can crawl through the Bar Kochba



caves and experience this piece of Jewish history first-hand.

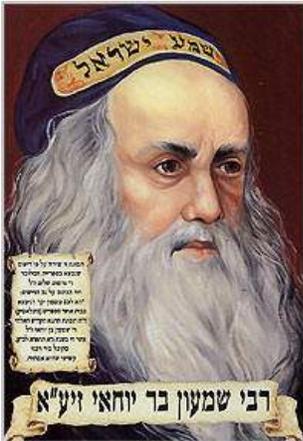
Whichever explanation -- that this was a plague or devastating losses during war -- on *Lag Ba'omer*, there was one day when the plague

ceased or the students were spared during the fighting. Thus, we celebrate a joyful day during a time of sadness.

Interestingly, here at Temple Emunah we do not have any *yahrzeits* on *Lag Ba'Omer*. While I hope I do not give it the evil eye, it is certainly interesting given that we have *yahrzeits* on almost every day of the year.

About 1200 years ago, Jews started observing *Lag Ba'Omer* as a scholar's festival in memory of Rabbi Akiva's students. Rabbinical students in the Middle Ages enjoyed this "scholar's festival" as a day for joyful celebration with various kinds of merrymaking.

After the writing of the *Zohar*, a mystical text attributed to Rabbi



Shimon bar Yochai, an early sage, *Lag Ba'omer* became associated with him since the anniversary of his death, his *yahrzeit*, falls on *Lag Ba'omer*. In Israel today, it is a day for celebrating by visiting his grave, enjoying hikes, BBQ's, picnics, and bonfires -- as we did with almost four hundred people including the

Israeli School of Lexington here at Temple Emunah on Thursday evening.



But my friend and colleague, Rabbi Marc Baker, the head of the



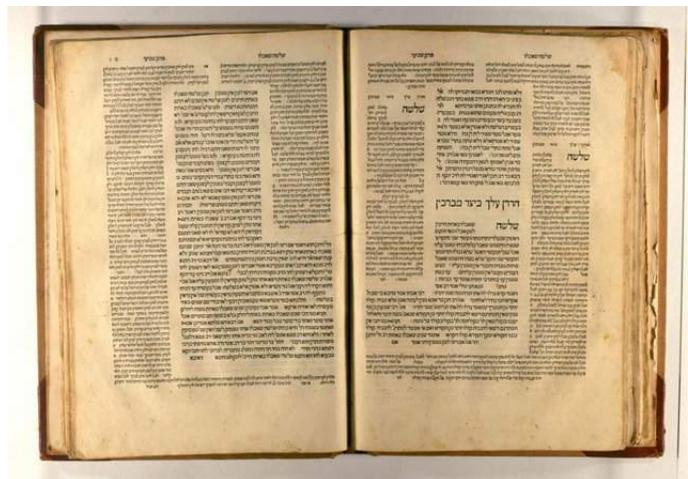
Gann Academy, reminded me this week of one of the central dimensions of this fun semi-holiday. The Talmud tells us that Rabbi Akiva's students died because they did not give each

other sufficient *kavod* -- they did not respect each other enough.

How could this be?? Rabbi Akiva's students were the elite -- they were the *creme de la creme* of the Jewish young people of that time, they were immersed in serious learning every day, how could they of all people forget to treat each other with *kavod*, with respect?



The answer is the Talmud is reminding us how easy it is to lose the forest for the trees. These students were so concerned with immersing



themselves in the tradition, memorizing large swaths of texts, especially after the destruction of the Temple -- that they prioritized the end over the means. They became consumed by the goal of learning quantities of Torah and not about the process of absorbing this knowledge.

It happened to them. And if it can happen to them, it can happen to us. And it does. We too can lose our perspective, we can get lost in the details and forget the big picture.

Perhaps that is why treating each other with *kavod* became such a



central principle in our tradition. Our rabbis taught that *k'vod habriyot* -- understanding and appreciating the fundamental worth of each human being, the dignity of each person, is so essential that it can push aside some of the

commandments.

Treating each other with respect is the essence of Torah. The details, the *mitzvot* are all there to propel us toward that goal. Ten years ago, when Conservative Judaism's understanding about LGBT issues was evolving, this principle -- of *k'vod habriyot* -- of preserving the respect and the dignity of every person helped us move forward to become more

welcoming and inclusive. And we should be proud that our community is just that -- it is a place where the *kavod* of all -- whether they are old or young, LGBT, have special needs -- everyone's essential humanity is respected.



And we work hard each and every day to make our *shul*, our community, the most welcoming place it can be. Rabbi Fel, Amy, Susan, our entire staff, and I, our lay leaders, our Inclusion Committee, our Keruv Committee, our *minyan*, truly our entire community are all a part of this essential project -- respecting the basic dignity of all.



Perhaps that is why as the counting of the *Omer* evolved in the Middle Ages and in Modern Times; these seven weeks became a time for spiritual and ethical growth. The spiritual and mystical aspects of our tradition encourage us to use these days as a time for becoming the people we have yet to become. We can all grow in this respect -- we can all grow in our sensitivity towards others and to their *kavod*.

The Kabbalists wrote a prayer to be recited each night after you count each day of the *Omer*: "*Ribbono shel Olam* -- Ruler of the Universe,

You commanded us through Moshe, Your servant to count the *Omer* count in order to cleanse us from the *klipot*, the shells [the stuff that accumulates on us, the aspects of ourselves we are working on transforming]. [...] May I become cleansed [of this aspect of myself I am working on] and through this may abundant bounty [your Divine light and energy] flow into all worlds. [...]

May that light and the energy of this counting bring us all to a deeper sense of *k'vod habriyot*.