

Drasha/ Sermon Parshas Emor/ Lag B'Omer

You might not have noticed it but on the Jewish calendar tomorrow is a holiday: Lag B'Omer. Lag B'Omer isn't noticed much in America, but in Israel it's a big deal. According to official Israeli reports, almost half a million people will have visited the tiny northern village of Meron in the days leading up to the holiday of Lag Ba'Omer; and more than 250,000 will be there on Lag Ba'Omer itself.

They are making this mass pilgrimage every year on Lag Ba'Omer in order to be at the tomb of the holy Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (known as 'Bar Yochai') a first-century Rabbi, Kabbalist, and leader of the Jewish people, who contributed greatly to the Mishnah, is often quoted in the Talmud, and who authored the Kabbalistic Sefer HaZohar.

Why does everyone go to Bar Yochai's tomb on Lag B'Omer?

Lag Ba'Omer is the day of Bar Yochai's yahrtzeit (otherwise known as his Yoma D'Hillula, the anniversary of his death) and this celebration was a specific request of his to his students. On that holy day, Bar Yochai revealed to his students many great mystical secrets of the Kabbalah, and this was a cause of great joy for the Jewish people. Many bonfires are lit (in Meron and all across the country) representing the spiritual fire that bar Yochai brought into the world, and there is much singing and dancing throughout the night and well into the morning hours.

In Israel on Lag B'Omer, it's a tough night to fall asleep.

But in addition to the more elemental joys of this minor-but-important holiday, Lag B'Omer is an opportunity to focus on the teachings of Bar Yochai, and the teachings of Kabbalah. One of the great teachings of the Zohar can be seen from the following true story.

Several years ago Chaim was driving in a state on the East Coast. As Chaim is driving, he notices on the side of the road a fellow wearing a kippah, and sees that something must be wrong with his car. He pulls over and starts to help him. In the middle of helping him Chaim notices that something is strange. He notices that there's not one thing that seems Jewish about this guy - except for the kippah on his head. So Chaim says, 'Shalom', and the other guy looks at him like he's from another planet. So finally, Chaim comes straight out and says, 'Are you Jewish?' And he says, 'What?' At that point, Chaim realizes that his question was basically answered. So he says,

'Tell me, why are you wearing a kippah?'

And the guy says, 'Wearing a who?'

"You know, the thing on your head.'

'Oh, this! It's very simple. My mother always told me, 'always keep one of these in your glove compartment, because if you break down and put it on, someone will stop for you.'

What does this mean? The answer is very simple: He's family. Despite our differences, despite our background, whatever it may be, the bottom line is, if I see another Jew, he's my brother or she's my sister.. And if my brother or sister needs my help, I'm going to be there. And "Being there for him" doesn't mean it's enough to just feel sorry, or feel sympathy, or say 'Can I help?' and drive by -- but we have to respond and take action.

This is one of the great teachings of Kabbalah, which was revealed to us by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. He taught that G-d's love for every Jew is unconditional. And that even when a Jew stumbles spiritually and needs help, G-d is always at his side, ready to extend a hand and to help him out of his predicament. There is a hidden spark of holiness in every Jewish soul that can never be extinguished, no matter how low he has sunk.

Therefore, we must extrapolate: If G-d is ready to extend a hand to help a Jew out of a tough spot, so should we. And extending a hand -- literally -- can make a significant difference.

In one study some rabbits were put on a high-fat diet. One group of them, however, was talked to and petted throughout the experiment. This group developed significantly less heart disease than those that received only routine treatment in the laboratory.

In another study, women surgical patients whose hands were held by a nurse while blood pressure and temperature were taken were able to leave the hospital sooner and recovered faster at home. There's healing in physical expressions of love.

Then there's the story about the rabbi who was teaching a class to families, and asked if they knew of anyone who was suffering. A little girl raised her hand and said, "My father is, but he won't tell anyone." Th girl then hugged her father tightly.

The father, already embarrassed, said, "Stop hugging me. Your hugging me to death."

"On, no, Daddy," she cried, "I'm hugging you to life."

Hugging people to life. Not just by expressing sympathy. Not by extending platitudes and promises of help. But by extending a hand, and hugging people to life.

The past summer was a particularly hot one here in St. Louis. Multiple days when the temperature reached or exceeded 105 F. made for dangerous bicycling at Forest Park, my favorite cycling route. One late morning when the temperature had already hit 90 F., I rode by a relatively isolated area of the park and saw a woman slumped down against a fence, holding up her bike. As I cycled by, I said, "Everything OK?". She responded with a wave of her hand, and said, "Yes."

But something didn't add up, as she was sitting in the exposed sun on a bike path. So after riding perhaps 25 yards, I turned around to see what the scoop was.

The woman, whose name was Kim, was in distress. The light sweatshirt and scarf she was wearing (which I later found out was to help her lose weight for an upcoming wedding) exacerbated the draining effects of the heat and humidity. I gave her to drink from an extra water bottle I was carrying, helped her to pour water on her scarf and put it on her head, and walked her to a shaded area where she had a chance to cool down and recover.

As we chatted, Kim said, "Do you mind if I ask what you do for a living?" I said, "No problem. I'm a rabbi." This apparently came as a surprise to Kim, given that when I ride I don't wear a suit, tie and kipah.

She then said, "That explains it. Now I know why you stopped. You're a rabbi. There were quite a few people who rode by, asking if I was OK. But you were the only one who stopped."

Bar Yochai taught that G-d's love for every Jew is unconditional. And that even when a Jew is in trouble, G-d is always at his side, ready to extend a hand and to help him out of his predicament. There is a hidden spark of holiness in every Jewish soul that can never be extinguished, no matter how low he has sunk.

Undoubtedly a special bond of brotherhood exists between us and our fellow Jews, obligating us to treat our brethren with exceptional kindness. However, we must not forget that all humans

were created *b'Tzelem Elokim* -- in the Image of G-d. And that Divine Spark within all of humanity obligates us to emulate the Almighty and lend a hand in time of need to everyone.

In conclusion, there's a certain prayer we say in shul a few days before the first day of the new Hebrew month. It's called 'Kiddush HaChodesh', and one of the phrases in there is 'chaveirim, kol Yisrael, v'nomar amen.' -- friends, all of Israel, and say, 'amen'. All of Israel are friends ..and let us say, 'Amen'

When I've read this I've thought to myself, "What does this mean? It doesn't seem that all the Jewish people are exactly 'friends'. But the truth is, is that when you look into the context of the whole prayer, you can see that it is a prayer; hopefully, by the time of the messiah, when the messiah comes, we'll all be friends, and everything will be great. But what it also means, is that really, deep down, we all really are friends, but deep down, sometimes we don't realize it.

In times like these -- during the Sefirah and Lag B'Omer -- we should remember the great teachings of bar Yochai. Lag B'Omer itself draws hundreds of thousands of Jews who come to Meron each year who represent the entire spectrum of Jewish custom and observance in the Holy Land. All Jews, it seems, feel drawn to the graveside of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai -- no matter what their spiritual background may be - for he revealed the hidden spark of holiness in every Jewish soul that can never be extinguished.

In our interactions with others, sympathy isn't enough; When the situation calls for it, emulate Hashem and extend a helping hand. Realize that the person in a tough spot is family. Despite our differences, despite our background, whatever it may be, the bottom line is, if you see another Jew, they're your brother or my sister.. And if your brother or sister needs your help, stretch out our hand.