

In Hilchos YOM TOV

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Lag BaOmer

A summary of the weekly Wednesday night shiur by **Rabbi Shmuel Stein** at the Miami Beach Community Kollel / To receive a copy send an email to InHilchosShabbos@gmail.com

Lag BaOmer is a day of joy and celebration with many various customs. Yet, for many this may seem difficult to understand and perhaps seems unrelatable to many. The Shem Aryeh¹ wonders “*All my days I have wondered about this, what is this celebration of the day of Lag BaOmer? really all about?*” The celebration on Lag BaOmer can seem to be intended only for people connected to words of kabbalah and not for the masses, yet it is a day that everyone celebrates on some level, as the halachos of mourning during Sefira are paused and *tachnun* is not recited. In this chapter we will discuss the halachos of Lag BaOmer and the significance of this day and perhaps even understand how this celebration is relevant for us all.

- 1) The Aveilus of Sefira
- 2) The Celebration of Lag BaOmer
- 3) Halachos of Lag BaOmer

1) Days of Aveilus: Mourning the death of Rabbi Akiva's students

The Rema² writes that during the days of Sefira the custom is to keep some aspects of Aveilus (mourning) based on the Gemara³ which states that Rabbi Akiva had 24,000 students who died between Pesach and Shavuot because they did not show the proper respect one to the other.⁴ We mourn the deaths of these holy students during these days and thus we do not hold weddings or take haircuts (or dance and listen to music) on these days.

The Gemara concludes that at that time the world was barren from Torah until Rabbi Akiva found the five students from the South and continued the *mesorah* through them. He told them “My sons, the first talmidim died because they did not show respect to one another, take note of this and do not follow in their ways.”⁵ The Gemara states that one of these five students was Rav Shimon Bar Yochai.

Which days do we keep Aveilus

The Rema⁶ writes that there are two customs regarding when to hold the days of Aveilus during Sefira, both of which hold that one must keep 33 days of mourning during this time period.⁶ They also agree that although the Gemara states that the talmidim died during the 49 days between Pesach and Shavuot, they only died for 33 days as they did not die on days when *tachnun* is recited (as they are days of Yom Tov). Thus, there were 16 days when *tachnun* is recited and the students did not die (7 days of Pesach, 6 days of Shabbos, 2 days of Rosh Chodesh Iyar, 1 day of Rosh Chodesh Sivan⁷). Thus, there remained 33 days which they died and to remember their deaths we mourn for 33 days between Pesach and Shavuot.⁸ The two customs disagree about which 33 days to keep as days of mourning:

Custom #1 – 33 days from Pesach until Lag BaOmer

The first opinion holds that one should keep the first 33 days of Sefira as days of mourning. After these 33 days, it is permitted to take haircuts and have weddings. One may already begin on the morning⁹ (i.e., Neitz Hachama¹⁰) of the 33rd day since we can apply the principle of *miktzas ha'yom k'kulo* (observing part of a day can be considered observing the entire day).¹¹ [The accepted custom is to permit music on the night of Lag BaOmer when celebrating in honor of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai.¹²

Custom #2 – 33 days from Rosh Chodesh Iyar until Shavuot

The second opinion holds that one should keep the last 33 days of Sefira as days of mourning from Rosh Chodesh Iyar until Shavuot are days of mourning.¹³ It is permitted to take haircuts and have weddings on the days before Rosh Chodesh.

Lag BaOmer. The Rema writes that even according to this custom it is permitted to take haircuts on the day of Lag BaOmer (even though it is part of the 33 days of mourning).¹⁴ The Chayei Adam¹⁵ explains that Lag BaOmer is the day of celebration because it is the *Hilulah* (wedding) of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai [as we will later explain] thus it is permitted to take haircuts once the morning of Lag BaOmer arrives (and we can apply the principle of *miktzas ha'yom k'kulo*).

Changing customs from year to year

Since these two customs really have one basis, that there must be 33 days of mourning, it is permissible to change one's custom from year to year and thus on one year one may keep the “first days” of Sefira and on another year he may keep the “second days” of Sefira.¹⁶

2) The Celebration of Lag BaOmer

The Rema¹⁷ writes that on the day of Lag BaOmer is somewhat of a Yom Tov as “we increase our happiness and do not say *tachnun*.”

Why do we celebrate on Lag BaOmer?

Lag BaOmer: The day Rav Shimon Bar Yochai died

Many explain that we celebrate the day of Lag BaOmer as it is the day that Rabbi Akiva died [and is unrelated to the ceasing of the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's talmidim.¹⁸] The Zohar¹⁹ states that the day which Rav Shimon Bar Yochai died and went up to heaven was his “*Hilulah*” (wedding or day of celebration²⁰).²¹ The Arizal²² writes that “Lag BaOmer is the day of happiness of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai as this was his wish to experience happiness on this day.” Thus, the Chida²³ writes that one should increase his happiness on the day of Lag BaOmer in a way of honoring Rav Shimon Bar Yochai.²⁴

The Magen Avraham²⁵ recounts that there was once a great Tzadik who had the custom to recite the prayer of Nacheim (a prayer of mourning over the loss of the Bais Hamikdash) every day of the year and one time said this prayer on Lag BaOmer [at the kever of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai. The Arizal was there at the time and received a message from Rav Shimon to relate this Tzadik that he should not be reciting a mournful prayer on the day of his happiness. Rav Shimon concluded that this Tzadik will soon need to mourn himself.²⁶] This Tzadik was indeed punished [and within a short time his oldest son died²⁷].

A dissenting view

The Chasam Sofer²⁸ questions this reason for celebrating the day of Lag BaOmer. He writes as follows:

I have heard that nowadays people travel from far to visit the city of Tzfas on Lag BaOmer on the Hilulah of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai. Although their intentions are sincere and certainly their reward is great, I do not wish to join them as I would not be able to comply with their customs [to celebrate on this day as the Hilulah of Rav Shimon] for one may not create a new holiday on a day when there was no miracle which occurred nor is it mentioned in the Gemara or poskim.²⁹

Similarly, Shoel Umeishiv³⁰ writes:

The day when a Tzadik dies is not a day of celebration for us but a day of sorrow. This that the Zohar calls Lag BaOmer the Hilulah (the wedding day) of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai is for the Tzadik himself as he has reached his resting place, but as for us who are left behind it is a day of great sorrow.³¹

Shem Aryeh³² wonders as well:

All my days I have wondered about this, what is this celebration [on Lag BaOmer based on death of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai] really all about? On the contrary, it is befitting to fast on a day when a Tzadik died, as the Tur³³ states that “these are days when one should fast: On the 10th of Nissan, when Miriam died... On the 1st of Av, when Aharon died... On the 7th of Adar, when Moshe died...” Now, who is greater than these pillars of the world, Moshe, Aharon and Miriam, who we fast on the days which they died, and we do not celebrate at all. Yet on the day when Rav Shimon Bar Yochai died - we celebrate? I have been perplexed by this for many years not knowing an explanation of this custom as this something which seems illogical.

An Explanation: A day when one can access the Torah of Rav Shimon

Rav Tzadok HaKohen³⁴ explains why the death of Rav Shimon was significant and left an effect on the day of Lag BaOmer for all generations.

The Zohar³⁵ writes that on the day that Rav Shimon died he revealed great secrets to his students in his chabura. [The Torah which was revealed at that time was so holy that a great fire came down from heaven.] But Rav Tzadok adds that there is an even greater event which took place on that day. The Medrash³⁶ states “A person truly implants his Torah in others when he passes away from this world.” Thus, on the day that Rav Shimon died, his Torah became implanted in the hearts of the Jewish people. This day is called the *Hilulah* (the wedding) of Rav Shimon and each year on this day one can accept the Torah of Rav Shimon. Therefore, the day of lag BaOmer was instituted as a holiday.”

1 Siman 14 2 493:1 3 Yevamos 62a 4 Medrash Rabba, Chayei Sara, 61 5 493:1-3 6 The Arizal (see Siddur Yavetz, 12; Shulchan HaTahor 260:8) held that (based on Kabbalah) one should refrain from taking a haircut during the entire Sefira (even on Lag BaOmer). 7 Biur Halacha 493:2 d"v y'eish 8 This is clear from the Mahari"l (Yamim she'bein Pesach l'Shavuot, 7) which is the source of the Rema (see Kovetz Halachos, Sefira p. 83). However, the Mishna Berura (493:8; Biur Halacha 493:3 y'eish) seem to learn that the first opinion of the Rema goes along with the reasoning of the Medresh which states that the talmidim of Rabbi Akiva did not die until Shavuot but until pros Shavuot which is 15 days before Shavuot – the 34th day of the Omer. Thus, the Shulchan Aruch (493:2) rules that one may only begin taking haircuts on the morning of the 34th day of the Omer. According to the Mishna Berura the Rema agrees to the reasoning of the Shulchan Aruch just holds that the talmidim stopped dying on the 33rd day of the Omer. (This is how Rav Moshe Feinstein, Igros Moshe O.C. 1:159 understood the Rema as well). However, Kovetz Halachos (ibid) cites many poskim who indicate that the Rema does not understand like the Shulchan Aruch (see also Mishna Berura 493:14). 9 The Mishna Berura (493:11) cites opinions that permit taking haircuts at night (or even on erev Lag BaOmer once tachnun has not been said at Mincha). Kovetz Halachos (p. 94) writes that the custom is to be stringent and wait until Lag BaOmer in the morning to take a haircut. 10 Mishna Berura 493:10 11 According to the opinion of the Shulchan Aruch as well (493:2) that the 34th day of the Omer is kept, it is permissible to take haircuts in the morning of the 34th day. 12 Chut Shani Shabbos vol. 4, p. 380; Kovetz Halachos, p. 95 as this may be considered dancing of a mitzvah; although he writes that from a halachic standpoint this would be questionable. 13 The Mishna Berura (493:15) writes that some start the 33 days from Rosh Chodesh Iyar (including Rosh Chodesh) and continue until the *shloshes yimei hagbala* and permit taking haircuts from the morning of the 3rd of Sivan. 14 The Mishna Berura (Biur Halacha 493:2, d"v y'eish) addresses this point but writes open-endedly that “perhaps it was for some [other] reason that they permit this.” 15 131:11. See Aruch haShulchan 493:7. The Levush (493:2) writes that this is merely meant as a sign to explain that the talmidim of Rabbi Akiva died for only 33 days and thus we celebrate the 33rd day. 16 Kovetz Halachos, p. 85. However, as we mentioned (in footnote 10) Rav Moshe Feinstein understood that the two customs have a different basis and thus he ruled that changing one's custom from year to year is not that simple. Still, he concludes that in a desperate situation one may change his custom. 17 493:2 18 The Pri Chadash (493:2) wonders what the celebration of Lag BaOmer is for. If it is because the talmidim of Rabbi Akiva stopped dying (according to the explanation of the Shulchan Aruch, cited in footnote 10), they only stopped dying because there were no more students left so what would be the reason for a celebration? Furthermore, the Shulchan Aruch rules that one may only take haircuts on the 34th day of the Omer (because that is when the students stopped dying) so why would the celebration take place on the 33rd day of the Omer? 19 Idrah Zuta 20 Rav Chaim Kanievsky (Yadun Moshe, p. 76) writes that it does not literally mean a “wedding” but a day of happiness and “Hilulah” is used as an expression. However, others write that Mekubalim compare a Tzadik leaving to the next world as *וְנִשְׁאָר וְיָחַי עוֹלָם* and their life on this world as *אִיִּים* (Moadim b'Halacha p. 302; see Shemos Rabba, 1). Boruch of Medzhybizh (Shemos Tovos p. 35) explains why we only find that the death of Rav Shimon is referred to his “Hilulah” and not by other Tzadikim: Since, as we know, the halacha does not generally follow Rav Shimon (since the halacha generally follows the halacha and not the kabbalah), his Torah was truly only accepted in Shamayim and thus when he died and was accepted in Shamayim it was his true “Hilulah”. 21 Chidiah (Birkei Yosef 493:4). However, the Chida (Maris HaAyn, Likutim 7:8) writes that it was the day that Rabbi Akiva gave over the *mesorah* to his five new talmidim (which included Rav Shimon). The Aruch HaShulchan (493:7) adds that it was also the day when Rav Shimon emerged from the cave. 22 Shaar HaKavanos, Sefiras HaOmer, 12 (end of d"v Gam) 23 Avodas HaKodesh, Moreh b'Eitzba 8:223 24 Taking children for a trip on Lag BaOmer. In the city of Vermisa the students in Yeshiva would not have school but have a day of enjoyment and the Rabbeim would give out drinks (Minhagei Vermisia p. 100). This was also the custom in Pressburg (Eleph Ksav, 160). 25 493:3 26 Ateres Zikeinim on the Shulchan Aruch 27 Ateres Zikeinim, ibid 28 Y.D. 233 29 Interestingly, the Chasam Sofer writes that perhaps since we find that the *mahn* began to fall on Lag BaOmer there is a reason to make some sort of celebration as a remembrance of this miracle. 30 Yosef Da'as, 5:39 31 Furthermore, some explain that the word Hilulah does not refer to a day of celebration but to a day of Halel, praise, as on the day of when a Tzadik dies he is eulogized and praised (Shem Aryeh 1:14). 32 14 33 O.C. 580 34 Pri Tzadik 3:89a

Thus, the celebration of Lag BaOmer is about the transmission of the Torah of Rav Shimon to the world and the opportunity for a person to attain it. There are other events which also occurred on Lag BaOmer that related to the Torah of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai:

- 1) The Arizal³⁷ writes that on Lag BaOmer, Rabbi Akiva began teaching the five new students of the South. This was the beginning of Rav Shimon acquiring his Torah.
- 2) The Aruch HaShulchan³⁸ writes that on Lag BaOmer, Rav Shimon Bar Yochai left the cave and began to reveal his Torah to the world.³⁹

We will begin to discuss what is unique about the Torah of Rav Shimon that we make the day of Lag BaOmer into a day of celebrating his Torah?

The Torah of Rav Shimon: The Ohr HaGanuz – The Hidden Light

The Bnei Yissaschar⁴⁰ explains that the first time the Torah states the word טוב – Good, was in reference to the *light* which Hashem created on the first day of creation.⁴¹ The Gemara⁴² explains as follows: When HaKadosh Baruch Hu created light on the first day of creation, “He saw that it [was so powerful that it] could enable a person to see from one end of the world to the other. He knew that it was not fit for the wicked, so he hid it for the Tzadikim *l’asid lavo* (the future righteous people).” It is this light that the Torah refers to as טוב – Good; and since it is the first time which the Torah states the word טוב it is the ultimate good.

A light for all generations

The Ba’al Shem Tov⁴³ states that this is not referring only to the Tzaddikim who will live in the times of Mashiach, rather to the Tzaddikim of all future generations.⁴⁴ But where did HaKadosh Baruch Hu hide this spiritual light and how can a Tzaddik access it? The Zohar⁴⁵ states that the *Ohr HaGanuz* (the hidden light) was hidden in the Torah and can be accessed by those who toil in it. The Bnei Yissaschar points out that this word טוב is the 33rd word in the Torah because it is the hidden light which Rav Shimon Bar Yochai revealed to the world. It is for this reason Rav Shimon is referred to as the בּוֹצִיט קַדִּישָׁא – The Great flame, because he revealed the *Ohr HaGanuz* of the Torah. This is also why his Sefer is called “the Zohar” (the shining light) as it gives one the access to the *Ohr HaGanuz* which allows one to see from one side of the world to the other – “The Good” light which is hidden in the Torah.

Lighting bonfires

The Bnei Yissaschar explains that it is for this reason that the custom on Lag BaOmer is to light bonfires in honor of the *Ohr HaGanuz* which Rav Shimon revealed. [Thus, this custom of lighting bonfires applies outside of Meiron as well as the Torah of Rav Shimon became accessible anywhere in the world.⁴⁶]

To Summarize: The day of Lag BaOmer is a day when there is greater access to the Torah of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai which reveals the *Ohr HaGanuz* – the hidden light within the Torah.

Rav Shimon Bar Yochai was an extension of Rabbi Akiva’s Torah

To truly understand the Torah of Rav Shimon there is another important facet of his Torah which must be addressed, one that perhaps we can more easily relate to. Rav Tzadok HaKohein⁴⁷ explains the importance of the Torah of Rav Shimon as follows: “Moshe Rabbeinu was the source of *Torah she'b'ksav* (the Written Torah) and Rabbi Akiva was the source of *Torah she’bal’peh* (the Oral Torah). The primary student of Rabbi Akiva was Rav Shimon Bar Yochai as he himself said⁴⁸ to his students “My sons, learn from my middos (i.e., from my Torah⁴⁹) for my middos are taken from Rabbi Akiva as I have refined the teachings of Rabbi Akiva and then refined them again.”⁵⁰

The Great Principle of the Torah - ואהבת לרעך כמוך

Rav Akiva was the one who taught⁵¹: ואהבת לרעך כמוך – זה כלל גדול בתורה (One must love his friend like himself – This is the great principle of the Torah). This means that ואהבת לרעך כמוך is not just an important principle of the Torah but it is the foundation and basis of the Torah. [Rav Moshe Shternbauch⁵² adds that it is because of this that there was a greater prosecution of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva, because their Rebbe was the one who taught this great principle and there was a greater expectation that they show respect to one another.⁵³] It would seem then that Rav Shimon teachings (and the other four students of Rabbi Akiva) would deepen this fundamental principle of ואהבת לרעך כמוך. In fact, the Medresh⁵⁴ states “Rabbi Akiva told the students of the South, pay attention to why my first students died, it was because their eyes were stingy (i.e., they did not want to share their Torah with others) and do not follow in their ways. Immediately, these students got up and began to spread Torah across the entire land.” These students of the South were careful to incorporate the great principle of Rabbi Akiva of ואהבת לרעך כמוך, not to be worried only about oneself and keep one’s Torah to himself, but to be connected to the rest of Klal Yisroel and affect others with one’s Torah.

What is “Good” and what is “Not Good”?

We discussed how the Bnei Yissaschar explains that the first time the Torah uses the word “טוב” – good, is in reference to the light of the Torah (of Rav Shimon), which we now explained is rooted on the great principle of ואהבת לרעך כמוך. If we look for the first time that the Torah uses the word “לא טוב” it is when it states⁵⁵: לא טוב היות האדם לבדו – it is not good for man to be alone (and self-absorbed).

Meaning, the ultimate “טוב” comes through the Torah of Rav Shimon which is founded on ואהבת לרעך כמוך - seeing past one own self, and the ultimate “לא טוב” is someone who is only focused on himself and is not also interested in others.⁵⁶ The Zohar⁵⁷ states that Rav Shimon Bar Yochai once noticed his students smiling and being happy amongst each other. He remarked: “The happiness and peace among you is the reason why the secrets of the Torah are revealed to our generation on such a high level.”

The relation between the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva and Rav Shimon

During the days of Sefira we find two occurrences:

1. The death of the 24,000 *talmidim* of Rabbi Akiva, and
2. The death (and *Hilulah*) of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai on Lag BaOmer.

During the time of Sefira when we prepare for Kabalas HaTorah it is not a coincidence that these events occurred during this time.

1. The 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died because they did not accept the Torah properly from rabbi Akiva as they were lacking in the principle of ואהבת לרעך כמוך the foundation of the Torah (“לא טוב”).
2. The death (and *Hilulah*) of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai on Lag BaOmer accepted the Torah properly from Rabbi Akiva with the principle of ואהבת לרעך כמוך (“טוב”) and was able to spread his Torah was spread on Lag BaOmer.⁵⁸

Learning the Torah of Rav Shimon brings Mashiach

Rav Shimon Bar Yochai wrote in the Zohar⁵⁹ that “In the future, Klal Yisroel will begin tasing the teachings of the Zohar and then Hashem will redeem them from exile.” Perhaps, since the Torah of Rav Shimon is founded on the premise of ואהבת לרעך כמוך it has the merit to end the exile for as the Chafetz Chaim⁶⁰ wrote the reason we are still in exile is due to baseless hatred and Lashon Hara.

The Torah of Rav Shimon: Pnimius HaTorah - Seeing past the Superficial

The question still remains, where in the Torah of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai do recognize the emphasis of ואהבת לרעך כמוך?

The Torah of Rav Shimon is referred to as *Pnimius HaTorah* – the inner workings of the Torah through which one can see beyond the superficial. For example, the Zohar teaches that the *neshamas* of a Jew is connected to the highest places, higher than all angels, as it rests on the Throne of Hashem and a deed which a Jew performs has cosmic effects.⁶¹ When a Jew performs a mitzvah, it affects not only himself but the entire world around him.⁶² Through *Pnimius HaTorah* one realizes that there is much more than meets the eye. One’s *neshamas* is connected to the highest places and all of the *neshamos* of the Jewish people are connected. When one Jew performs mitzvot or learns Torah he affects not only himself but all of Klal Yisroel.

Through his *Pnimius HaTorah*, Rav Shimon Bar Yochai explained the principle of ואהבת לרעך by revealing how all of the *neshamos* of Klal Yisroel are connected and when one performs a mitzvah or learns Torah it is not a selfish pursuit but something which affects and benefits all of Klal Yisroel.

“I can exempt the entire world from judgment”

The Gemara⁶³ states that Rav Shimon said, “*I am able to exempt the entire world from judgment from the day that I was created until now.*” Perhaps, the message that Rav Shimon was giving over was that all Jews are connected and united and with the Torah that he himself learned he benefitted the entire world to the point that he could exempt all of the Jews of his generation.

הוד שבהוד

The Bas Ayin⁶⁴ explains that the middah of הוד is based on the middah of Anavah (humility). The day of Lag BaOmer is הוד שבהוד which is total humility and through this one can reach this important principle of ואהבת לרעך כמוך.

Shooting a Bow and arrow. The Bnei Yissaschar⁶⁵ explains that the reason for the custom to shoot a bow and arrow on Lag BaOmer is because in the generation of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai a rainbow never showed. Meaning, that we are expressing that the actions of all Jews are connected and that the Torah of Rav Shimon did not only protect himself, but it saved his entire generation.

Making a bonfire. As we mentioned, the Bnei Yissaschar explained that a bonfire represents the light of the Torah of Rav Shimon, but perhaps it is deeper, as it also hints to the fact that the light of the Torah is not fueled by one’s own Torah learning but by the collective efforts of all of Klal Yisroel. Thus, we do not merely light a candle, but a bonfire fueled by many branches.

Throwing garments into the bonfires. There is a custom to throw clothing into the bonfires at Rav Shimon. The Chasam Sofer⁶⁶ disapproved of this custom writing that it is considered *Ba’al Tashchis* (wasteful); others⁶⁷ objected against this custom as well. Perhaps this custom is based on the fact that Rav Shimon taught the *Pnimius HaTorah* to see past the superficial outside and look deeper. Therefore, clothing is burnt as a way of inspiring us to see past the external.⁶⁸

35 Introduction to the Aidrah Zuta 287b 36 Bamidbar Rabba 14:4 37 Kaf HaChaim (493:26) citing the Gurei Arizal 38 493:7 39 Mizmor L'Dovid, p. 382. 40 Lag BaOmer 41 Bereishis 1:4 42 Chagigah 12a 43 Degel Machaneh Ephraim, Breishis, Va'yaar 44 Rav Chaim Volozhiner, Introduction to Shenos Eliyahu writes this as well. 45 Mishpatim 148b-149a; Bereishis 21a 46 Mekadesh Yisroel, 107. Bitul Torah. Rav Chaim Kanievsky (Sheilas Rav p. 33) ruled that it is better to learn Torah then to go to bonfires on Lag BaOmer. Mekadesh Yisroel (ibid, 107) writes that certainly if one wishes to go to Meiron on Lag BaOmer, which is a longstanding custom, it is not considered Bitul Torah to go. But even to attend a bonfire outside of Meiron, if it will bring one to Yiras Shamayim he may go since Yiras Shamayim brings one to Torah. 47 Ibid 48 Gemara Gitten 67a 49 Rashi, there 50 He finely sifted the teachings of Rabbi Akiva and carefully refined it (Rashi). 51 Bereishis Rabba 24:7; Yerushalmi, Nedarim 30b 52 Biurim v'Hanhagos, Vayikra (23:15) 53 Rashbi, m'Mesiva Kadisha 2, p. 51. Perhaps this was the mistake of the 24,000 talmidim of Rabbi Akiva. Of course, they understood this great principle of Rabbi Akiva as an important goal to attain, but they did not realize that without this principle one cannot be considered to be learning Torah at all. When they saw their friends dying, they attributed it to the fact that they were not learning enough Torah, but they did not realize that without ואהבת לרעך כמוך the Torah is not true Torah. 54 Medrash Rabba, Chayei Sara, 61 55 Bereishis 2:18 56 The Gemara (Sotah 14a) says “The Torah begins with Chesed and ends with Chesed.” The Gematria of the words גְּמִילוּת חֶסֶדִים is equivalent to the word תּוֹרָה (Be'er Moshe, Devarim p. 222) 57 Zohar 2:190b 58 In fact, it is ironic that the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died on all of the days of Sefira except for Lag BaOmer (according to the Shulchan Aruch, see footnote 10) and Rav Shimon Bar Yochai died specifically on Lag BaOmer. Hence, the one day that the 24,000 talmidim did not die was specifically the day that Rav Shimon died. Perhaps, the day of Lag BaOmer has a power to influence this middah of טוב (as it is the 33rd letter in the Torah) which is founded on of ואהבת לרעך כמוך, on this holy day the 24,000 were able to reach a level where they did show respect to one another. This is also the day that Rav Shimon died as through his death the Torah of ואהבת לרעך כמוך was able to spread. 59 Parshas Naso p.124b 60 Introduction to Sefer Chafetz Chaim 61 See nefesh HaChaim, Chapter I 62 Zohar, Parshas VaYeishev 63 Sukkah 45b 64 Parshas Reah 65 Lag BaOmer 66 Y.D. 233 67 Shoel Umeishiv, 5, Yosef Daas 39; Chakirei Lev (Y.D. 11); see Shulchan Aruch Y.D. 349:4; Semah C.M. 248:12 68 However, Sefer Yeshuas Malko (Likutei Torah p. 76) gives a different justification for this custom based on the Gemara which states that when Rav Shimon Bar Yochai was hiding in the cave he resided there without clothing like Adam HaRishon before the sin. Thus, clothing is thrown into the fires to show that this great Tzadik did not need clothing. Shu"t Shem miShmuel (8). He adds that he heard that the holy Ohr haChaim would burn many expensive clothing on Lag BaOmer in honor of Rav Shimon bar Yochai. See also Pri Megadim (560:4) where he explains that it is permitted to break a glass at a wedding since it is done for people to take mussar and accept its message.