

Lag B'Omer 5781

Rabbi David Levy

## Reengaging in the World with Cautious Optimism

Over the past few weeks, we've been counting the omer: the 49 day period beginning on the Second night of Passover and culminating in Shavuot, the feast of weeks. Like most Jewish holidays it has agrarian roots, even the name "Omer" is a dry weight measurement, specifically referring to the Omer of barley that would be offered at the Temple in Jerusalem each day, until the priests offered Wheat on the 50th day.

But over the course of time, our people have found new meaning into this moment of Jewish time. In the post agrarian period, the Omer became a time of mourning. Around 2000 years ago, a plague impacted the Jewish people killing tens of thousands. It was on the 33rd day, in Hebrew Lag, that the plague was lifted. We stand here today, on Lag B'Omer: the day where generations of Jews have given thanks that plagues are not eternal. The plague of COVID19 still ravages throughout the world, and unlike in the stories told of Lag B'Omer, the plague doesn't end like that, (snap fingers) but rather slowly shifts towards a more hopeful and joyful reality. And the fact that we are together tonight, so many of us in person, and so many also joining us virtually, is a hopeful sign that

we are moving forward towards that better future that we are all hoping for. We continue now with the Shema

In the Talmud you can find the story most associated with Lag B'omer: the tale of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who was known to have a brilliant mind with a fiery wit. Throwing caution to the wind, he openly criticized the Roman government, claiming that everything they built: their roads, sanitation systems, and marketplaces were not for the good of society, but merely to feed their own appetites. When the critiques reached the ears of the Emperor, he sentenced Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son, Rabbi Elazar, to death. To avoid the harsh decree, they hid in a cave where they studied Torah day and night while being nourished by a carob tree and spring of water which had miraculously appeared for them.

After living twelve years alone in the cave, the emperor died and the death sentence was lifted. Elijah the prophet came and told Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rabbi Elazar that it was safe to leave the cave. <sup>1</sup>

Now I want to pause for a moment, to consider our own re-emergence from the cave. The way in which each of us has sequestered ourselves to various degrees not over 12 years, but over the past 14 months. For all of us it has taken a toll, and we have found new ways of living over this past year, that are incompatible

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<sup>1</sup> [Leaving the Cave](#)

with the new reality that is emerging. Each of us have had to chart a course back into this new world that is both more open in some ways, and more closed in others.

Later on in our service, I'll continue our story, about what happened when Rabbis Elazar and Shimon bar Yochai come out of the cave. But for now, let us offer the words of Mi Chamocha, that continue to imagine a world perfected, a world where each of us feels the sense of safety and security we are all longing for.

**Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and Rabbi Shimon emerged** from the cave, and **saw people who were plowing and sowing**. Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai **said**: These people **abandon eternal life** of Torah study **and engage in temporal life** for their own sustenance. **Every place that** Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar **directed their eyes was immediately burned**. **A Divine Voice emerged and said to them**: Did you emerge from the cave in order **to destroy My**

**world? Return to your cave. They again went and sat there for twelve months...A Divine Voice emerged and said to them: Emerge from your cave. They emerged. Everywhere that Rabbi Elazar would strike, Rabbi Shimon would heal. Rabbi Shimon said to Rabbi Elazar: My son, you and I suffice for the entire world...**

Friends, another time I would love to unpack every aspect of this story with you, but for tonight, I'd love to focus on one particular part: the way in which Shimon and Elazar enter the world once again after being forced into lockdown for such a long time. They respond with fire, and it's that relationship with Fire that I want us to consider tonight.

Fire that blazed forth from the gaze of those Rabbis inspired the campfire we have here tonight. At Lag B'omer gatherings around the world, they light fires, sing and tell stories, and quite often begin with this story. Which in many ways feels counterintuitive: the fire in this story was so destructive that God banished the Rabbis back into lockdown!

Fire in our tradition, and in life, is not good or bad: it's a tool in our hands that can be used to destroy or build, to burn or cauterize, to char or cook. Our return to this new reality shares commonalities with Fire: that we can just as quickly burn ourselves if we get too close to that fire, anxious and excited to return to what might look

like "normal life." It was only yesterday, where in the exuberance to celebrate Lag B'omer ended in tragedy. Lag B'Omer celebrations in Meron, Israel at the burial place of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, were intended to be the first large gathering allowed in the country. Far too many flocked to Meron, and 45 people were crushed to death, and over 150 were hurt in a stampede. This is the worst peacetime tragedy in Modern Israeli history, and the cause according to Magen David Adom, the Israeli Red Cross was severe overcrowding. We pray for those that died, and those that are injured, and it's a painful reminder of how quickly the joy of returning to something that looks like normal life, can quickly burn us if we get too close.

Even as we recognize this terrible loss, I want to ask us to consider the other side of fire. We know that the warm glow of the fire that you can see right over there, is not only a harbinger of destruction, but also can be warm and inviting. It's around the fire that we built connections that need to be renewed, that we cook food that we'll begin to share with each other once again. It's around the fire that if we're careful our community will reemerge, not by getting too close, but by gathering around, with music in our ears and our hearts and seeing each other in the flickering light.

