

A Message from the Rabbi (May, 2016)

S'firat HaOmer, the counting of the Omer, transports us back to the time when our ancestors brought an Omer, a special offering of grain, to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. We count the Omer from the second day of Passover onwards. S'firat HaOmer will end on Shavuot, seven weeks later, as commanded in the book of Leviticus (23:15-16). This year, Lag baOmer begins on Wednesday, May 25 and ends on Thursday, May 26.

What does 'Lag baOmer' actually mean? The first word consists of the Hebrew letters lamed and gimmel. The numerical value associated with lamed is 30, and that of gimmel is 3. So Lag baOmer literally refers to the 33rd day of the Omer period.

What is Lag baOmer about? The Omer period is a period of mourning, during which we commemorate the death of thousands of students of Rabbi Akiva. Akiva, a renowned sage and shepherd who began studying at the age of 40, joined the Jewish military leader Bar Kochba in the disastrous rebellion against Roman power in Judea, and died as a martyr in 135 CE, teaching Torah against the odds of Roman rulings.

On the 33rd day of the Omer period, the tragedies that beset Rabbi Akiva's students came to an end, which is why Lag baOmer is a day for commemoration. The occasion is usually marked with picnics and bonfires. Lag baOmer is a holiday of camaraderie, on which we mingle and socialize and are afforded the opportunity to reflect on our bonds with one other, honoring Rabbi Akiva, who taught that to love our fellow as ourselves is a fundamental law in the Torah.

The source of this teaching can be found in Leviticus 19:18, a major passage that is part of the Holiness Code in which we are commanded 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself', which came to be known as 'the golden rule'. In the same portion we are also told 'You shall be holy for I, Adonai your God, am holy' (19:1-2).

Preceding Rabbi Akiva's lesson, in the 1st century C.E., when asked to sum up the whole Torah in a nutshell, Hillel replied: 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is a commentary; go and learn it.' (Shabbat 31a)

Whether it is formulated negatively, as in Hillel's saying, or positively, as in Akiva's

teaching, the love of our neighbor is such an essential commandment, which is conducive to positive and peaceful relationships and keeps us together. Whenever we depart from God's commandment, it feels as though a tear has occurred in the canvas of our tradition.

So, as we journey from Pesach to Shavuot and graduate from liberty to responsibility, let us take the golden rule to heart and remember to cherish our relationships with our relatives, friends and acquaintances.

Wishing you a meaningful Lag BaOmer, Rabbi Séverine Sokol