The Noisy and Upsetting Rebbe Shimon Bar Yochai

Why do we rejoice on Lag Ba’omer, the 33rd day of the Omer, 18 Iyar? According to tradition, this is the day of passing of Rebbe Shimon Bar Yochai, the famous Talmudic sage, also known by the acronym, Rashbi. What is there to celebrate on the day of passing, particularly of a great sage? After all, on the day of passing of Moses, we do not make big celebrations, and some people even fast! We feel sorrow at the passing of Moses because he did not merit to enter the Land of Israel and finish his task. Thus, the Kabbalists say that the soul of Moses returns in every generation, in order to finish his task. But Rebbe Shimon revealed the secrets of the Torah just before his passing and passed away amidst great joy. This is the meaning of the Hebrew word, ‘hitulah’ which refers to the day of passing of a tzaddik, but which really means ‘a joyous wedding.’ Inside the deep secrets of the Torah that Rebbe Shimon revealed, the light of the complete redemption and Mashiach is concealed. Thus, the joy knows no bounds.

The core of the Torah taught to us by Moses is the practical commandments. Moses himself desired to perform all the commandments, which is why we feel sorrow upon his death – because many of these commandments can only be performed inside the Land of Israel. Rebbe Shimon, however, primarily revealed the light of the Torah: the light that is above any limitations (transcendent light, in terms of Kabbalah). Rebbe Shimon spent thirteen years in the cave – almost bereft of practical commandments: He did not have a sukkah or a lulav for the Sukkot holiday, or matzah for Pesach. All that he had was Torah study. This light was more intensely manifest when he passed away, exiting the confines of his physical body.

Until We Don’t Know

Something about the joyousness of Lag Ba’omer is reminiscent of the joyousness of Purim. Even on the Hebrew calendar, Lag Ba’omer will always fall out on the day that we celebrated Purim. What is the inner connection between the two dates?

On Purim, we drink wine “until we don’t know the difference between the evil Haman and the righteous Mordechai.” On Lag Ba’omer, however, there is no need to drink large amounts of wine. It is enough to just drink a small “l’chaim” and “When wine goes in, secrets come out.” (The Hebrew word for ‘wine,’ yayin, equals the Hebrew word for ‘secrets,’ sod). On Purim, the wine goes into our mouths and on Lab Baomer the secret itself – the secrets of the Torah- emerge from our mouths. These secrets are so deep that they really are above and beyond regular knowledge (such as not knowing the difference between the evil Haman and the righteous Mordechai). They are derived from a wondrous, hidden place, as is written about Rebbe Shimon Bar Yochai, “Bar Yochai, a wondrous light from the heights of Above.”

Interestingly, the day of passing of Moses, the seventh of Adar, also comes out on the same day of the week as Purim and Lag Ba’omer. Lag Ba’omer is the 71st day from the 7th of Adar, similar to the connection between Moses and the 70 Elders. This is a
beautiful allusion to the fact that the hilulah of Rebbe Shimon brings completion to the passing of Moses. Initially, we felt sorrow upon his death, but now, we begin to understand that the passing of a tzaddik is the dawn of the revelation of the light of the redemption.

**Noisy and Upsetting**

In the Zohar, it is told that when Rebbe Shimon was buried, a voice called out, “This is the man who makes noise on earth and who angers kingdoms.” This refers to the death and downfall of the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnetzar.

What is the connection between Rebbe Shimon Bar Yochai and the evil Nebuchadnetzar, who destroyed the First Temple in Jerusalem? As we say on Purim, “Cursed is Haman, blessed is Mordechai,” so we say on Lag Ba’omer “Cursed in Nebuchadnetzer, the head of all the destroyers.” “Blessed is Rebbe Shimon, the head of all the Children of Israel.” (In Hebrew, ‘Rebbe’ is an acronym for ‘Rosh Bnai Yisrael,’ ‘the head of the Children of Israel’).

How do we rectify the destruction of the Temple? Rebbe Shimon makes noise on earth – he makes positive noise in the world, awakening us all – including the most simple Jews – to return to God and beg Him for the redemption. In this way, he “angers kingdoms” – transforming the kingdom-government to the kingdom of Torah and holiness – the kingdom of Mashiach.