

Kol THE VOICE OF Barrack

Lag B'Omer: Bringing *Kavod* Back Into Light

THE OMER

As of today, the 29th of April, the 17th of Iyar, we are now in the 32nd day of the Sefirat HaOmer in the Jewish year of 5781.

The days of the Omer — the period of time between Pesach and Shavuot — are marked by a daily counting process which includes recognizing the days and weeks: the 49 days that comprise 7 weeks. Many different customs permeate the Omer on the Jewish calendar, but one of the more prominent is the celebration of Lag B'Omer — the 33rd day of the Omer, which we will celebrate tomorrow, Friday, April 30.

THE 33rd DAY — WHY IS IT SPECIAL?

There are two reasons of significance for this day: it marks the day when the plague which killed the students of Rabbi Akiva ceased, and it is also the *yahrzeit* — the anniversary of the death — for famed sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who was a second-generation student of Rabbi Akiva.

The Talmud recounts a well-known story that during the time of the Omer, 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died from a plague “on account of their not extending *kavod* (honor, respect) to one another.” We are taught that the plague persisted until the 33rd day of the Omer when it then ceased. [Tractate Yevamot (62b)]

Yet what is the Talmud referring to when it says that they did not give *kavod* to one another? What does *kavod* really mean?

KAVOD - SHOWING HONOR & RESPECT

Loosely translated, *kavod* means “honor” or “respect,” and is one of our core *Derech Eretz* values at Barrack. At its root, *kavod* entails a belief in seeing the equal and innate worth of others. When we honor or show respect to others, we are validating not only their extrinsic identities — their rank, position, degree, or title they hold — but also their intrinsic self-worth and being.

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF

Rabbi Akiva’s Jewish philosophy on life included the statement, “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself — This is the overarching principle of Torah!” So it sounds hard to believe that his students would not honor one another. But the Talmud tells us that they fell into a common trap: when we are hyper-focused on ourselves, it becomes increasingly difficult to appreciate, understand, or value another person or their point of view.

By ignoring the insights, perspectives and contributions they might have to offer each other, Rabbi Akiva’s students ceased to value dissenting opinions, deeming them unnecessary, or even without merit. As a result, they did not extend *kavod* to one another. And as a result, their combined Torah and the teachings of their rabbi ultimately perished and were lost.

Kol Barrack (The Voice of Barrack) is a periodic publication that recognizes important dates in the Jewish calendar. In this edition, Rabbi Akiva Weiss, Judaic Studies Teacher, shares his thoughts with our school community.



Rabbi Akiva Weiss

JUDAIC STUDIES TEACHER

Rabbi Akiva Weiss is in his third year at Barrack as a Judaic Studies teacher. He has spent over a decade as a rabbi and chaplain on college campuses working with Jewish students of all backgrounds through the Orthodox Union and Hillel. He lives near Bala Cynwyd with his wife and five children and is a volunteer firefighter with the Lower Merion Fire Department.

aweiss@jbha.org

FINDING THE LIGHT: RESTORING THE LOST LESSON

This lost lesson was not restored until Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai came along in the next generation of Rabbi Akiva's students. Lag B'Omer is often marked by bonfires, and in Israel literally hundreds of thousands of people gather at the gravesite of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai on that day to light bonfires and celebrate his legacy.

What is the connection between the fires of Lag B'Omer and the story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai? And what did Rabbi Shimon know that the first generation of thousands did not?

The Talmud (Shabbat 33b) recounts a story where Rabbi Shimon and his son Eleazar fled from the Romans and hid themselves in a cave studying the secrets of the Torah for 12 years. When they emerged, their connection with the divine seemed to be all-encompassing, so much so that they had trouble finding meaning in anything that was not directly Torah-oriented. They saw people farming the land and couldn't understand why they were not spending their time in pursuit of Torah. They immediately began to set the world alight; "anything upon which their gaze fell was immediately consumed by fire."

A heavenly voice called out rebuking them: "You left your cave in order to destroy my world?! Get back in your cave!" After an additional 12 months in their cave, they emerged anew. This time, while the younger Rabbi Eleazar still seemed bent on destruction, the Talmud tells us: "wherever Rabbi Eleazar would strike, there Rabbi Shimon would heal." Later, the pair would encounter an elderly individual preparing for Shabbat. That encounter soothed the passions of both rabbis and instead of seeing negativity everywhere, they rejoiced in finding the positive.

Rabbi Shimon and his son Eleazar had become consumed through their isolation and learning of Torah to see the world through only one lens — the lens of Torah study. When the world around them and its inhabitants did not reflect their viewpoint of how one is to bring 'light' to the world, they began to resort to their own methods to force others into their paradigm: they burned all that they saw.

As a local volunteer firefighter, I happen to know a little bit about fire. It reduces things to their basic elements, and in doing so, it also creates heat and light. In Jewish lore, these properties become spiritual metaphors. We are encouraged to share our light with others, but the story of Rabbi Shimon and Eleazar shows the destructive potential of forcing your own light onto others.

LESSONS OF THE OMER

See Things from Another's Perspective

When a person can only see the world through their own perspective and lens, others become either obstacles in their path, or a means to be used to bring about a given end. Yet in the end, Rabbi Shimon learned to not see others through his own personal lens of worth, but to find and appreciate the self-worth and *kavod* in the other *irrespective* of his own take on things. Rabbi Shimon thus mastered the lesson of *kavod* which Rabbi Akiva's first generation of students did not and was able to restore the lost Torah.

Bring out the Light in Others

Finding and uncovering the values inherent in the opposing viewpoint is one of the hardest yet most rewarding endeavors we can undertake. It helps us to recast our disagreements in terms of not one against the other, but as individuals striving together to enrich our world. When we can extend to each other the necessary *kavod* and appreciation that is required for honest and soulful dialogue, we not only make headway in repairing our relationships and the world we live in, but in bringing light to the world as well. As a Judaic Studies teacher, I am keenly aware of how necessary this approach is in education if we are to help every one of our students be their best and most inspired self. When we face such hyper-polarization in America, there is no greater time in our shared history where it is more important to work harder to help others bring forth their own light, and work less to assert our own.

This is why we light bonfires on Lag B'Omer. It is a reminder of the lesson learned from Rabbi Shimon and how we are here to not only shine our own light into the world but to help others do so as well.

This Lag B'Omer let us all strive to bring out the light in others!