What do we celebrate on Lag BaOmer?

In his book Megilat haMered vehaChurban ("The Tale of the Rebellion and the Destruction"), Dr. Chagi Ben Artzi, professor of history at Bar Ilan University, tells the story of the destruction of the Second Bet haMiqdash and mentions a lesser-known (at least to me) opinion regarding why Lag laOmer (also known as Lag baOmer) is considered a festive day.

First, according to an important rabbinical opinion (Chatam Sofer), on the 18th day of Iyar, we Jews began to receive the man (manna), a food provided by God daily in the desert of Sinai for 40 years. According to this opinion, on the 33rd day of the Omer, we celebrate the miracle of the man.

Second, the Sages say that between Pesach and Shabuot, 24,000 students of Ribbi Aqiba died in an epidemic, and on the 33rd day of the Omer, this epidemic ended. According to Rabbi Sherirah Gaon (906–1006), Rabbi Aqiba's students actually died fighting the Roman Empire, and it is possible that the Gemara speaks of "an epidemic" as a euphemism.

Third, and as we explained earlier, on this day we celebrate the life and achievements of Ribbi Shimon bar Yochai (see here).

Finally, Professor Ben Artzi reminds us of another major event that took place on the same day—the 33rd of the Omer—around the year 130 of the common era.

THE SHEMAD

After the destruction of the Second Temple, Jerusalem was in ruins, and the Jews were not allowed to enter the city. Things got even worse when the Roman Emperor Hadrian came to power in the year 117. Hadrian had an obsessive hatred toward the Jewish people, and like so many antisemites before and after him, he was seeking a "final solution to the Jewish problem." Hadrian banned Berit Mila (circumcision) and the study of the

Tora, and punished these “crimes” with death.
These times were so traumatic that the Hachamim rarely spoke of them, and referred to this era with a generic term: Shemad—“destruction”—in a way similar to how we use the term Shoah (“Holocaust”) to encompass the tragedies our people experienced during the Second World War.

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

To ensure the name “Israel” was erased, Hadrian changed the name “Yehuda” (Judea) to “Palestine,” falsely attributing Israel’s identity to the Philistines. Ironically, Philistines in Hebrew, pelishtiim, means “foreign invaders” and refers to the savage peoples who came from the sea, plundered the locals, and took by force everything they could. Incidentally, the Philistines had already disappeared by Hadrian’s time—but he didn’t care. The main thing was to “cancel” the connection between Israel and the Jewish people.
Incredibly, we see similar tendencies in our days: a few years ago, UNESCO launched a campaign to declare the Jews as invaders in their own land, referring to Israel as “occupied Palestinian territory.” Officially, UNESCO also changed the name of Jerusalem—especially the Temple Mount—to “al-Haram al-Sharif” in all of its documents. See more details here: .

A PAGAN TEMPLE IN THE MOST SACRED PLACE

Hadrian, like UNESCO, also tried to erase the name of Jerusalem. He had the city plowed and rebuilt under a new name: Aelia Capitolina. Why Aelia? Because before becoming emperor, Hadrian’s family name was Aelius, and he wanted to commemorate himself. Why Capitolina? Because Hadrian intended to rededicate Jerusalem to the Roman god Jupiter Capitolino. A massive pagan temple would be built on the very site where the Bet haMiqdash had stood—guaranteeing, God forbid, that the Jewish Temple would never be rebuilt.
The Jews learned of Hadrian’s plan. Although they had tolerated his ongoing provocations, this crossed a line. They could no longer remain passive. Thus began the Bar Kochba

Rebellion, supported by many Sages, including Ribbi Aqiba.

A GREAT VICTORY AFTER ALL

The brave Bar Kochba rebellion ultimately failed. However, despite the terrible price paid—more than half a million Jewish lives—there was a significant victory. The first goal of the rebellion had been achieved: to prevent Hadrian from erecting a pagan temple on the ruins of the Bet haMiqdash. Bar Kochba and his fighters, facing the world's most powerful army, defeated the mighty 10th Legion of Rome and recaptured Yerushalayim.

When was Jerusalem recovered from the Romans? On a day like today: Iyar 18, the 33rd day of the Omer. Although the war was eventually lost, this victory forced the Romans to suspend the construction of the pagan temple on the site of our Sanctuary. A few years later, Hadrian died (138 CE), and his plan—Barukh HaShem—was never carried out.

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