How To Thank HaShem? A Lag BaOmer Story

□□□□□□ □□□ □□□□□□□□ .… □□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□

Ribbi Shimon Bar Yochai passed away on Lag BaOmer, and it is a widely accepted custom to commemorate his legacy on this day. Why? Because there is much to learn from his life.

THE MYSTICAL INITIATION

Ribbi Shimon was a Sage from the time of the Mishnah (approximately 150 CE). He was more connected to the Divine world than the earthly one. For Ribbi Shimon, nothing was more important than the study of Tora. Tora study was the most tangible connection to the Creator. For him, immersing oneself in Divine Law was the most direct way to connect with God, the exclusive purpose of our lives. Ribbi Shimon once explained that the reason God did not lead the people of Israel directly to the Promised Land when rescuing them from Egypt was not that they were unprepared for war but because the Creator wanted the Jews to spend more time in the desert, sustained by manna – food that fell from heaven – so that without material worries, they could dedicate themselves exclusively to Torah. Ribbi Shimon's ideal was to live in the times of manna, studying Torah without earthly concerns.

A FULFILLED DREAM

Unexpectedly and involuntarily, his dream came true. Once, Ribbi Yehuda, Ribbi Yose, and Ribbi Shimon Bar Yochai were gathered. Ribbi Yehuda began to praise the works of the Romans, who ruled Israel at that time: "The Romans do great works like bridges, markets, and bathhouses for hygiene." Ribbi Yose remained silent, neither validating nor negating what was said. But Ribbi Shimon Bar Yochai criticized the works of the Romans: "Everything they do is for their benefit

or to assimilate us. They build bridges to tax us, fill markets with promiscuity, and we cannot use public baths." Ribbi Shimon's critical comments reached the ears of the Romans, and he was sentenced to death. First, he sought refuge in the Yeshiva, but when the search intensified, he had to escape to a cave hidden in the mountains of Meron, where he lived with his son for 12 years. During this extended quarantine, they survived by eating carob seeds and drinking water from a spring. Far from being a problem, for Ribbi Shimon, it was a Providential act: the closest scenario to receiving manna from heaven. Now, he and his son El'azar could dedicate themselves exclusively to Torah study, and they did not mind living in extreme minimalism. During all that time, they devoted themselves to studying Tora and reached a level of spiritual depth and understanding unparalleled in the rabbinic world. The Zohar, the Book of Splendor, which is the fundamental work of Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah), contains many stories, ideas, and sayings of Ribbi Shimon Bar Yochai, constituting the main body of this book.

THE REPROGRAMMING

During those years, Ribbi Shimon devoted himself to studying with his son El'azar until he was informed that he could leave his confinement and return to normal life because the emperor had died. When that happened, the decrees were lifted. Ironically, returning to normal life was the hardest thing for Ribbi Shimon. At first, they criticized Everything they saw, especially El'azar, who could not tolerate, for example, seeing people interrupt their dedication to work instead of studying Torah all day. A Divine voice rebuked him and ordered him to return to the cave for another twelve months. Ribbi Shimon and his son had to "reprogram" themselves. When he emerged from the cave for the second time, Ribbi Shimon had learned the lesson he had once taught: "I have seen that individuals who 'live in the heights' [= in a state of permanent spiritual elevation] are very few." Ribbi Shimon

realized that ordinary people found it very difficult to maintain an uninterrupted relationship with God, like the one he and his son had. He realized that he was not the rule but the exception. And he became more tolerant towards others. The experience of going into the cave for the second time transformed him.

GROWING IN A CAVE

While Ribbi Shimon's cave represents an ideal, this ideal is utopian and unattainable for most. One should only live his life thinking only about sustenance. However, one cannot be rooted only in the earthly, as we can be dangerously trapped in a society where the urgent leaves no time for the important. When Ribbi Shimon emerged from the cave for the second time, he achieved the delicate balance between the elevated man who lives in the clouds and the ideal represented by the dream of our patriarch Jacob: the human angels who ascend a ladder to heaven and then descend bringing something from heaven – the Tora they learned -– and sharing it with the rest of society.

"And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem… and he pitched his tent before the city."

RIBBI SHIMON AND OUR PATRIARCH JACOB

When Ribbi Shimon finally returned to civilization, he said, "God has saved my life, and that of my son, and I must thank Him for this miracle." The Talmud (Shabbat 33b) recounts that at that moment, Ribbi Shimon remembered the story of our patriarch Jacob when he was saved from Laban and Esau, and he finally arrived safely (in Hebrew: "shalem") in the city of Shechem. Jacob was very aware that he had escaped danger thanks to Divine intervention. The Torah says that upon arriving in Shechem, "he camped before the city." The Talmud then debates what exactly Jacob did for the inhabitants of Shechem, mentioning three opinions. Rab said that Jacob

established a monetary system, “matbe’a,” replacing the primitive barter method, which was deficient. Shemuel said that our patriarch established a new commercial system for the inhabitants of Shechem: the market, where sellers and buyers conveniently gathered a couple of times a week. Ribbi Yochanan said that he built a system of public baths in that city to increase hygiene and public health. While they differ on exactly what Jacob did, the three Rabbis agree that he performed an extraordinary and selfless act of kindness for the benefit of the inhabitants of Shechem.

THERE IS ALWAYS SOMETHING WE CAN GIVE

Next, the Talmud tells us that when Ribbi Shimon arrived safely in Tiberias, he wanted to imitate Jacob’s actions. Unlike Jacob, who had great wealth, Ribbi Shimon had nothing material to offer, so he offered his time, knowledge, and effort for the benefit of others. First, he asked, “Is there anything I can do for the good of the city?” And they told him yes, that there was a large plot of land between the city and the market, which in the past had been used as a cemetery – but the graves were unmarked – and this prevented the Kohanim and other Jews who strictly observed purity laws from accessing the market. Ribbi Shimon then set about examining the entire area to identify places where bodies might be buried. He took testimonies from people who knew the area and verified the consistency of the terrain, inch by inch and marked the areas where he found evidence of old graves, such as disturbed earth and others. Thus, after arduous work that could have taken several months, he marked the prohibited areas and authorized many people’s entry to the liberated “pure” areas.

HOW TO THANK HASHEM

The lesson we learn from these two stories, that of Jacob and Ribbi Shimon Bar Yochai, is vital: What is the way to “repay” God, to show our gratitude to the Creator? The Jewish way of

thanking God is by practicing “chesed,” doing good deeds for others, for His children, even though they may not have done anything special for us. The best way to thank a friend for a favor they did for us is by doing a favor for one of their children. We can do that by giving our material means, as Jacob did, or with our time and dedication, as Ribbi Shimon bar Yochai did.