

Torah Wellsprings

*Collected thoughts
from
Rabbi Elimelech
Biderman
Shlita*

Emor - Lag B'Omer





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Email: Mail@torahwellsprings.com

Parshas Emor - Lag b'Omer

The first pasuk of the parashah speaks first to all cohanim, and then it speaks to the individual. It says, אִמְרָא לְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל, "Tell the *cohanim*... *he* shouldn't become impure..."

Why does the *pasuk* begin in plural and conclude in singular? (The *Zohar* asks this question.)

The Imrei Emes *zy'a* answers that the *pasuk* is saying two things. First the *pasuk* is speaking to all *cohanim*, telling them that they mustn't become *tamei*. The end of the *pasuk* isn't only meant for the *cohanim*; it is a message for every Yid. Hashem says, "My beloved son. Be careful with your *kedushah*. Guard the holiness of your *neshamah*. Don't contaminate it with improper deeds. לֹא יִטְמָא, don't make your *nefesh tamei*."

This message is written in the singular form so everyone should feel that the *pasuk* is speaking to him.

To protect one's soul, one should begin with the eyes.

The Beis Ahron explains the *pasuk* (*Yeshaya* 27:6), וְצִיץ וּפְרַח יִשְׂרָאֵל, "If one looks where he shouldn't, the *kedushas* Yisrael flies away from him."

Rebbe Bunim of Otvotzk *zy'a* was very

careful with guarding his eyes. He had people go before him to clear the way, so he can go through the streets without contaminating his eyes.

The *gaon*, Reb Pinchas Epstein *zt'l*, once saw this and wondered, "The Rebbe is already old. Why is this necessary? No one else takes such precautions, so why does he?"

When the Rebbe passed by, he knew what Reb Pinchas Epstein was thinking, so he told him, "The wisest of all men (Shlomo HaMelech) said אַל תְּהִיָּה חָכֵם בְּעֵינַיִךְ, 'don't be wise, when it comes to the eyes.' Even if one is very old, he is obligated to guard his eyes."¹

It is written, לִיבְבַתִּי בָאָחָז מֵעֵינַיִךְ, "[Hashem says] you aroused My love with *one* of your eyes." This implies that if one guards his eyes, even just once, it is already a great accomplishment, and sufficient to arouse Hashem's love for him.

The Vilna Gaon *zy'a* taught: A Yid cannot imagine just how joyous he will be in heaven if only one forbidden thought will be detracted from his record.²

A *mashal* is told about someone, we'll call him Moshe, who used to buy bags

1. Someone mentioned to the Rebbe of Ruzhin *zy'a* that his eyes hurt him. The Rebbe retorted, "How do you know that your eyes hurt you? Maybe you are hurting your eyes?"

2. Reb Michoel Ber Weismandel *zt'l*, the Nitra Rav, lost five children in the Holocaust. After the Holocaust, he rebuilt his family. At the bris of his fifth child he said, נִקְדַּשׁ אֶת שְׁמִי, and explained that he had five children who died *al kiddush*

of flour from an Arab, and then re-sell those bags in his store. To keep track of how many bags he received, Moshe would place one coin into a dish for every bag of flour he got. Afterwards, they would count the coins and know how much Moshe needs to pay.

Once, Moshe was buying many bags of flour, and the Arab saw the tray filling up with coins. When Moshe turned away for a moment, the Arab grabbed a handful of coins and placed them in his pocket. He thought he gained, but he only lost, because Moshe paid him less.

This is how it is when one grabs forbidden pleasures. For a moment the person thinks he is gaining, but it doesn't last for long. Soon, he is left with less than what he had beforehand.

People have ups and downs. There are days when one wants to live with holiness, and then there are days when he isn't inspired. What can one do so he will always be vigilant with the holiness of his soul?

Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk *zy'a* taught that one should derive inspiration from the elevated moments. Rashi (on the first *pasuk* of the *parashah*) writes, להזהיר גדולים על הקטנים and Rebbe Elimelech explains: the גדולים (the high spiritual moments) should להזהיר (shine) onto the קטנים (lower times).

In simple terms, this can mean to take on

kabbalos (resolutions). When one is on a spiritually high moment and he experiences just how good it is to serve Hashem, it would be wise for him to take on a *kabbalah* he will stick to even when he falls.

Reasons for Counting the Omer

This week's *parashah* discusses *sefiras ha'omer*, as it states (23:15-16), ומספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת...שבע שבתות תמימות תהיינה... תספרו חמישים יום. We will discuss some of the reasons for this holy mitzvah:

1. Mitzvah d'Oraysah

The *Mishnah Berurah* (ביאור הלכה תפ"ט ד"ה) (לספור העומר) discusses how the Rambam (and others) maintain that *sefiras ha'omer* is a mitzvah from the Torah, even in our generation.

2. Mitzvah d'Rabbanan

The *Mishnah Berurah* writes that most opinions hold that in our generation *sefiras ha'omer* is a mitzvah from the *rabbanan*. This is because the Torah associates the mitzvah of counting the *omer* with the *korban omer*. As it states, ומספרתם לכם... מיום הביאתם את עומר התנופה, "Count... from the day you bring the *omer*..." When there isn't a *korban omer* — like today — the mitzvah is *d'Rabbanan*, rabbinical.

3. Zecher leMikdash

The Ra'n (*Pesachim* 28.) writes, "Most *meforshim* agree that *sefiras ha'omer* in

Hashem. They made a *kiddush Hashem* בשמי מרום, when they were killed and went up to heaven *al kidush Hashem*. נקדש את שמך בעולם, now we will sanctify Hashem's name while still living in this world, by living with *kedushah*, according to the Torah.

our time, when we don't sacrifice the *korban omer*, is a mitzvah *d'Rabbanan*, זכר למקדש, in commemoration of the Beis HaMikdash, when this mitzvah was applicable..."

4. In Memory of the Jewish Nation's Counting

When the Yidden left Mitzrayim, they counted the days leading up to *mattan Torah*. To commemorate that count, we count these days.

The Ran writes, "The Midrash states, when Moshe Rabbeinu told the Jewish nation תעבדון את האלקים על ההר הזה, 'You will serve Hashem on this mountain [Har Sinai].' The Jewish nation asked, 'Moshe Rabbeinu, when will we do this service? [When will we receive the Torah?]' Moshe replied, 'In fifty days.' The entire nation began counting the days. Due to this count, the *chachamim* established we should count *sefiras ha'omer*. According to this Midrash, in our generation, when we don't bring the *korban omer*, we count fifty days...to commemorate when the Jewish nation counted these days [in anticipation for *mattan Torah*]. This explanation is a דרש. The primary reason for counting the *omer* is זכר למקדש, in commemoration of the Beis HaMikdash..."

5. Anticipation

Each year, on Shavuot, we receive the Torah again. According to the *Sefer HaChinuch* (306) we count the *omer* to show our excitement and anticipation for this great moment, when we will receive the Torah.

The *Sefer HaChinuch* (306) writes, "The Torah is the essence of the Jewish people... They were redeemed from Mitzrayim...to receive the Torah at Sinai and to keep the Torah... Receiving the Torah is the utmost perfection and goodness, greater than redemption from slavery... Therefore, we are commanded to count...to show our excitement for this special day... We can compare this to a slave who counts the days towards his emancipation. He counts, continuously, 'When will the time finally come when I will be free?' Counting shows your aspiration to reach that time..."³

6. Celebrating Leaving Animalistic Behaviors Behind

The Chinuch asks, why do we count the days that passed? As we say, "One day of the *omer*... Two days of the *omer*... Three days of the *omer*..." and so on. If we are counting in anticipation for

3. When the Yidden in the desert counted fifty days leading to *mattan Torah*, they went through many ups and downs. For example, in Eilam, where there was no potable water, it says, וילנו על משה, the nation complained to Moshe (*Shemos* 16:2). In Refidim, they had doubts in *emunah* and then Amalek came, as it states, היש ה' בקרבנו אם אין ויבא עמלק (*Shemos* 17:7-8). But they counted each one of those days in joyous anticipation for *mattan Torah*. We too, shouldn't be fazed by the hardships of life, and by all the ups and downs we go through. Even when you have difficulties and tests, keep on going forward and you will merit Torah.

mattan Torah, we should count, “Fifty more days to *mattan Torah*... Forty-nine more days to *mattan Torah*... Forty-eight more days to *mattan Torah*.” Isn't that the way people count towards something they look forward to? The Chidushei HaRim *zt'l* answers that the sacrifice offering of the *omer* is made from barley, which is animal feed. On Shavuos, the *sh'tei halechem*, which was made from wheat, a human sustenance, is sacrificed. This indicates that during the fifty days of *sefiras ha'omer* we rise from being animal-like to a proper Yid. And so, we aren't only anticipating Shavuos, the day of *mattan Torah*, but we are also leaving behind an animalistic lifestyle. That is why we count the days that passed, because each day gone by means we are further away from that lowliness.

7. Purity

Rebbe Avraham Yehoshua Freund of Nasad *zt'l* (a student of the Divrei Chaim of Tzanz *zt'l*) said that when the Divrei Chaim counted *sefiras ha'omer*, he didn't count in front of the congregation like a *chazan* (as many Rebbes do). He counted the *omer* from his place, “but when he counted, his face would turn black, like coal [because of his fiery excitement]. He would climb up the walls (געדראַפּעט אויף די גראַדע וועג).”

“Climb up the walls” is a metaphor, to give us an inkling of his overflowing *hislahavus* when he counted the *omer*.

My father, the Lelover Rebbe *zt'l*, would often count *sefiras ha'omer* at home. He

would count the *omer* with immense passion and excitement. He would repeat, approximately ten times, *ואטהר ואתקדש* and also, *ולתקן את נפשותינו של מעלה...* with intense yearning. (After he finished saying *sefiras ha'omer*, my mother would check the walls of the house, to see that everything was o.k., and nothing destroyed by her husband's holy passion.)

They would count with so much fervor, because the *segulah* of counting the *omer* is to purify us from all our *tumah*, and to connect us to Hashem.

As we say in the *tefillah* of *sefiras ha'omer*, *ולתקן את נפשותינו ורוחותינו מכל סיג ופגם*, “[We count] to rectify our *neshamos* from all blemishes; to purify and to sanctify us in Your divine holiness, amen.”

We must remember though, that the goal isn't external passion, which is seen on the limbs or heard in one's voice. Primarily, we want the heart to be aroused and inspired.

It states (*Shemos* 19:6), *ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת קדוש*, “You shall be for Me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.” *גוי* can be translated “inside” (see *Bava Kama* 9: (שליש מלגו)). Following this translation, Rebbe Henoch of Alexander *zt'l* says, *גוי קדוש* means the *inside* of the Yid should be holy. The goal isn't to show external signs of fervor, but rather primarily to have that fervor *גוי*, inside the heart.

In a similar vein, the Rizhiner *zt'l* translated the words (at the end of *Nishmas*) *קרב*, ובקרב קדושים תהלל (the inside

of a Yid, should praise Hashem. An external show of passion is commendable when used as a tool to arouse your soul, or when your fervor overflows. But *solely* external passion, when the heart isn't in it, that isn't the purpose at all.

The *Ishah Shunamis* said to her husband (*II Malachim* 4:9), הנה נא ידעתי כי איש אלקים, “Behold I know that a holy, man of G-d is always coming here...”

The Gemara (*Brachos* 10:) asks, “How did she know that Elisha was holy?”

The Gemara answers, “It’s because she never saw a fly on his table.”

The commentaries ask, the Shunamis woman certainly saw Elisha's cautiousness with halachah, and she witnessed his devotion to Torah and mitzvos. Why does the Gemara say she knew Elisha was holy because flies didn't land on his table? She could have known it by his actions!

The Rizhiner *zy'a* answers that external deeds don't prove anything. It is possible to act like a holy man to trick people, while the heart is full of corruption. The Gemara sought a more definite source from which the *Ishah Shunamis* knew

that Elisha was a holy man. As we explained above, the goal is בקרב קדושים, that holiness should be inside the heart.

The Maharam Shi"r and several others who enumerate the 613 mitzvos say the mitzvah of *sefiras ha'omer* is mitzvah number 307. That is exactly the middle of the Torah, since there are 306 mitzvos before it and 306 mitzvos after it.

Reb Avraham Simchah, the Barnever Rav *zt'l* (in his sefer *Orah v'Simchah*) explains that the middle beam is the supporting beam that holds up the entire structure. Similarly, the mitzvah of *sefiras ha'omer*, which is the middle one of the 613 mitzvos, holds up all 613 mitzvos of the Torah.

This is because *sefiras ha'omer* purifies us. As we say (in the prayer said after *sefiras ha'omer*), אתה צויתנו על ידי משה עבדך, לספור ספירת העומר, כדי לטהרנו מקליפותינו ומטומאותינו וכו', “You commanded us via Moshe Your servant to count *sefiras ha'omer*, to purify us from our impurities...” Counting *sefiras ha'omer* gives us the purity and sanctity we need to uphold and keep the entire Torah. It is the middle mitzvah, because the entire Torah is dependent on it.⁴

4. Chazal say דבר שבמנין אינו בטל, something that's counted can never become annulled.

There are different kinds of *bitul*, such as ביטל ברוב, to be annulled in a majority, בשישים, to be annulled in sixty. However, דבר שבמנין, an item that is counted, אינו בטל, can never be annulled. (There are items sold by their weight or by their size. These can become *batel*. However, there are items that are sold by their number. Each item is counted individually, because of their individual importance. Those items don't become *batel*.)

The *Orah v'Simchah* writes, “Hashem gave us the mitzvah of *sefiras ha'omer* to purify us from *tumah*. What is significant about this mitzvah that it has the *segulah* to purify us?

“We can explain, *bederech tzachus*: If a person has many sins when he performs a mitzvah,

The nature of the purity of *sefiras ha'omer* is expressed in this week's *parashah* with the words (23:15), וּסְפַרְתֶּם, לכם מִמּוֹחֶרֶת הַשַּׁבָּת, “Count...from the day after *yom tov*...” וּסְפַרְתֶּם comes from the word סַפִּיר or סַנְפִּירֹן, which is a sapphire stone. (As it states *Shemos* 28:18 נֹפֶךְ סַפִּיר.) Moshe Rabbeinu made the *luchos* from sapphire (see *Midrash Ki Sisa* 26). The Or HaChaim HaKadosh explains that וּסְפַרְתֶּם לכם means that by counting the *omer*, your *neshamos* will become cleansed and will shine like sapphire.⁵

Rebbe Mendel of Riminov זת"ל would count the *omer* several times a day. Whenever he remembered the *sefiras ha'omer*, he would say, הַיּוֹם יוֹם...לְעוֹמֵר, שֶׁהֵם... Perhaps this is because each counting purifies us and makes our *neshamos* shine like sapphire.⁶

8. An Antidote

In addition to cleansing us from *tumah*, counting the *omer* acts as an antidote, a vaccine, that prevents us from falling into the hands of the *yetzer hara*.

The Shem MiShmuel (*Emor* תרע"ב) writes “The heart's nature changes somewhat [via counting the *omer*] that it shouldn't want improper matters.”

The *sefarim* teach that in the summer the *yetzer hara* becomes stronger, and we must seek an antidote to protect us from the *yetzer hara's* hands. The mitzvah of *sefiras ha'omer*, which we perform at the start of the summer season, is to protect us from falling into the clutches of the *yetzer hara*.

That is why we learn *Pirkei Avos* on Shabbos afternoons in the summer. We

the mitzvah doesn't protect him because the mitzvah becomes *batel* (annulled) by his many sins. However, the mitzvah of counting the *omer* is דְּבַר שְׂבִמְנִין, something that is counted, and the halachah is דְּבַר שְׂבִמְנִין אֵינוֹ בָטֵל, something like that never becomes annulled. Now, since this mitzvah doesn't become annulled, it has the ability to purify us from our *tumah*. If one wants to fortify a building so it shouldn't collapse, he will put up a strong beam, exactly in the middle of the building. Similarly, the mitzvah of counting the *omer* gives strength to the entire Torah and mitzvos... There are 306 mitzvos until the mitzvah of counting the *omer*, and there are 306 mitzvos after it. Right between them is this mitzvah; it supports the mitzvos on both sides, because this mitzvah purifies us from our *tumah*.”

5. The Or HaChaim (*Vayikra* 23:15) writes, “Chazal tell, the souls of Bnei Yisrael are associated with the *luchos*... And Chazal (*Vayikra Rabba* 32) say the *luchos* were made from סַפִּירֹן sapphire stones... Due to the...impurity of sin, their souls became soiled and their luster weakened. וּסְפַרְתֶּם לכם means that through counting the *omer* you will shine like sapphire...”

6. The Shem MiShmuel (*Bamidbar* תער"ב) writes, “Even if a person doesn't feel the purity that comes from *sefiras ha'omer*, he must believe that his *neshamah* is becoming purified... The amount of purity one attains varies from person to person. For some, only the source of their *neshamah* becomes pure. For others, their *nefesh* also becomes pure...”

need the *mussar* that is contained in *Pirkei Avos* especially in the summer, to keep us strong.

9. Attached to Hashem

The fifty days between Pesach and Shavuos are *mesugal* for connection to Hashem. It states (*Shemos* 26:10), ועשית חמישים לולאת, "you shall make fifty hooks" and the Chida *zt'l* (*Lechem min HaShamayim, Trumah*, 21) explains in the name of Rabbeinu Efraim that these hooks correspond to the fifty days of *sefiras ha'omer*. Just as there were fifty hooks to connect the sheets of the Mishkan, these fifty days connect us to our Father in heaven.

10. Cleared from Gehinom

Counting the *omer* can absolve a person from having to go to Gehinom.

The Mishnah (*Idiyos* 2:10) states, "Five things were for twelve months: (1) The *mabul* (2) Iyov was afflicted twelve months. (3) The ten plagues (4) The punishments for Gog and Magog (5) משפט רשעים בגיהנם שנים עשר חדש, the *resha'im* are punished [and cleansed] in Gehinom

for twelve months... Reb Yochanan ben Nuri [disagrees and] says מן הפסח ועד העצרת, the *resha'im* are punished in Gehinom from Pesach until Shavuos..."

There are different explanations for the final words of this Mishnah.⁷ The *Shibolei HaLeket* (and other commentaries) explain that מן הפסח עד העצרת is literal. Gehinom isn't always active. There are forty-nine days in the year — the days of *sefirah*, between Pesach and Shavuos — when Gehinom is active and the *resha'im* are punished and cleansed from their sins.

The *Chidushei HaRim* quotes the *Shibolei HaLeket*, and adds that just as in heaven, the purification term of Gehinom takes place between Pesach and Shavuos, so too, we purify ourselves between Pesach and Shavuos. If people take advantage of this time to purify themselves, they won't need the purification process of the next world in Gehinom.⁸

We've mentioned ten reasons for *sefiras ha'omer*, but there certainly are endless more reasons. It is an extremely holy

7. The Ra'v Bartenara *zt'l* explains, there are fifty days of *sefiras ha'omer*, and likewise, Gehinom is for fifty days. Gehinom is active the entire year, but each *rasha* is punished for solely fifty days, the amount of days between Pesach and Shavuos.

The *Be'er Yotzer* explains that מן הפסח עד העצרת means all souls are re-judged at this time. Even after the primary judgment was decided and determined, every year between Pesach and Shavuos the souls in heaven are judged again.

8. The *Pnei Menachem* of Gur *zt'l* taught that these fifty days are *mesugal* for attaining purity and for improving one's ways, and one who doesn't take advantage of this time will be punished in Gehinnom. The *Pnei Menachem* said that this is the intention of the Mishnah: משפט רשעים בגיהנם... מן הפסח ועד העצרת, "The judgment of Gehinom is given for not taking advantage of the days between Pesach and Shavuos."

time and a great privilege to count the *omer*. Fortunate are those who keep this mitzvah with holiness and purity, with joy and inspiration.

Chol Ha'Moed

There are two ways to view the period of *sefiras ha'omer*—either as days of mourning, or as days for rejoicing.

The *Ramban* (*Vayikra* 23:36) writes that the days of the *sefirah* are like *Chol HaMoed* because *Chol HaMoed* comes between the first and final day of the *yom tov* and *sefiras ha'omer* is between *Pesach* and *Shavuos*.

In contrast, *Sefiras ha'omer* is also a time for mourning. *Shulchan Aruch* (493:1) states, "The custom is, one doesn't make weddings [in *sefiras ha'omer*]...because the students of Reb Akiva were *niftar* during this period..."

So is it a happy time like *Chol HaMoed*, or a time of mourning?

The *Rebbe of Ruzhin zt'l* explains that it is up to each individual to decide how he wants to treat these days. One can treat them as days of mourning, or one can treat them similar to *Chol HaMoed*. Either way, all the *halachos* are the same.

For example, some refrain from celebrating marriages during *sefiras ha'omer* because of the deaths of Reb Akiva's students, and some refrain from marriages because it is like *Chol HaMoed*. Just like one shouldn't get married on *Chol HaMoed*, one shouldn't marry during *sefirah*.

The *halachos* and the customs are exactly

the same, but the experience will obviously be entirely different.

Good Middos

Middos aren't explicitly spoken about in the *Chumash*. Reb Chaim Vital *zy'a* explains that this is because *דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה* (*Tana d'Bei Eliyahu Rabba* 1:1). Good *middos* is pre-requisite, upon which Torah stands.

Reb Elyah Lopian explained this with the following *mashal*:

In Russia, two people were arrested for the crime of dealing with counterfeit money. One was caught with thousands of counterfeit bills in his possession. The other didn't have any counterfeit money in his possession, but he did own a printing press, which was used to print counterfeit money.

The court ruled that the one who was caught with thousands of counterfeit bills should be imprisoned for a year. The owner of the printing press was sentenced for seven years.

The owner of the press said to the judge, "Is this justice? That man had thousands of counterfeit bills, and I had none. Why does he get one year, and I get seven years?" The judge explained, "Your crime is greater. You own the printing press, and there is no limit to the damage you can cause."

Reb Eliyah Lopian explained that someone who has bad *middos* is the worst, because there is no limit to the bad he can cause.

The Rambam writes, "Just as a person must do *teshuvah* for sins, one must also seek out his bad thoughts and his bad *middos* that need correction, such as anger, hatred, and the like - and do *teshuvah* for all of these."

Ahavas Yisrael

Reb Akiva's students were *niftar* during *sefiras ha'omer* because they didn't honor each other sufficiently. As such, during the days of *sefiras ha'omer* we must increase our love and respect towards our fellow man.

Chassidim tell the story of Reb Yitzchak, a poor student of Rebbe Moshe of Kobrin *zy'a*. His wife asked him to go to their Rebbe, Rebbe Moshe of Kobrin, to request a *brachah* for wealth.

Reb Yitzchak went to his Rebbe for Shabbos and planned to speak with the Rebbe about his financial woes on *motzei Shabbos*.

As is proper to do, on Shabbos, Reb Yitzchak removed all problems and worries from his mind, and devoted himself entirely to *avodas Hashem*. He was still on a spiritual high when he said goodbye to the Rebbe on *motzei Shabbos* and forgot to ask the Rebbe for a *brachah* for *parnassah*.

Only when Reb Yitzchak came home and he saw his hungry children did he remember that he hadn't asked the Rebbe for a *brachah* for *parnassah*. His wife urged him to return to the Rebbe again.

He returned, and this time he remembered to tell the Rebbe about their financial plight.

The Rebbe gave him two coins, and told him, "Go buy food for two meals, but only enough for one person. Buy meat, fish, and other good food, and eat the meals at home. But you mustn't give any of it to your wife or children. You must eat all the food by yourself. After that, you can return to me and I will bless you with wealth."

Reb Yitzchak followed the Rebbe's orders, but it was extremely difficult for him. His children stood around the table when he ate, and his wife looked longingly from the distance. How could he not give them anything? They were so hungry! His heart went out for them. But he wasn't permitted to give them anything. He had to follow the Rebbe's orders.

After eating the two meals, he returned to Rebbe Moshe of Kobrin. The Rebbe blessed him with wealth, but there was a condition. The Rebbe said, "Whenever you are ready to eat, you must remember those two meals you ate in front of your hungry wife and children. You must think, 'How can I enjoy food when there are hungry Yidden outside?'"

Reb Yitzchak replied, "I'd rather forgo all the wealth, than to endure that terrible feeling again."

Reb Yitzchak went home and told his wife that he doesn't want the wealth. She quickly went to the Rebbe and begged for *parnassah*. The Rebbe promised that she and her husband will become wealthy.

It only took a few days, and Reb Yitzchak became fabulously wealthy.

Reb Yitzchak ate only in a communal kitchen together with paupers, so he could always have their needs in mind. He only ate at home when his children got married, because then he would invite all the paupers in his city to eat together with him, at his table.

This story demonstrates perfection in *ahavas Yisrael*; to always have other people's needs in mind.⁹

Improvement

A wise, wealthy businessman, and a poor fool, were friends since their youth. The fool once asked his wealthy friend to explain how he became wealthy, and what he does for *parnassah*.

This wasn't a simple matter, because it was hard to explain anything to this poor fool, but out of their old friendship, the

wise, wealthy man began to explain to his friend the business procedure.

"I take money, go to the market in Leipzig, and buy merchandise. Then I sell it back home for a profit."

The pauper didn't understand. "So you started with money and you ended with money. What did you gain?"

"I gained that I have more money, because I sell it at a higher price than I bought it."

"Yeah; but traveling to Leipzig also costs money. You have to pay for the wagon, for the hotel... So what did you gain?"

The wealthy friend brought out his ledger to show the expenses he incurs due to traveling, the cost of the merchandise, and the price he sells it. "Look at the final line, and you will see the profit margin."

The pauper said, "Oh, I understand. The

9. After the Holocaust Reb Mordechai Greenfeld was in a DP camp with his childhood friend, Engel.

They applied for a Canadian visa. Reb Mordechai received his visa, but Engel who contracted typhus, was turned down.

Engel escorted his friend to the port. Moments before the boat sailed, Engel began to cry. "I fear I will remain here forever. Even after I recuperate, no country will accept me, since I was once sick with typhus. I'm afraid I'll never build a *bayis neeman b'Yisrael*..."

Reb Mordechai had pity on his friend and gave him his visa. "Your name isn't Engel anymore. From now on you're Mordechai Greenfeld. Go and build your life."

Eventually, Reb Mordechai received another visa to Canada. Someone called Weinberger received a visa to Canada and was *niftar* before he could use it. Reb Mordechai got the visa, and from then, Reb Mordechai's name was changed from Greenfeld to Reb Mordechai Weinberger.

In Montreal, Canada, Hashem granted him financial success. He was from the renowned *baalei tzedakah* in Montreal, Canada.

Reb Mordechai asked his Rebbe, the Imrei Chaim of Viznitz *zt'l*, whether he should go back to using his previous name, Mordechai Greenfeld. The Rebbe replied, "Whenever someone says 'Reb Mordechai Weinberger' it reminds Heaven of your *mesiras nefesh* for another Yid. Why would you want to lose that?"

main thing is the bottom line. But if that's the case, you could have stayed here and written whatever you wanted on the bottom line! Why did you have to travel so far?"

The *nimshal* is, we count the *omer* every day, as we seek to improve. But if we count the *omer* and remain the same, it's like someone writing a grand sum on the bottom line, without anything to show for it.

The *mashal* reminds us that we don't want to solely count the *omer*, rather to use these days for introspection and for improvement.

Reb Yitzchak Yeruchem Burdiyanski *shlita* (*mashgiach* of Yeshivas Kol Torah, Yerushalayim) heard this story from a non-religious taxi driver, "When I was a teenager, I camped with friends in the desert in the south of Eretz Yisrael. In the middle of the night, one of our friends' terrifying cries woke us all up. A snake had wound itself around his body. His life was in danger. Our guide had a gun, and he wanted to shoot the snake in its head to save the boy's life. However, to do so was extremely dangerous. To miss by a millimeter meant striking the boy. But he felt that he doesn't have a choice..."

One of the boys in the group was religious. He asked our guide to wait a moment. He went over to our friend and said, 'Repeat after me: Shema Yisrael...' When they said ה' אחד, the snake suddenly released its grip and slithered away."

Reb Burdiyanski was intrigued by this story, and asked the taxi driver, "What happened to that boy? Did he do *teshuvah* after witnessing this miracle?"

"He did," the taxi driver assured. "Now he studies in yeshivas Or HaChaim for *baalei teshuvah*."

"And what about you? Did you do *teshuvah*?"

"No."

"Why not? You also witnessed the miracle."

"True, but the snake wasn't around *my* body..."

Reb Burdiyanski repeated this story to Reb Shalom Shwadron *zt'l*, and Reb Shalom would often repeat it in his *drashos*. This story demonstrates that one can see a miracle, but if he doesn't feel connected to it, he won't feel obligated to change because of it.

Sefiras ha'omer are days of introspection, days when we should be thinking about how we can improve. But to improve, we have to feel connected to the counting of these days.

To explain this concept, we tell a *mashal*:

A wealthy shop owner wanted to count his money, to know how much money he earned that year. It was too much money to count on his own, so he hired some workers to count the money together with him. They were all counting, but they weren't counting with the same enthusiasm. The store owner was counting with all his heart and soul, for the sum total would tell how much money he earned that year, while his

workers didn't really care how much money the boss earned that year.

The *nimshal* is about *sefiras ha'omer*. It states **וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם**, "count for yourself." When you count the days, don't feel disconnected as though the counting and the *cheshbon hanefesh* is not important to you. Feel connected. Count the days, see where you need to improve, and set plans towards getting there.

The *omer* is called **עוֹמֵר הַתְּנוּפָה**, "the waved omer." This is because one of the details in the mitzvah of bringing the *omer* is to wave it up and down, back and forth, like a lulav.

We can ask, why is the *korban omer* named specifically for the waving of the *omer*? There are many other laws and details of the *omer*. Why isn't the *omer* named for them?

The Nesivos Shalom *zt'l* answers with a story: Rebbe Aharon HaGadol of Karlin *zt'l* wanted to inspire someone to do *teshuvah*, but he realized that this person was so steeped in *taavos*, worldly temptations, that words alone wouldn't rouse him. So he grabbed onto his coat, pulled him around, and said, "How long will you be going about the world in this way?" The man started to shout, "I want to do *teshuvah*..."

Rebbe Aharon realized that this person needed to be physically shaken to be

woken up to *teshuvah*. This is the implication of **עוֹמֵר הַתְּנוּפָה**, "the waved omer." It is telling everyone to take themselves into their hands, shake up and awaken to do Hashem's will.¹⁰

To improve, we suggest taking on *kabbalos*, resolutions that will lead to improvement. It is essential to recognize your abilities and know what you can take on, and what you can't. To understand this point, consider the following *mashal*:

A *talmid chacham* went into a shoe store and asked for a pair of shoes, size 8. The store owner was very generous, "You're a *talmid chacham*, so I want to give you more. I'll give you size 10."

The man replied, "A size 10 will slip off my foot. I need a size 8, because that size fits me well."

The *nimshal* is, a person needs to improve his ways according to his strengths. If he will take on *kabbalos* that are beyond him, he will fail.

This lesson is also alluded to in the words **וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם**. This means find the service that is **לָכֶם**, for your level.

Recognize the Enemy

The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 38:) tells us that Reb Meir's lectures consisted of 1/3 halachah, 1/3 *aggadah*, and 1/3 *mashalim*. Reb Meir said three hundred *mashalim* about foxes. Most of them

10. About the *shtei halechem* that are brought on Shavuos the Torah says, **תְּבִיאֵוּ לֶחֶם תְּנוּפָה**, "Bring the waved bread." This can also hint that on these days, one should "wave" and move towards improving his ways. One shouldn't be complacent. Take yourselves into your hands, and grow.

were forgotten; we have only three of them. [It is really only one parable, but it explains three *pesukim*, thus it is called three parables.] *Rashi* (*Sanhedrin* 39.)

brings that parable, told by Reb Meir:

One Friday, the fox said to the wolf, "The Jewish people are preparing their Shabbos meals today. Why don't you go help them cook, and tomorrow they will let you eat with them?"

The wolf went to a Jewish courtyard to help them cook. But the residents took up their sticks and chased him away.

The wolf was angry that the fox tricked him, and he was ready to kill the fox. The fox feigned innocence, "They were hitting you because of what your father did to them. Your father once helped them with the cooking on Friday and he ate up all the good slices."

"Should I get punished for my father's deeds?"

The fox replied, "Yes, as it states, *אבות ואמהות*, 'The parents ate the unripe fruit and the children's teeth hurt' (*Yechezkel* 18:2). Come with me," the fox said, "I have another plan how we can get a good meal."

The fox brought him to a well that had two buckets attached to two ends of a rope. When one bucket was in the water the other one was up on top. The fox jumped into the bucket hanging on top the well and dropped into the well. The other bucket went up. The wolf asked, "Why did you go down there?"

The fox replied, "There's meat and cheese here."

The fox told the wolf to look in the water. The wolf saw, what appeared to be a big round piece of cheese, and he was convinced that there was indeed cheese in the well. (It was really just the moon's reflection on the water.)

The wolf asked, "How do I get down there?"

"Get into the bucket, and you will go down."

The wolf climbed into the bucket and dropped into the well, bringing the bucket with the fox inside up. The wolf saw that nothing was there; he was fooled again. "How do I get out?" he asked.

The fox answered, *צדיק מצודה נחלץ ויבא רשע תהרתיו*, "The tzaddik was saved from his troubles, and a *rasha* took his place" (*Mishlei* 11:8). And it states, *מאזני צדק ואמני צדק*, "Honest weights and scales..." (*Vayikra* 19:36) everyone receives his just reward and punishment.

What can we learn from Reb Meir's parable? For one thing, we learn that we must recognize our enemies. The fox tricked the wolf twice. He told him to help cook on Friday so he could eat on Shabbos, and the wolf ended up being chased away and beaten. The wolf should have realized that he shouldn't listen to the fox anymore; the fox doesn't mean his good. But when the fox came up with another plan, the wolf trusted him again. He went down into the well.

There wasn't any food, and there wasn't a way out.

Wolf, why weren't you wiser? You should have realized that you shouldn't trust the fox?

People are similar, because we know from experience that the *yetzer hara* isn't interested in our welfare. Whenever we follow his counsels, we regret it afterwards. His counsel repeatedly causes us losses in the spiritual venue, and also in this world. So, when the *yetzer hara* comes up with a new scheme why do we think that this time it will be different? Why don't we realize by now that it isn't wise to listen to the *yetzer hara*?

Yet, people know all of this and nevertheless repeatedly follow the *yetzer hara's* counsel. They fall into his trap, regret it, and then listen to him again!

Here is another *mashal* to express this point:

There was a *poritz* who owned many inns, which were run by Yidden. One day he went to one of his innkeepers and asked to be invited for a dinner. The Yid replied that he would be honored with the visit.

The Yid prepared a special meal for the *poritz*, which cost him more than he could afford. The *poritz* looked at the beautifully laid table and asked, "Where's the Swiss cheese? Didn't you prepare Swiss cheese for me?"

He didn't.

The *poritz* told his aide to beat the

Yid cruelly because "he didn't honor me properly."

The following morning, the *poritz* met up with another Yid and said he wants to come to his home for supper. When the Yid was cooking and preparing a special meal for the *poritz*, yesterday's host of came by and said, "The *poritz* is crazy over Swiss cheese. Make sure you have Swiss cheese."

It wasn't easy to find Swiss cheese in their village, but he understood the importance of the matter, and managed to get Swiss cheese. He served it to the *poritz*, together with other delicacies. The *poritz* asked, "And where is the Persian halvah? Don't you have halvah?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you wanted halvah..."

The *poritz* didn't accept his apology, and he told his servants to beat him for "not honoring me properly. He didn't even want to buy halvah for me."

The next day, the *poritz* asked a third innkeeper whether he could come for supper. The innkeeper graciously agreed, and he soon received a heads up from the two previous hosts, warning him to serve Persian halvah and Swiss cheese.

The *poritz* looked at the royal table that was set for him, with the Swiss cheese and Persian halvah prominently placed in the middle of the table. He asked, "And where is the French bread?"

His men beat up this innkeeper too, because "he didn't honor me. He didn't even want to buy French bread for me."

The *poritz* invited himself to a fourth

home. The first three hosts warned him to prepare Swiss cheese, Persian halvah, and French bread, but he didn't prepare anything at all. When the *poritz* came, there was only dry bread on the table. The *poritz* asked, "Is that how you honor me?"

The Yid replied, "You don't want to eat. You want an excuse to beat up a Yid. Why should I work for nothing? If you want, you can beat me up now."

The *nimshal* is, the *yetzer hara* comes to a person and tries to make the Yid feel down and dejected. The *yetzer hara* knows that if comes dressed in the clothes of the *yetzer hara*, no one would listen to him. So he pretends to be the *yetzer tov* who is solely trying to rebuke the Yid to be more cautious with the mitzvos.

The Yid takes the *yetzer hara's* rebuke seriously (because he thinks that it is the *yetzer tov*) and he feels bad about his shortcomings and sins. But then he becomes depressed and dejected — and that was the *yetzer hara's* original plan. The Yid discovered that it wasn't the *yetzer tov* after all. It was the *yetzer hara* trying to bring him to despair.

Then the *yetzer hara* comes again, and he finds some other fault in the Yid. For example, the first time, he told the Yid that he isn't learning enough Torah. The second time he tells him that he wasn't careful with kashrus. He wants to discourage the Yid again. But the Yid shouldn't listen to him. He has already learned that this is the *yetzer hara* trying

to throw him into despair. The last time the *yetzer hara* tricked him and won, so why should he pay attention to his words this time? The *yetzer hara* comes with many hats, always rebuking the Yid for some sin, but his intention is the same: an excuse to beat up the Yid, and to throw him into despair.

A wise person will shout, "You're the *yetzer hara*, you want to make me sad. I don't want to hear anything you say."

Reb Yankele Galinsky *zt'l* told that he was once on a very long train ride in Russia. There were bunks on the train, but Reb Yankele didn't get a bed; he had to sleep on the floor. One night, Reb Yankele was extremely tired. He was hoping to have a good night's sleep, but one of the Russian men kept shouting from his bed, "I'm thirsty! I'm so thirsty!" Reb Yankele realized that until this man gets water, no one in the car could sleep, so he got up to bring him water. Reb Yankele returned to his place on the floor, hoping to finally get some sleep, but the gentile started shouting again, "Boy was I thirsty! I was so thirsty." He carried on, disturbing Reb Yankele's sleep.

The moral of this story is that when one thinks he's finished with a struggle, a new struggle comes along. Similarly, after you've overcome the *yetzer hara*, the *yetzer hara* will return again, this time with a new tactic. We just need to keep on battling with the *yetzer hara*, time and again, until we succeed.

Beginnings

Beginnings are a microcosm of everything that follows; accordingly, we shouldn't be negligent with beginnings.

The Mishnas Chachamim writes, "They say that beginnings are more than half. (If you have a good beginning, it is already more than half done. This is because beginnings are the root and the primary aspect of all things. Therefore, they say, *כל התחלות קשות* all beginnings are difficult."¹¹

The Vilna Gaon teaches: The first *brachah* of *Shemonah Esrei* has eighteen praises in it, which corresponds to the entire *Shemonah Esrei*. This is the reason we must have *kavanah* by this *brachah*.

Reb Chaim Volozhiner writes in the name of the Vilna Gaon, "It is tested and proven: When one awakens in the morning and accepts the yoke of Torah with truth and sincerity — which means he decides in his heart that he won't let

any person or any matter disturb him from studying Torah — then all disturbances vanish, and he will certainly succeed in Torah that day. In accordance to the degree he accepts the yoke of Torah in the morning, and in accordance to the strength of his decision, Hashem will help him that day, and relieve him from all issues that prevent him from studying Torah."

On Yom Kippur we say (in *Mussaf*), *אמת, מִה נִהְדָר הָיָה מְרֵאָה כְּהֵן גָּדוֹל בְּצִנְאוֹתוֹ בְּשִׁלּוּם מִן הַקּוֹדֵשׁ*, "It is true, how beautiful and glorious it was, the appearance of the *cohen gadol* when he left, peacefully, from the Holy of Holies ..." Why do we discuss the beauty of the *cohen gadol* when he leaves the Holy of holies? Why don't we discuss his beauty when he enters?

We will answer with an example. We recently celebrated Pesach. An indication of the amount of spirituality and inspiration we received is seen in how

11. Reb Yeruchem *zt'l* would say, "When one studies well the first few weeks of the *z'man*, his *hasmadah* will continue throughout the entire *z'man*."

The first Rashi in *Chumash* begins *אמר ר' יצחק* "Reb Yitzchak said, 'the Torah didn't have to begin with *בראשית*. It should have begun with *לכם הזה החודש הזה*.'" The *Turei Zahav (Divrei Dovid)* writes, "When I was young, I saw in a very old *sefer* that "Reb Yitzchak" [Reb Yitzchak's question and commentary] stated at the beginning of Rashi isn't stated in Gemara or in the Midrash. Rather, Rashi wanted to honor his father, and to begin the *sefer* with a lesson from his father. So he asked his father, "Tell me a question, and I will write it in your name." That old *sefer* writes that Rashi's father wasn't a great *talmid chacham*. The *Divrei Dovid* disagrees on that point, because Rashi quotes his father in the Gemara (*Avodah Zarah* 75. ד"ה דרב). Nevertheless, the *Divrei Dovid* agrees that Rashi begins his commentary with *אמר ר' יצחק* to honor his father.

This is a lesson in *kibud av*. In addition, we learn the importance and the specialness of beginnings. For Rashi wanted to mention his father specifically at the beginning of the commentary.

we act *after* Pesach. If after Pesach we are more cautious with the mitzvos, more attached to Torah, etc. this is a sign we had an inspirational holiday. Similarly, the beauty of the *cohen gadol* *בצאתו מן הקדוש*, is when he leaves the Holy of Holies. How the *cohen gadol* acts and appears when he leaves gives us an indication of the holiness he attained when he entered.

The Meor v'Shemesh (*Shemini אל ד"ה* *וספרתם לכם ממהרת, השבת*) explains the *pasuk*, that one should make certain that

the *מהרת השבת*, the day after Shabbos, and similarly, the day after *yom tov*, should be good. He writes that it is hard to daven on Sundays, but one should force himself to daven well on that day. That will be an indication of the holiness he acquired from Shabbos.

There was a custom that *talmidei chachamim* would say a *pilpul* on Gemara, Rashi, and *Tosfos* after Pesach and after Succos. The Meor v'Shemesh writes that this was to demonstrate the growth attained on the holiday.¹²

12. Someone came to a gas station, filled his car with gasoline, but he didn't continue his travels. Someone asked him why he is staying in the gas station. He replied, "What's wrong with staying here? Why should I go anywhere?"

The man replied, "The purpose of filling the car with gas is to travel..."

This is an analogy for those who pass through a *yom tov*, and don't strive to reach higher levels after *yom tov*. The purpose of the *yom tov* was to grow, and we should be traveling further with the inspiration we received.

A *chasan* said to the Nesivos Shalom, "I'm afraid I didn't use my years as a *bachur* properly. We heard in yeshiva that it's important to utilize these years for Torah, *hasmadah*, and *avodah*, but I wasted those precious years."

The Nesivos Shalom answered, "I can't help you with your past. You are correct. It is a great loss. But I can help you with your future. Just before you came to speak with me, a *yungerman* was here. He said, 'I heard that the first five years after marriage are the best years of a person's life. During those years, one doesn't have financial worries, and he can devote himself entirely to Torah. But I'm already five years after the wedding, and I can say that I didn't spend these years well...'"

The Nesivos Shalom concluded, "I'm unable to help you retrieve your *bachur* years, but I encourage you to make use of your early years after your *chasunah*. If you will devote yourself to Torah during the next few years, you can also grow a lot in Torah."

Someone came to a new country, rented an apartment in a basement, but found it teeming with mice. He asked a friend, "What's the story with this country? There are mice all over my apartment!"

"Which floor do you live on?"

"I live in the cellar."

Lag b'Omer

Rabi Shimon bar Yochai called Lag b'Omer "Rabi Shimon's day" (יְמוֹ שֶׁל רַבִּי רִשְׁבִּי"י, see *Idra Zuta* 292:). Reb Akiva's students stopped dying on this day. Only five students remained — one was Rabi Shimon — and Reb Akiva taught them Torah and gave them *semichah* on Lag b'Omer (*Chida*). Years later, Rabi Shimon was *niftar* on Lag b'Omer. On this day, prior to his *petirah* he revealed to his students many divine secrets of the Torah. (The *sefer* containing Reb Shimon's lesson on that day is called *Idra Zuta*.) The sun didn't set until Rabi Shimon finished teaching the secrets. He said, דָּהָא בַּל יוֹמָא בְּרִשׁוּתֵי קַיִמָא, "The entire day is in my possession."

From then until today, the gates of heaven are open on Lag b'Omer, to bestow blessings and goodness to all Yidden.

"Go up and Gather..."

When Reb Shimon was *niftar* a *bas kol* came out and announced, "Go up and gather for the celebration of Reb Shimon" (*Zohar*).

Tzaddikim say this *bas kol* calls every year, inviting people to celebrate the *hillulah* (celebration) of Reb Shimon bar Yochai.

Reb Chaim Vital *zt'l* writes, "Klal Yisrael are accustomed to go to the *kevarim* of Reb Shimon bar Yochai and Reb Elazar (his son) on Lag b'Omer, and they eat and are happy there. I saw that my *rebbe* [the Arizal] once went there on Lag b'Omer with his entire family, and he remained there for three days..."

Reb Ovadyah of Bartunara writes in a letter, "On the eighteenth of Iyar, the day of his [Reb Shimon's] *yahrtzeit*, people from all around Meron come and light

"Well obviously you have mice. You should live on a higher floor and you won't have mice." This reminds us of the people who are always complaining that wherever they turn, they are confronted with great tests. The answer often is to go up to a higher floor, live a more spiritual life, and then many of the tests will disappear. This is hinted at in Chazal, (*Avos* 6:2), וְכֹל מִי שֶׁעוֹסֵק בְּתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה הָרִי זֶה מֵתַעֲלָה, "Whoever studies Torah is elevated."

At a *siyum*, and each day, upon leaving the *beis medresh*, we praise Hashem, שְׂמַת חֲלַקְנוּ מִיּוֹשְׁבֵי קַרְנוֹת בֵּית הַמְדֻרָּשׁ, ולא שְׂמַת חֲלַקְנוּ מִיּוֹשְׁבֵי קַרְנוֹת בֵּית מְדֻרָּשׁ, "that you gave our portion among those who sit in *beis medresh*. You didn't set our portion among those who sit at the street corners." *בית מדרש* is in singular and *קרנות* is in plural. The explanation is, when one seeks material pleasures, as the people who sit on the street corners do, he will never be satisfied. To find joy, he will go from one street corner to the next, thinking "Perhaps over there I will find joy?" But when one learns Torah in *beis medresh*, he can be in the same *beis medresh* for many years, and he will be satisfied and happy with his lot.

bonfires... Many barren become fruitful and ill are healed because of the vows (*kabbalos/resolutions*) that they take on at that place."¹³

When Yidden rejoice in Meron, Reb Shimon is also there, rejoicing together with them. The Shinover Rav tells that one year the Arizal with his students were dancing on Lag b'Omer in Meron and a tall elderly person (whom they didn't recognize) was also there, with his students. The elderly person danced a lot with the Arizal and with the Chareidim. Afterwards, the Arizal told them that he was Reb Shimon bar Yochai, and his students were Reb Shimon's students. (This story is recorded with several more details in *Taamei HaMinhagim*.)

It states (*Shemos* 34:23), שלש פעמים בשנה, וראה כל זכורך את פני האדון ה', "Three times a year every Yid must see the face of the Master, Hashem..." This *pasuk* is discussing the mitzvah of going up to the Beis HaMikdash for Pesach, Shavuos, and Succos (עליה לרגל).

The *Zohar* states, מאן פני האדון ה' דא ר' שמעון בר יוחאי, "Who is the master... It is Reb Shimon..." We don't know what this *Zohar* means; however, there seems to be a correlation between the mitzvah of *aliyah leregel* and going to Meron.¹⁴

A fiery holy place

If you merit to go to Meron, you should gird yourself with the proper *yiras Shamayim* and joy.¹⁵

13. The Gemara *Sotah* (14. see *Bach*) writes, "Why is Moshe Rabbeinu's grave hidden from all mankind? It is because Hakadosh Baruch Hu knows that the Beis HaMikdash will be destroyed, and the Yidden will be exiled. [If they know where Moshe is buried] perhaps they will go to Moshe's grave, and cry and beg Moshe, 'Moshe, get up and pray for us!' Moshe will stand up and pray and the decree of exile will be annulled."

This Gemara gives us an inclination to the immense power Yidden have when they daven at *kevarim* of tzaddikim.

14. Some people go to Meron on Pesach, Shavuos and Succos, as somewhat hinted in this *Zohar*.

15. There is a saying from tzaddikim, "If you go to Miron, it's a sign Reb Shimon invited you."

There was a family who spent a Shabbos in Meron. It was very expensive, and the head of the family said, "For the money we spent, we should have gone to a hotel in a luxurious vacation resort." He was implying that he regrets spending a Shabbos in Meron; the money could have been spent on a better vacation.

For the next three years, he didn't return to Meron. It wasn't that he didn't want to go. It was just that things didn't work out for him. For example, when his son turned three, he wanted to make the *chalah* in Meron, but the boy was slightly ill so they didn't go.

His wife told him, "It seems that since you said that it wasn't worthwhile coming to Meron, Reb Shimon isn't inviting us anymore. It is as though he is saying, 'If you aren't appreciative that you came here, don't come back again.'"

He realized she might be right, so he closed himself in a room and cried and repented for

The Shlah HaKadosh writes in a letter, "At the holy, fiery place, the *tzion* of Reb Shimon bar Yochai, people learn *Zohar* with awe and *deveikus*, because many miracles happen there. One must learn *Zohar* with awe, and make oneself very happy with spiritual happiness, without any mourning and sadness, because this is what Reb Shimon wants, and this is proven and true, and then they take vows, and pray."

Reb Shmuel Heller *zt'l* writes, "I testify that when I was a child, I heard from elderly Sephardic rabbis that their fathers saw it and told them that the Or HaChaim HaKadosh, Reb Chaim ben Atar, was once in Tzefas for Lag b'Omer and he went to Meron. When he reached the bottom of the mountain that leads up to the holy place, he went off his donkey and climbed on his hands and feet, grunting the entire way up like an animal. He shouted, 'How can the lowly me go to the awesome place, where Hakadosh Baruch Hu, all angels, and all souls of *tzaddikim* are there?!' And at the *hilulah* he was very happy."

When Avraham Kalisker *zt'l* would go to the *mikvah* in honor of Lag b'Omer he would say, הרניי מקבל עלי קדושת היום, "I embrace the holiness of the day."

It states in the *sefer* מירון מסע that in Cheshvan תקכ"ב, there was an earthquake in Tzefas and in Miron, and many Arabs, with their wives and children, ran to the

building over Reb Shimon's grave to protect themselves, but the door of the building was locked. They all shouted, "Reb Shimon! Reb Shimon! We heard about your greatness from our fathers, and we perceived it with our eyes. Open your doors." The doors opened immediately, and they went inside.

Reb Shimon became even more revered to them.

A month later, the 6th of Kislev, there was a second earthquake. Yidden and *lehavdil* goyim ran to Reb Shimon's grave. They found the building jumping up in the air and falling back down again. The *kippah* on top was split in two. They became very afraid. They said, "Reb Shimon! Reb Shimon! If this is what is happening to your building, what will be with us?" After a half hour, the earthquake settled, and the building sat firmly on its place. They went inside and checked to see the damages, but there were none. The *kippah* merged together, and there was no sign of any scratches or damages.

This story is an example of the miracles that happened in Meron. Miracles will certainly happen to the people who go there to pray.

The Gemara tells that Reb Yehoshua ben Levi once met Eliyahu HaNavi at the entrance to Reb Shimon bar Yochai's cave. The Maharal (*Netzach Yisrael* 28)

the foolish words he said. After he washed his face and dried his tears someone knocked at his door, his neighbor came to his door and said, "I just bought a new car. I want the first time I use of the car to be for a mitzvah. Do you want to come with me to Meron...?"

writes, "Know, it is certain, there are locations in the world that are conducive for holiness. The cave where Reb Shimon hid is one such place. There is no doubt that Eliyahu HaNavi appeared to Reb Shimon several times in the cave... And it doesn't make a difference whether Eliyahu appeared to him visually, or if he appeared without anyone seeing him. Because many times, Eliyahu tells someone something, and the person doesn't know where the words came from. He thinks they are his own thoughts, but they are really Eliyahu's words, speaking to him..."

The Joy of Lag b'Omer

The *Zohar* tells that when Reb Shimon bar Yochai's *levayah* passed the village of Tzipori, the residents of Tzipori didn't let them continue. They came out with sticks demanding that Reb Shimon be buried in their town. The people from Meron weren't silent. They demanded that Reb Shimon be buried in Meron, near them. Suddenly, the bed of Reb Shimon bar Yochai ascended in the air. Surrounded by a divine fire, the coffin glided to Meron and that's where he was buried. At that moment, a *bas kol* came forth, "Go up and gather for the celebration of Reb Shimon."

Reb Asher Zelig Margolies writes, "When we see the great joy at the holy *tzion* of Reb Shimon bar Yochai in Miron we are certain that up until today, on Lag b'Omer, the *bas kol* speaks to the heart of every Yid and proclaims, "Go up

and gather at Reb Shimon's resting place, rejoice and celebrate..."

The Bnei Yissaschar writes, "We heard from reliable sources that the joy at Reb Shimon's *tzion* is supernatural. As it says, אור צדיקים ישמח, "the light of tzaddikim brings joy."

Those who go to Miron on Lag b'Omer experience a great joy. There's also a strong feeling of *achdus*, also supernatural. People from all backgrounds come and dance together as one.

The Chida (*Moreh b'Etzba* 223) writes, "Be happy, in honor of Reb Shimon bar Yochai, because Lag b'Omer is his *hilula* [celebration] and it is known that he desired people to rejoice on this day."

Rebbe Shlomke of Zvhil *zt'l* asked his *gabai* to awaken him when their entourage was ready to travel to Meron, for Lag b'Omer. He said, "I want to rest a bit. Wake me up when everyone is ready to go."

When the *gabai* went to wake the Rebbe, he saw the Rebbe's pillow and bed soaked with tears.

As they traveled, Reb Shlomke urged everyone to be happy. "We have to be happy also while traveling to Meron," he told them.

There are two Gemaras that have forty-nine pages: *Shavuos* and *Sotah*. The Chasam Sofer would teach one page a day during the forty-nine days of *sefiras ha'omer*. One year he was teaching

masechta Shavuos, and when he came to the page ל"ג בעומר דף ל"ג that is studied on ל"ג בעומר ר', שמעון מחכו עליה במערבא, and translated, "In Eretz Yisrael, people are rejoicing with Reb Shimon."

The Mishnas Chassidim writes, "On this day, Reb Akiva's students stopped dying, and Reb Akiva gave *smichah* to five of his students, and from them, Torah emanates. Among them was Reb Shimon bar Yochai... It is a mitzvah to be happy on this day, the joy of Reb Shimon bar Yochai. If you live in Eretz Yisrael, go and celebrate at his grave, and be very happy there. Certainly, do so if you have a *chalachah yingel*, to make *peyos* for a child..."

Reb Chaim Vital tells that Reb Avraham HaLevi zy'a would say, נחם את אבלי ציון (said on Tisha b'Av). He would say it every day in *Minchah Shemonah Esrei* and in *birchas hamazon*, for he was always mourning the *churban Beis HaMikdash*. He said it in Meron, as well, on Lag b'Omer.

The Arizal saw Reb Shimon bar Yochai standing on his grave, as though he was alive, and Reb Shimon said, "Ask your student why he said נחם on the day of my immense joy." Within a month, Reb

Avraham HaLevi was *niftar*. This teaches us the great importance to be happy in Meron on this day.

Someone asked the Maharil the following question: Someone made a vow that he will only eat at a *seudas mitzvah*. What constitutes a *seudas mitzvah*?

The Maharil replied, "Chazal say whoever eats at a *seudah* of *talmidei chachamim* it is as though he is enjoying from the shine of the *Shechinah*. Lag b'Omer is a *seudas mitzvah* (because it is Reb Shimon's meal)..."

The Taamei HaMinhagim asks: On Moshe Rabbeinu's *yahrtzeit*, on the 7th of Iyar, people fast. In contrast, on Reb Shimon bar Yochai's *yahrtzeit*, on Lag b'Omer, we celebrate. What is the explanation? Is a *yahrtzeit* a day for rejoicing or a day for mourning?¹⁶

The Taamei HaMinhagim answers: The *Zohar* tells us that Reb Shimon bar Yochai was unique in the manner he annulled harsh decrees. Most tzaddikim fasted when there was a harsh decree, Reb Shimon bar Yochai ate. With his joy, he annulled harsh decrees. Therefore, by Reb Shimon's *yahrtzeit* we eat.¹⁷

16. Chazal tell that on the day Moshe Rabbeinu was *niftar* many laws of the Torah were forgotten. In contrast, on the day Reb Shimon bar Yochai was *niftar*, secrets of the Torah were revealed. This could be the explanation why Lag b'Omer is a day of celebration, while the 7th of Adar is a fast day.

17. The *Zohar* (*Shemos* 15.) teaches: Once, Reb Shimon was teaching secrets of Torah, and Reb Elazar was near him. Their faces shone like the sun. They sat there two complete days, without eating and drinking. They didn't know whether it was daytime or whether it was nighttime. When they left, Reb Shimon said the *pasuk* (*Shemos* 34:28) ויהי

Hilulah

The *Zohar* calls a *yahrtzeit* "*yoma dehilula*" which can be translated as, "a wedding day." Why? What is the connection between a wedding and a *yahrtzeit*?¹⁸

The Rema MiPano explains that at a wedding all discussions and *divrei Torah* are about the wedding. If a person will get up and begin speaking about any other topic, even if he speaks about an upcoming *yom tov*, he will be told, "It is all very interesting, but this isn't the time or place for such discussions." At a wedding, we only speak about the *chasunah*. Similarly, on the day of a

yahrtzeit of a tzaddik, all discussions in heaven are about this tzaddik and about his *divrei Torah*.¹⁹ It is therefore appropriate to call a *yahrtzeit* a *hilulah*, a *chasunah*.

People give gifts to the *chasan* and *kallah* at their wedding. Rebbe Yissacher Dov of Belz *zy'a* explained that the tzaddik's *yahrtzeit* is called a *chasunah*, a *hilulah*, because Hashem gives presents to the tzaddik on that day.

The primary present that a tzaddik desires is to be able to bestow kindness onto Yidden. Thus, on their *yahrtzeit*, Hashem grants them the ability to *mashpia* goodness to klal Yisrael.

שם עם ה' ארבעים יום וארבעים לילה – לחם לא אכל מים לא שתה
forty days. He didn't eat bread and he didn't drink water."

When Rebbe heard this story, he was astounded. Rebbe's father, Reb Shimon ben Gamliel, told him, "My son, Reb Shimon was like a lion, and his son was like a lion. Not a regular lion, rather אריה שאג מי לא ירא 'When the lion roars, who isn't afraid?' Even the upper worlds are afraid of them, certainly we should be afraid. He was a man that never decreed a fast day to attain his requests. He decreed and Hakadosh Baruch Hu acquiesced. Hakadosh Baruch Hu decreed and he annulled it."

18. Every year, Reb Simchah Mund *zt'l*, would come to Meron for Lag b'Omer. When he was old, his students would almost carry him up the mountain, as he leaned on them for support. His students tried to convince him to come to Meron some other day of the year, when there are fewer people. It would be easier for him and for them.

He replied, "When one comes to a wealthy man's home asking for *tzedakah*, the wealthy man checks the *hamlatzos* to see whether he deserves the money. But when *tzedakah* collectors come to the wealthy person when the wealthy man is celebrating a *chasunah* for his son, he doesn't check the *hamlatzos*. He gives to everybody. Coming to Meron on Lag b'Omer is like coming to Reb Shimon's *chasunah*. Everyone receives, no one is left out." Someone asked a Yerushalmi Yid when he plans to be in Meron on Lag b'Omer. He replied, "I am planning to be there for the *kabalas panim* and to remain there until after the *mitzvah tantz* (24 hours). I want to be by the entire *chasunah*, just like a relative."

19. This is one of the reasons it is recommended to study the *divrei Torah* of a tzaddik on his *yahrtzeit*. The tzaddik's *divrei Torah* is the primary discussion in heaven, so it should be our discussions too.

Bonfires/Hadlakah

One of the customs of Lag b'Omer is the *hadlakah*, bonfire.

The *Zohar (Idra Zuta 291:)* tells that on the final day of Reb Shimon's life, he revealed to his students great, holy secrets of kabbalah. As long as he taught, the sun didn't set. The Bnei Yissaschar (*Lag b'Omer 6*) writes that this can explain the custom to light candles and bonfires on Lag b'Omer. It is in commemoration of the sun that continued to shine on the final day of Reb Shimon bar Yochai's life.

There were tzaddikim who would throw clothing into the fire in Meron, to increase the light and the joy of the day.

Reb Shmuel Heller *zt'l* the rav of Tzfas wrote a *sefer K'vod Melachim* on this subject, and he writes that the Or HaChaim HaKadosh *zt'l* and other tzaddikim would do so.

The *sefer Alef Kasav* writes, "The Or HaChaim would cry the entire night of Lag b'Omer at the hadlakah, and say 'How can I come near the fire, where the *neshamos* of Avraham Yitzchak, and Yaakov are there, together with all the holy tzaddikim?'"

The *sefer מבע מירון* describes how the *hadlakah* appeared (תרמ"ה): "Everyone buys olive oil and pours it in honor of the Tana. Then those who will light it come forward [to the roof of the *tzion*] and emotionally, with joy and a happy heart, they light a towel soaked with oil, and they throw it into the bowl of oil. Everyone stands by – their eyes

watching, waiting for the fire. When the first flames come forth, everyone rejoices. The sound of their happiness is so loud, I never saw and I never heard any joy similar to it. The people of Eretz Yisrael say the *neshamah* of Reb Shimon bar Yochai is there, at this *hadlakah*. At that time I took out the names of my friends and family...and I prayed for them, that the merit of the holy *tanah* should protect them, enlighten their candle, that they should have *hatzlachah* for their bodies and souls."

The Sadugeira Rebbe *zt'l* spoke about the specialness of the *hadlakah* on the roof of the *tzion*. He said 80,000 *neshamos* get their *tikun* at this time.

Some have the *minhag* to throw their yarmulka into the fire. That was the *minhag* of my father *zy'a* and of his father, Rebbe Moshe Mordechai of Lelov *zy'a*.

Once, a father complained to Rebbe Dovid Biderman of Lelov *zy'a* that his son keeps taking off his *kappel* (yarmulke). The Rebbe told him that he and his son should travel to Meron for Lag b'Omer.

During the trip, the father was very embarrassed by his son's wild ways. At every stop they had to look for him so they could continue.

When they came to Meron, and they lit the fire, the Rebbe took the boy's *kappel* and threw it into the fire. The boy immediately shouted, "My *kappel*! My *kappel*!" He changed in a minute. Before, he was constantly throwing off his *kappel*, and now he wanted it.

First Haircuts (*Chalakah*)

Many people have a custom to give their son's his first haircut in Meron.

Reb Chaim Vital *zt'l* writes, "The Arizal came to Meron [on Lag b'Omer] with his young child and with all his family, and they made *peyos* for his son there, as the custom is known. He made it a day of celebrating."

The Mishnas Chassidim writes, "If you live in Eretz Yisrael, go and celebrate by Reb Shimon's grave, and be very happy there. Certainly, do so if you have a *chalakah*, and you will make *peyos* for your child..."

What is the reason for this custom?

Reb Yaakov Meir Shechter *shlita* explains that Reb Shimon bar Yochai promised, *כי לא תשכח מפי זרעו*, Torah will never be forgotten. The *mesorah* will be passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, when we make *peyos* for our child, and we are about to bring him to cheder to study Torah, we do it at Reb Shimon's grave, for he promised the chain will continue eternally.

I heard another explanation from the Chernobyler Rebbe Shlita:

The Gemara (*Me'illa* 17.) states, "The government decreed that Yidden may not keep Shabbos and they may not circumcise their children. Reb Reuvan Istrobuli sought to annul the decrees, so he wore a non-Jewish hairstyle (with long hair in the back and no hair in the front) so the goyim would think he is one

of them. He sat among the politicians and asked them, "If you hate someone, do you want to make him wealthy or poor?"

They replied, "Poor!"

"So they shouldn't work on Shabbos, so they will become poor."

The government officials agreed with him and they retracted the decree that forced them to work on Shabbos.

Then he asked them, "If you have an enemy, do you want him to be strong or weak?"

They said "Weak!"

"So they should circumcise their children at eight days, so they will become weak."

They replied, "You are correct," and they annulled their decree.

Sometime later, they realized that Reb Reuvan was a Yid, and that he tricked them, so they re-instated the two *gezeiros*.

Who will annul the *gezeiros* now? The *chachamim* sent Reb Shimon bar Yochai to the king, because "many miracles happen to him."

A demon called Ben Temalyon met with Reb Shimon and offered his assistance... The demon went ahead of Reb Shimon, and attached itself to the king's daughter, causing her much pain. When Reb Shimon arrived he said, "Ben Temalyon, leave!" which it did.

The king was thankful to Reb Shimon, and brought him into the treasury room. "Take whatever you want."

Reb Shimon found the documents of the decrees forbidding the Jewish nation from practicing *milah* and obligating them to work on Shabbos, and he tore up the document.

Reb Reuvan Istrobuli helped the nation dressed as a gentile, but Reb Shimon was able to save the nation appearing like a Yid.

One of the purposes of a Jewish haircut is so it should be noticeable that we are Yidden. We therefore have a custom to make the *chalah* in Meron, at Reb Shimon's *kever*, because Reb Shimon was able to annul the harsh decrees appearing as a Yid.

Learning from his Ways

A primary *avodah* for Lag b'Omer is to study Reb Shimon's holy ways, and to seek to emulate them, if even just a drop.

One of the songs that discuss Reb Shimon bar Yochai's praises is בר יוחאי, "the son of Yochai." Why don't we call *Reb Shimon* by his name? Why does this song call him by his father's name?

Perhaps it's to remind us that Reb Shimon was a human being, born from human parents. He wasn't a *malach*. And just as he reached very high levels, we can reach high levels too if we follow in his footsteps.

The Gemara (*Shabbos* 112) says, "If the people of the first generations were like angels, we are like people. And if the earlier generations were like people, we are like donkeys..."

Reb Baruch Shimon Shneerson *zt'l*, the *rosh yeshiva* of Tchebin, explained that people's nature is to shun responsibility. People don't mind hearing that tzaddikim of the past "were like angels," because that doesn't obligate them in any way. They heard a description of a *malach*, and they say, "That doesn't obligate me to be like him. Who can be a *malach*?"

But if we hear that the tzaddikim of the past were also human beings, and they had struggles just as we have, then people become like donkeys who simply can't listen. They don't *want* to listen, because that will obligate them. They won't be able to claim they can't be like the tzaddikim, because they are hearing that the tzaddikim also had tests and challenges, and that they were human beings who passed those tests.

The Beis Avraham *zt'l* writes, "When one attends a *yahrtzeit seudah* of a tzaddik, he is connected to that tzaddik even if he never knew the tzaddik, and he never heard a *dvar Torah* from the tzaddik, because he is following in that tzaddik's ways, and he tells stories about the tzaddik, and he studies his holy lessons on *avodas Hashem* ..." This is what we seek to do on Lag b'Omer, to be inspired, to learn his holy ways, and to see what we can do to go in his footsteps.

Emunah

We seek to go in Reb Shimon's ways, and one primary way we do so is to increase our *emunah*, to believe that

everything that happens is with
hashgachah pratis.

The Gemara (*Shabbos* 33:) says: Reb Shimon, Reb Yosi, and Reb Yehudah were sitting together. Also present was Yehudah ben Geirim. They were discussing the Roman Empire.

Reb Yehudah said, "How good are the deeds of this empire. They built marketplaces, bridges, and bathhouses."

Reb Yossi was quiet.

Reb Shimon said, "Everything they made, they made for themselves."

Yehudah ben Geirim repeated what they said to his friend, and that person told the next, until the Roman Empire heard about it. The Roman Empire said, "Yehudah that praised us should be

honored, Reb Yosi who was silent should be exiled to Tzipori, and Reb Shimon who disgraced Rome should be killed."

Reb Shimon and his son went into hiding, first in a beis medresh, and then in a cave, where he hid for thirteen years.

At times, he would go out of the cave for a short while. On one such excursion, he watched a hunter. Reb Shimon was able to hear the *bas kols* of heaven. When the *bas kol* said *dimus*, "free," the bird flew away, and wasn't captured by the hunter. When the *bas kol* said *sapkula*, "caught," the bird was caught. Reb Shimon said to his son, "If Hashem's *hashgachah pratis* is even on birds, He certainly has *hashgachah pratis* on us. If a bird can't be caught without Hashem's decree, the Romans will also not harm us, if it isn't Hashem's will."²⁰

20. The man who caught the bird probably thought that he caught the bird because he had good aim. He didn't hear the *bas kol*, so he didn't know that he caught the bird because it was decreed from Above. When he didn't catch a bird, he accused himself for not being more diligent. He didn't know that no matter what he would do, he wouldn't catch the bird, because that was the decree from Above.

Reb Shimon heard the *bas kol* and knew that it doesn't have to do with skills, only by Hashem's decree.

We learn from this that when one succeeds in business, or when one loses money, he shouldn't think he is the cause. For as we see in this story, everything is decreed Above and announced by a *bas kol*. It isn't up to the hands of mankind at all. He shouldn't feel proud when he makes money, and he shouldn't feel like a fool when he loses money, because it has nothing to do with him.

It states (*Tehillim* 123:2), הנה כעיני עבדים אל יד אדוניהם... כן עינינו אל ה' אלקינו עד שיחוננו, "Like a slave lifts up his eyes to his master...so are our eyes turned to Hashem our G-d, until He has compassion on us." A slave knows that his only hope for freedom is when his master frees him. Therefore, his eyes are turned to his master, for his compassion. That is how we should turn our eyes to Hashem, with the awareness that only Hashem can help us.

About the *mon*, it states (*Shemos* 62:), שטו העם ולקטו וטחנו ברחיים... "The nation spread out

That is when Reb Shimon and Reb Elazar courageously left the cave (see *Yerushalmi Shviis* 9:1).²¹

Let us follow Reb Shimon bar Yochai's holy footsteps and be aware that everything is from Hashem, and nothing happens by chance.

Try, Try Again

Another way to go in Reb Shimon's ways is to never lose hope, no matter what occurs.

The Gemara says, "Reb Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of *talmidim* from Gavas until Antifras, and they all died in

and gathered [the *mon*] and ground it in a mill..." Reb Shimon bar Yochai, in *Zohar*, explains that שטו means foolishness, שטותא, because if they were wise, they wouldn't work so hard to gather and to prepare the *mon*. If they weren't so panicky about their *parnassah*, fearing they may not have enough, the *mon* would have fallen right on their doorstep, ready to eat. The Alshich adds that even ולקטו, that they bent down to gather up the *mon* was unnecessary. Hashem would have given them *parnassah* without any exertion at all.

The *Zohar* states, the *mon* traveled through Gan Eden before it fell on the ground in the desert, and it had a taste and scent of Gan Eden. But that was solely for those who didn't work hard to prepare the *mon*. Those who overworked didn't experience the scent of Gan Eden in the *mon*.

A thief stole a hundred dollars, and the next day he used those hundred dollars to pay for his medical care, because he fell and broke his leg. He said, "It's a good thing I stole a hundred dollars. I needed it to pay for the medical bill." He doesn't know that if he didn't steal the money, his foot wouldn't need to break. He had in his possession one hundred dollars more than what was destined for him on Rosh Hashanah. This had to be taken away from him, and this is the reason he fell. Had he not stolen the money, he wouldn't have fallen and broken his foot.

21. The Gemara (*Shabbos* 33:) gives another explanation why Reb Shimon left the cave.

After living in the cave for twelve years, Eliyahu HaNavi stood at the cave's entrance and said, "Who will tell Yochai's son that the Caesar died and the decree [of his death] was annulled?"

Reb Shimon heard Eliyahu's message and left the cave together with his son, Reb Elazar. But they were on a very high level, and they couldn't tolerate it, when they saw people interested and involved in material pursuits. When they saw people working, they would say, "They are abandoning Olam HaBa [Torah and mitzvos] and busying themselves with Olam HaZeh." They would look at them with disapproval, and the people would be consumed in fire.

A *bas kol* cried out, "Did you leave the cave to destroy My world? Return to your cave!" They lived in the cave another year. They thought that it was sufficient, since even *resha'im* aren't punished in Gehinom for more than twelve months. As they were thinking this, a *bas kol* said, "Leave the cave."

the same time period for they didn't honor one another..." The Beis Yosef explains that they stopped dying on Lag b'Omer, hence Lag b'Omer is a day of celebrating.

The Pri Chadash asks, the reason the students stopped dying on Lag b'Omer is mostly because there were almost no students left. Only five students remained. Why should we be happy on this day?

The Pri Chadash answers, on Lag b'Omer, Reb Akiva took his five remaining students and began to teach them Torah. Those five students were: Reb Meir, Reb Yehudah, Reb Yossi, Reb Shimon and Reb Elazer ben Shamo'a, and from them the Torah continued to live on in Klal Yisrael. That's a reason to celebrate!

Reb Akiva lost most of his students but he didn't give up. Only a short while before, Reb Akiva had twenty-four thousand students. Many funerals were held daily. They all perished. The situation was tragic. Reb Akiva was left with only five students but he didn't give up. He taught his five remaining students, and from those five students, Torah continues until today. Their lessons are repeated throughout the Mishnayos and the Gemara. Torah survived because Reb Akiva didn't lose hope.

Reb Shimon bar Yochai also didn't give up. Chazal tell that the Romans wanted to murder Reb Shimon. To save his life, he hid in a cave for thirteen years together with his son, Reb Elazar. No

one would blame Reb Shimon if he would have lost hope. At this time, Reb Shimon thought he would remain in the cave forever. Living in a cave interminably, removed from all Torah teachers, students and Torah centers, could cause anyone to despair. But Reb Shimon continued to study Torah with all his might, and it was specifically there, in the cave, that he reached his outstanding, unfathomable heights. (As we sing שם קניית הודך והדרך, "there you acquired your glory").

The Nachlas Avos tells that Yochai (Reb Shimon's father) was married for many years and didn't have children. Yochai told his wife that he wants to divorce her and marry someone else, so he can have children. His wife didn't want a divorce. She cried and prayed a lot for children.

On the night of Rosh Hashanah, Yochai had a dream. He was in an orchard. There were many trees there, some tall, and some small. Yochai saw himself leaning on a small tree, without fruit. He understood that the tree represents him. It didn't have fruit, because he didn't have children. A malach came into the orchard, carrying a barrel of water and began watering some of the trees. Yochai understood that whichever tree the angel watered meant that person would have a child that year. How he hoped the *malach* would pour some water on his sapling as well.

The *malach* came to Yochai's tree. This time, he didn't pour water from the barrel. Instead, the angel took out a small jug of water and poured it over the tree.

The tree immediately sprouted flowers and grew beautiful fruit.

When he awoke, he told his wife about the dream. They understood that the dream was telling good tidings.

On *motzei* Rosh Hashanah, Yochai repeated his dream to Reb Akiva. Reb Akiva agreed that the dream meant they would have a child that year.

Yochai asked, "Why didn't the angel water my tree from the barrel, as he watered all the other trees? What is the significance of that small jug filled with water?"

Reb Akiva answered, "This jug wasn't filled with water. It was filled with your wife's tears; the tears she shed to have children. In the merit of those tears you will have a holy child."

That year, Reb Shimon bar Yochai was born.

Chesed

The Bnei Yissaschar (*Iyar* 3:1) teaches, the 49 days of the *sefirah* are *gematriya* לב טוב, a good heart. Lag b'Omer is the

beginning of the final 17 days of the Omer, the *gematriya* of טוב. For during these days we seek to develop a לב טוב, a good, caring heart.²²

Reb Shimon bar Yochai (*Midrash Tanchuma Vayechi* 5) teaches, "Whoever helps Yidden, it is like he helps the *Shechinah*. As it states (*Shoftim* 5:23), ארו מרוז... ארו ארו ירביה כי לא באו לעזרת ה' לעזרת ה' בגבורים, 'Cursed are the people of Maroz... Cursed are their inhabitants, because they didn't come to help Hashem [to fight] the war against the mighty [Sisro].' What is the meaning of this *pasuk*? Hashem doesn't need help! This teaches us whoever helps Yisrael, it is like he helped the *Shechinah*."

The *Zohar* (vol.2 198.) states, "Fortunate is the person who meets up with a pauper. This meeting is a gift from Hakadosh Baruch Hu..." because if you do kindness with the pauper, Hashem will do kindness with you.

The *Zohar* teaches, "Before Reb Shimon's *petirah*, he said, 'In heaven there are three courts. One court has 23

22. Rebbe Yitzchak of Peshvarsk *zt'l* discussed the virtue of פארגינען א יודן, which means to be happy when your fellow man has goodness. He said that the *roshei teivos* of יודן is פארגינען א יודן, Hashem's name associated with *parnassah* (also the *roshei teivos* of פותח את ידך). When one adapts the attitude to want that your fellow man should be happy and well, it is *mesugal* for *parnassah*.

This generous attitude is also *mesugal* for *ruchniyus*. The Midrash (*Shemos Rabba* 3) teaches that although Aharon was the older brother, and he was the leader of the Jewish nation before Moshe, he was happy when Moshe was appointed to be the leader. As it states, וראך ושמה בלבו, "He will see you and he will be happy."

Reb Shimon bar Yochai teaches, "The heart that was happy with his brother's greatness should merit the joy of wearing the *urim v'Tumim*." Aharon wore the *choshen* with the *urim v'Tumim* over his heart, the reward for having a good heart.

judges. One court has 71 judges, and a third court is judged by Hakadosh Baruch Hu, Himself. Best is to be judged by Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Whoever is judged in Hashem's court will certainly be deemed innocent. By the other courts, some will say זכאי, merit, and some will say חייב, guilty. But by Hakadosh Baruch Hu there is pure good, *chesed* and compassion. As it states (*Tehillim* 130:4), כִּי עִמָּךְ הַסְלִיחָה, 'Atonement is with You...'"

How does one merit that Hashem should be his judge? Shaar HaMelech writes, "When one is *maavir al midosov* (he forgives others, and he doesn't answer back) Hakadosh Baruch Hu, Himself, will judge him. And therefore, he will certainly be judged and ruled that he merits Gan Eden."²³

The *Zohar* (*Idra Kadisha*) tells: Reb Yitzchok (Reb Shimon bar Yochai's student) became ill, and was about to die. Reb Shimon bar Yochai visited him, and Reb Shimon asked whether his father from Gan Eden had already come down to accompany him on his journey to his place in heaven. Reb Shimon said, "If you have already seen your father, there is nothing I can do to save you."

Reb Yitzchok said that he hadn't seen his father. Reb Shimon bar Yochai decreed, "Whoever is [right now] in this room right now may stay. But no one else may enter." Thereby, Reb Shimon prevented the *malach hamaves* [the angel of death] from entering the room. Reb Yitzchok

was saved from immediate death, but he still needed prayers to continue living. Reb Shimon turned to Heaven, and said, "I need Reb Yitzchok. He helps me in our studies of Kabbalah and the secrets of the Torah."

Heaven replied that Reb Yitzchok will live, but when Reb Shimon bar Yochai will die, Reb Yitzchok would need to leave the world together with him.

A spiritual fire surrounded Reb Shimon bar Yochai on the last day of his life. Reb Shimon called Reb Yitzchok and told him to join him, and prepare for his death. Reb Yitzchok's father appeared, and said: Before, when you were ill, it was destined upon you to die and to return your *neshamah* to the Creator. I and all the holy souls in heaven were preparing a great celebration in honor of your arrival. There was only a slight distress in my heart, and that was because you wouldn't be able to teach your young son Torah."

This part of the *Zohar* is known, and there are people who read this portion of the *Zohar* on Lag b'Omer. Rebbe Moshe of Savran *zy'a* said there is another *Zohar* (*Beshalach* 61) that finishes this story. Because it wasn't only Reb Shimon bar Yochai's *tefillos* that saved Reb Yitzchok from death, it was also the mitzvah of *tzedakah*.

The *Zohar* states: "Reb Yitzchok was traveling and met with a pauper. The

23. In the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* we say in *kaddish* לעילא ולעילא. This hints that we want our judgment should be לעילא ולעילא, up by the highest court, by Hashem Himself.

pauper asked for some money to feed his hungry family. Reb Yitzhok said: 'I only have a half *mah*. How would this help you? What could you buy with a half *mah*?'

"The poor man replied, 'I also have a half *mah*. Together I will have a full *mah*, which is sufficient to buy a loaf of bread for my family.'

Reb Yitzchok gave him the half *mah*. That night, Reb Yitzchok had a dream. He saw himself drowning in a raging ocean. He began to shout and pray to Hashem for a salvation. Suddenly, he sees his holy *rebbe*, Reb Shimon bar Yochai, standing on dry land. Reb Shimon bar Yochai extended his hand to him, to pull him to safety. But there was a small gap between their two hands. Reb Shimon bar Yochai's hand didn't quite reach Reb Yitzchok's. But then the pauper (whom he helped earlier on that day) came, and he bridged their hands. Reb Yitzchok helped the pauper put together the two half *mah*, and in reward, the pauper came, and connected their two hands to bring Reb Yitzchok to safety.

"When Reb Yitzchok awoke, he said the *pasuk*, 'אשרי משכיל אל דל ביום רעה ימלטהו ה', "Fortunate are those who pay attention to the needs of the poor. On a bad day, Hashem will save him."

Rebbe Moshe of Savran, *zy'a* taught that this dream occurred when Reb Yitzchok was ill. In the merit of *tzedakah*, Reb Shimon came and saved him from death.

Shemiras Einayim

Hundreds of thousands of people ke'h go to Meron on Lag b'Omer, and to prevent traffic jams the police arranged that cars aren't permitted to drive up the mountain (excluding the select few who receive special permits). Whoever wants to drive to Meron must park their car in the distance, and take a bus for the last leg of the journey.

A *bachur* traveled to Meron with three other people by car, but when they reached the last leg of the journey, and the *bachur* saw that the busses would challenge his *shemiras einayim*, he decided to stay behind in the car. He told the others, "You go, and I will wait here until you come back."

They tried to convince him to go with them, but he refused. When they returned, a few hours later, he was still there, waiting in the car. The *bachur* said, "For my sake, try to drive straight up to Meron, to the *kever*. Maybe the police will let us through."

The others in the car thought it was ridiculous. They didn't have a permit, and there were many police guarding the roads. But the *bachur* insisted they should try. They felt bad for the *bachur* who traveled all the way, and never actually came to Meron, so they decided to try. (Mostly, they wanted to him show him that it is impossible.)

They came to the first blockade, and honked for the police to let them pass. The policeman was on the phone, and apparently he didn't have peace of mind

to check them. Assuming they had a permit, he let them pass.

There were another five manned blockades they had to pass, but they all relied on the first policeman, assuming he checked their permits, and they let them pass through. In Reb Shimon's merits, and in the merit of the *bachur's mesirus nefesh* for *shemiras einayim*, they came to the *tzion*, without the *bachur* having to compromise his *kedushah*.

It states (beginning of *parashas Netzavim*) אתם נצבים היום כולכם לפני ה' אלוקיכם... כל איש ישראל, מפכם ונשיכם, "You stand today, all of you, before Hashem your G-d... every Yisrael, your children, your wives..." The Chasam Sofer *zt'l* explains that since everyone was present at that time, Moshe told them that the children should stand between the men and the women, as it states כל איש ישראל, מפכם ונשיכם. The children served like a *mechitzah*, separating the men from the women.

Reb Yosef Nechemyah Kornitzer *zt'l* (the Chasam Sofer's grandchild) said that in *parashas Vayigash*, Pharaoh told Yosef, ואתה צוית זאת עשו לכם מארץ מצרים, עגלות למפכם ולנשיכם, "Command that this should be done: Take for yourselves from Mitzrayim wagons for your children and for your wives..." Pharaoh knew that Yosef and his family were cautious with their *kedushah*, and he understood they would want to separate between the men and the women. Therefore, Pharaoh said to arrange chariots that will be לכם... למפכם ולנשיכם, for yourselves, for your children and for

your wives, with the children seated in between the men and the women.

It states וירא את העגלות אשר שלח יוסף לשאת אותו, ותחי רוח יעקב אביהם, "Yaakov saw the wagons that Yosef sent to bring him, and Yaakov's spirit was revived." At first, Yaakov didn't believe that Yosef could remain a *tzaddik* in Mitzrayim. As it states, ויפג לבו כי לא האמין להם, but when he saw the wagons arranged in a *tzniusdig* manner, Yaakov believed.

The Beis HaMikdash had rooms, לשכות. Some rooms were built on the area of the Beis HaMikdash, others began by the wall of the Beis HaMikdash and jutted outside. Some rooms had doors opening to the Beis HaMikdash, others rooms opened to the outside, to Har HaBayis.

The Mishnah (*Maaser Sheini* 3:8) explains that it wasn't the location, which determined whether the לשכה should have the *kedushah* of the Beis HaMikdash or not. It all depended on where the doors opened to. If the door opened to the outside of the Beis HaMikdash, the room wasn't holy. Even if the room was built within the parameters of the Beis HaMikdash, since the door was to the outside, it wasn't holy. In contrast, all rooms that opened into the Beis HaMikdash (even those built on the outside) had the holiness of the Beis HaMikdash.

Reb Shalom Shwadron *zt'l* said that the לשכה that is built outside the Beis HaMikdash represents those who have to work all day long. They are outside the *beis medresh*. They too, can be pure and

holy. It all depends on “where the door opens to,” or in other words, what they yearn for. If they yearn to be in *beis medresh* as much as possible, and they yearn for more Torah and more *tefillah*, than they are pure and holy. But if the door – their main objective – is opened to the outside, they are impure.

Someone bought for Reb Michel Yehudah Lefkowitz a beautiful plaque with the name Lefkowitz, to hang on his front door. His wife was about to hang it up, but Reb Michel Yehudah told her she shouldn't. He explained:

“In a couple of weeks, we will say, ‘the beautiful plaque doesn't match with an old door. It's time to change the door.’ Then we will say, ‘The new door isn't compatible with the old walls. The walls have to be redone.’ Afterwards, the furniture will have to match the walls. We will never end refurnishing the home. I want to stop the process from the very beginning...”

We repeat this, as an analogy to how the *yetzer hara* works. He doesn't come to a person, telling him to do a grave sin. He offers himself something small. And then one matter leads to the next. For those who know, in this generation, this is something that happens every day... It would be wise, therefore, to stop the *yetzer hara* at the start....

The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 19:2) states, “They asked the snake, ‘Why are you always crawling between the gates?’ The snake replied, ‘It's because I broke the gate of the world.’”

There are gates set by Chazal, and by the

rabbanim of each generation. The purpose of these gates is to safeguard the continuity of the Jewish nation and the continuity of Torah. The *yetzer hara* knows the importance of these gates, so he strives to break them.

This is what happened to Chavah. Hashem forbade them from eating from the Tree of Knowledge, and she made a gate for herself, that she wouldn't even touch the tree. The snake had her break that gate, and then the snake was able to entice her to eat from the fruit. Similarly, we must be cautious with the gates that Chazal established, and that the rabbanim of our generation establish, because these safeguard us and protect us.

There was a *bachur* who was falling, spiritually. Many *mechanchim* spoke with the *bachur*, but they couldn't stop his descent. Rebbe Shlomke Zvhil *zt'l* said he wants to speak with the *bachur*. People told him, “It isn't worth the Rebbe's time. So many people tried and failed...”

But Rebbe Shlomke tried. He told the *bachur*, “Hakadosh Baruch Hu has immense *nachas ruach* from a Yid when he battles with the *yetzer hara*, even if he loses the fight in the end. Hashem enjoys the Yid's attempts. He enjoys watching him put up a fight against the *yetzer hara*. Hashem has more pleasure from the Yid's skirmish than He derives pleasure from the *malachim*. The *yetzer hara* is called *מלך זקן וכסיל*, an old, foolish king. I request one thing from you. Don't make your *yetzer hara* king. When a king decrees something, everyone must

listen immediately. I request that you don't listen immediately. When he asks for something, push it off for later..."

The *bachur* followed this advice, and with it, did *teshuvah*. He became from the respected Yerushalayimer Yidden.

The *yetzer hara's* success is because he makes the person act compulsively, immediately, without thinking. He entices the person to grab something from Olam Hazei immediately, without delay. Waiting until later cools down the passion of the *yetzer hara*, and it is likely that by then, you can overcome your *yetzer hara* entirely. Because by waiting, you realize that the *yetzer hara* isn't selling anything worthwhile, nothing worth pursuing.

Tefillos

The importance to daven for good children is well known. An extravagant

expression of this concept is in the Gemara (*Makos* 17:) which states, "Rava said, 'When a woman gives birth, she should pray that the child be like Reb Shimon...'"

This Gemara is wondrous, because who can expect to have a child like Reb Shimon bar Yochai? The Minchas Elazar (*Shaar Yissaschar*) answers that the Gemara is referring to someone who is davening on Lag b'Omer. On this day, anything is possible. On this day, one can ask for the greatest things - even that one's child be like Reb Shimon bar Yochai.

According to one Midrash, the *mon* started to come down on Lag b'Omer. Therefore, Lag b'Omer is an ideal day to daven for *parnassah*.²⁴

ורפאתיו *is gematriya* שמעון בר יוחאי, so Lag b'Omer is also *mesugal* for *refuah*.²⁵

24. The Chasam Sofer (*Yorah Deiah* 233) makes the following calculation: Chazal tell us that the nation finished the matzos on Pesach Sheini. The Midrash says that they didn't have food to eat for three days, and then the *mon* fell. According to this calculation, the *mon* first came on Lag b'Omer.

25. It is known that the *sefirah* יהוד *is mesugal* for *refuah*. Reb Pinchas of Koritz *zt'l* said that Lag b'Omer, which is the *sefirah* יהוד *is certainly mesugal* for *refuah*.

Rebbe Pinchas of Koritz taught that if one needs to take a medication, he should begin on Lag b'Omer, which is יהוד *is mesugal* for *refuah*.

In תש"ט, because of the wars with the Arabs, the gates to Yerushalayim were opened only for one day, every two weeks.

An Arab shot a *bachur* called Meirovitz in the leg, but he couldn't reach the Shaarei Tzedek hospital for two weeks, when the roads would be open. By the time he got to the hospital, his leg was infected and the doctors said they needed to amputate.

Lag b'Omer was approaching and Meirovitz asked his friends to bring him to Meron, where he can pray for his health. "It's impossible," his friends told him, and indeed, it was almost impossible. Because of his wound, Meirovitz had to travel lying down. In those days, a trip

to Miron could take an entire day, changing busses several times. How could they make the long trip with him, in his condition?

But the *bachur* begged that they bring him to Meron, until his friends agreed to do whatever they can. They rented a truck, so he could lie down, and they traveled to Meron.

At the *tzion*, the *bachur* said the following prayer, "My entire family was killed by the Nazis. Only I survived. I must marry and build a family so my family will continue. But how can I get married if I lose my leg?"

Afterwards, they went to the *chatzer* (courtyard) for the dancing. The *bachur* Meirovitz wanted to dance, so he put his arms around the shoulders of two of his friends, and they danced with him. Suddenly, he began dancing on his own. The dressing fell off. He was healed.

A boy was smitten with a severe disease. Doctors tried some treatments, but they soon realized that the boy's body was too weak, and wasn't responding well to the treatments. They admitted that they had nothing to do.

The father of the boy said, "Until now the doctors did what they know, now it is time for us, as Yidden, to do what we know." A minyan was organized to travel to Meron, to pray for the boy. The father took his weak son along with them.

When the boy was at the *tzion*, he cried from his pains. This spurred the people davening there to cry and pray with greater devotion, hoping the boy would finally get a *refuah sheleimah*.

At that time, the boy ate and drank intravenously. But as he sat there, near the *tzion*, he asked for water. Everyone was surprised. It was a sign of improvement.

When they returned, the father asked the doctors to check his son again. The doctors were astonished how much better he had become. He had a few more treatments and merited a *refuah sheleimah*.

The following story was told by the great *mekubal* and *tzaddik*, Reb Asher Zelig Margolies *zt'l*, who witnessed it, and it is also told by several other people who were in Meron, Lag b'Omer of תרפ"ג.

Three years before, a childless couple prayed at the *kever* of Reb Shimon bar Yochai and promised that if they have a child they will bring him to Meron on Lag b'Omer for the *chalachah* (to make *peyos*). That year, they had a child, and when the child turned three, the mother came to Meron, as she promised. (The husband remained home.)

That year, Lag b'Omer was on Friday, so most people remained in Meron for Shabbos. On Shabbos, as Reb Asher Zelig was davening *Mussaf*, he heard great screams and cries. It was because the three-year-old miracle-child became ill with cholera and had died. Everyone was panicking; especially the mother, whose cries could be heard above all others.

Reb Asher Zelig writes that he saw the child, "He was green and seemed to be dead." Everyone was distraught. The *tefillah* was finished, but no one made Kiddush. A feeling of gloom reigned.

The mother took the child and placed him near the *tzion*. She said, "Reb Shimon! I brought my only son here. He was born in your merit. I kept my promise, and I made his first haircut here. Do not ruin my happiness and the happiness of my husband, who is waiting for us to

The Tzemech Tzedek taught that מרון (without the יו"ד) is *roshei teivos* מ'לך ר'ופא ג'אמן ור'חמן.

The Shem Shlomo of Munkatch ז'ל taught that to bear children one should have *kavanah* in the *brachah* רפאנו. Therefore, Lag b'Omer, הוד שבהוד, which is *mesugal* for *refuah*, is certainly also *mesugal* for bearing children.²⁶

The Taamei HaMinhagim writes, י'שפע ש'פע ר'ב ב'כל העולמות should come down in all worlds" is *roshei teivos* רשב"י

The Avnei Nezer ז'ל told his chassidim that Lag b'Omer is *mesugal* for *shidduchim*, because about Reb Shimon it states, הציל הלחוצים, "He saves those who are stressed and worried," and who is

return. Reb Shimon! I'm leaving my son here. Don't embarrass me. Bring him back to health and life as I brought him here yesterday. Sanctify Hashem's name. Reveal before everyone that Hashem is here, and that there are tzaddikim."

After saying this *tefillah*, she left her son near the *tzion*, and left closing the door behind her. Only the child remained inside. A few minutes later, the child's voice was heard. He was calling for his mother.

Reb Asher Zelig opened the door. The boy was standing on his feet, calling, "Mother, I'm thirsty. Bring me water."

A tumult of joy and wonder roared. The dead child came back to life. They all said the *brachah* מחיה המתים.

Shaar Yissaschar writes that שמעון בן יוחאי *gematriya* מחיה המתים.

The truth is, whoever prays at Reb Shimon's *kever* as this mother prayed for her child, will attain all the *yeshuos* they need. Miracles beyond the rules of nature will happen to them. But the condition is to pray as this mother prayed...

Reb Asher Zelig Margolis ז'ל tells that he had a lot of pain in his throat. The doctors recommended an operation, but he was very wary of doing so. He came to Meron and said the entire *Tehillim*. In the middle of saying the *Tehillim*, he began coughing violently, and blood and all the infections that were blocking his throat came out. He was healed.

26. The Midrash (*Shir HaShirim Rabba* 1) tells that there was a couple in Tzidon who didn't have children for ten years. They came to Reb Shimon for a divorce. Reb Shimon told them, "In the same way you got married with a celebration, I want you to divorce with a celebration."

They made a grand party, and she gave him a lot of wine to drink. When the wine was wearing off, he told her, "Take whatever you love the most from this home, and bring it to your parent's home."

He fell asleep, and she told her slaves to carry him, together with the bed, to her parent's home.

He awoke at midnight, and didn't understand why he was in her parent's home. She said, "You told me I can take whatever I like the most. There is nothing I like more than you."

They returned to Reb Shimon. He davened for them, and they bore children.

more stressed and worried than someone who is waiting for their *shidduch*?

The Sfas Emes (*Emor* 5652) writes, “I heard from my grandfather [the Chidushei HaRim *zt'l*] that on Lag b'Omer one can attain *yiras Shamayim*.”

Rebbe Tzaddok HaCohen *zt'l* (*Tzikkas HaTzaddik* 127) writes, “The *Zohar* (*Chayei Sarah* 129) states that even the greatest sinner, when he repents, merits all levels. I heard in the name of Rebbe Bunim of Pshischa *zt'l* that this is in the merit of Reb Shimon bar Yochai. He

accomplished this with his toil in *avodas Hashem*.”

The *Zohar* tells that the gates of heaven are opened on Pesach Sheini for a week, and then they close. Rebbe Naftali of Ropshitz *zy'a*, asked why do the gates have to close? Why can't they remain open? The answer is, in this week is Lag b'Omer, and on Lag b'Omer everyone receives everything they need. Since Klal Yisrael has already received all their hearts' desires, the gates of mercy can close.²⁷

We learn from this Midrash: Just as Hakadosh Baruch Hu is פוקד עקרות, remembers the barren so they can bear children, so are tzaddikim פוקד עקרות with their tefillos.

27. There are many large stones on the mountain, going up to the *kever* of Reb Shimon.

Tzaddikim said that these stones are the heavy stones that people shed off their hearts when they come to Meron to pray.

When Rebbe Avraham Elimelech of Karlin *hy'd zy'a* was in Meron he didn't take *kvitelach* from his chassidim. He told them that in Meron, everyone has an exceptional power of *tefillah*.

Every year, Rebbe Moshe Mordechai of Lelov *zy'a* would go with his chassidim to Meron for Shabbos *parshas Behaloscha*, and he too didn't accept *kvitelach* from his followers, as he felt that there was no need for that in Meron.

There's another similarity between these two tzaddikim (Reb Avraham Elimelech of Karlin and Rebbe Moshe Mordechai of Lelov) concerning Meron: They both said that after going to Meron, there is no need to go to any other *kever*. Rebbe Avraham Elimelech *zy'a* said: “After pouring one's heart out in Meron, one should have the sensation that he left all his sorrows in Meron, by Reb Shimon bar Yochai.”

When the Minchas Elazar *zt'l* of Munkatch would go to his father's *kever*, the Darkei Teshuvah, he would sing יוהאי three times, because his father wrote three *sefarim* on *Tikunei Zohar*, written by Reb Shimon bar Yochai.

One year, after singing the songs, the Minchas Elazar discussed the words, אשרי העם הם, לומדיך, which literally means, “Fortunate is the nation *who teach you*.” It seems it should say לומדי תורתך, “Fortunate is the nation who learn your Torah,” or לומדי ספריך, “Fortunate is the nation who learn your *sefarim*.” Why does it state לומדיך, that they teach Reb Shimon? What do they teach Reb Shimon?

The answer is, when there are harsh decrees in the world, the Satan often conceals it from the tzaddikim, so they won't pray and annul the decree. But when Yidden come to a grave

Express Yourself Well

Reb Mottel Slonimer *zy'a* said: When a person speaks with his lawyer in preparation for an upcoming court case, he will tell the lawyer all the small details related to his case, so the lawyer can help him. Reb Shimon bar Yochai is our lawyer in the heavenly court. We should express each of our desires and wants in detail, so he will plea on our behalf in heaven.

This point also applies to *tefillah*. Whenever one prays to Hashem, it is important to express yourself clearly.

One shouldn't only state his needs, briefly. He should express everything that is in his heart, with elaboration.

It states (*Mishlei* 12: 28), דאגה בלב איש, "When a person has a worry in his heart, he should speak it over with others." The Beis Aharon *zy'a* explains, if one has a worry in his heart, he should speak it over with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. He should tell Hashem everything he is going through.

The Chazon Ish said, "Our generation has fallen immensely. Years ago, everyone knew that it is possible to turn to Hashem in prayer, at any time, in one's own words. Today, people are unaware of this simple truth. Ask a yeshiva *bachur*, 'Did you know we have the option to speak with Hakadosh

Baruch Hu in the manner one speaks with his good friend, and we can ask all our needs from Him?' The *bachur* will respond that he never heard of that idea before. "I know one can daven three times a day, but I didn't know I can daven all the time, in my own words." But that is the reality, which once everyone knew. In addition to the set *tefillos* (*Shacharis, Minchah, Maariv, Tehillim*, etc.) one can use his own words to pour out his heart in *tefillah*. At these times, one should express everything that is in his heart, and Hashem will listen to his *tefillos*.

Yeshuos for the Individual

The stories in this section happen literally every day, and especially on Lag b'Omer, in Reb Shimon bar Yochai's merit. There isn't enough paper in the world to write down all the miracles that occur. We write merely a few examples:

A Yid from America came to Meron for Lag b'Omer to daven at Reb Shimon bar Yochai's *tzion*. A poor man from Eretz Yisrael was standing next to him, davening loudly for *parnassah*, and his loud shouts were disturbing him.

The poor man was shouting, "Hashem! In the merit of Reb Shimon! Send me fifty thousand dollars!"

The wealthy Yid thought to himself, "I came all this way to daven at Reb

of a tzaddik, they can tell the tzaddik about the decrees that are happening, so they can pray for Klal Yisrael. This is the intention of אשרי העם הם לומדיך, "Fortunate is the nation *who teach you*." After saying this, the Minchas Elazar fell on his father's grave, and told his father the many *gezeiros* of his time.

Shimon bar Yochai's grave, and this man's loud shouts for fifty thousand dollars are giving me a headache and ruining my concentration."

He wanted to take revenge on this poor man, so he asked the poor man for his address, which he readily gave. *When I get back to America, he thought to himself, I will write a check for fifty thousand dollars and sign it, "Reb Shimon bar Yochai." With this tease, I will pay him back for all the frustration he's causing me.*

Some weeks later, this wealthy man was going through his bank statements, and saw he was charged fifty thousand dollars! He didn't understand. When did he write such a large check? Then he remembered the hoax he played on the poor Yid by Reb Shimon's kever. He looked at the check, and saw he accidentally signed his own name, and not Reb Shimon bar Yochai.

The poor man's *tefillos* were answered.

The following story happened twenty years ago, and it's still going on until today:

There are two very good friends who learn together each morning, from 3:00 am, until *Shacharis*. One of them became very ill. His *chavrusah* would visit him and speak with him about *emunah*. Once, in middle of their conversation, the friend said, "Lag b'Omer is only a month and a half away. For years, we traveled together to Meron, let's travel this year, again."

The ill man looked up, surprised. He said, "The doctors are telling me I have only two months to live. I don't even know if I will be alive when Lag b'Omer comes around."

A few weeks later, he called his ill friend, "I'm buying a ticket to Eretz Yisrael today. Should I buy a ticket for you too? The doctors don't prevent you from going, so why not?"

The ill man agreed, and the two friends set out. That year Lag b'Omer was on Motzei Shabbos. As soon as Shabbos was over, they went to the *maarah* (cave where Reb Shimon is buried) to daven. Twenty years ago, the crowd wasn't as large as it is today, and most of the chassidim were still with their Rebbe for the *hadlakah*. The *tzion* wasn't very full, so they could get inside, and even to come near the *tzion* to daven. The ill man sat down near the *tzion*, and poured his heart out in *tefillah*. He said the entire *sefer Tehillim*, from beginning to end. When he finished, he turned to his friend and said, "I feel that I've just removed a large stone off my heart and I'm leaving that stone here."

They returned to America, and when he went to the doctors, they operated on him, and they saw that the cells, which they thought were cancerous, weren't cancerous at all. They took a biopsy, but it wasn't cancerous, and it was curable. His first phone call was to his friend who encouraged him to go to Meron. He cried tears of gratitude. At first, when his friend heard him crying, he feared that he had received a negative report from

the doctors. But his friend was finally able to find his voice and explained that these were tears of joy and happiness.

Both of them told me this story, and they conclude, "Since then, we come to Meron every year, and before we leave we say, "Reb Shimon, next year again!"

It was תשע"ד. Zelig was getting older, and couldn't seem to find his *bashert*. On Lag b'Omer, his mother was traveling to Meron and was speaking to her husband on the cell phone. "I just reminded myself that years ago, we were in Meron, davening for a child, and we promised we would call the son Shimon. But when our first son was born, we forgot our promise and we called him Zelig. I was thinking, maybe this is what's holding back his *shidduchim*?"

The father immediately called his *rebbe* who told him to call their son Shimon Zelig from then on. The mother davened at the *kever* of Reb Shimon that her son Shimon Zelig should find his *bashert* and become engaged.

The next Shabbos, the *gabai* called up the *bachur*, "Shimon Zelig" for an *aliyah*, and afterwards he made a *mi shebeirach*. There was another person in this *beis medresh* called Zelig. He asked the *gabai*, "Why did you call this *bachur* Shimon Zelig. Until now he was Zelig." The *gabai* said, "That is what the father asked me to do. I don't know the reason. I didn't ask questions."

That Zelig had a daughter in *shidduchim*. He always wanted the *bachur* Zelig for a *chasan*, but Reb Yehuda HaChosid taught that the names of father-in-law

and son-in-law mustn't be the same. Now that their names weren't exactly the same, he was willing to go forward with the *shidduch*. Shimon Zelig became engaged to Zelig's daughter.

For five years, a wealthy man from America was supporting a Yerushalmi Yid. Their agreement was that this Yid from Yerushalayaim should daven periodically at *kivrei tzaddikim* for his wife, who needed a liver transplant. Five years passed, and they still didn't find a fitting donor.

On Friday before Lag b'Omer, the husband called his contact in Yerushalayim and asked him to go to Meron for Shabbos and to remain there until after Lag b'Omer. "My wife's health is deteriorating, and she needs your *tefillos*. I'll pay for the taxi and for all expenses involved."

The Yerushalmi Yid obliged, and he poured his heart out at the *kever* of Reb Shimon bar Yochai for her recovery.

That Shabbos there was a fatal car accident in New York. The dead driver's liver was an exact match for this woman. But there were two other people (*goyim*) ahead of her in line for a transplant. The hospital tried to call the first person in line, but they couldn't get hold of him. So the hospital called the second person in line. This man came to the hospital, but as they were prepping him for surgery he became afraid and left. It was this woman's turn now, but how can she be contacted on Shabbos? It wasn't likely that they would answer the phone, but someone felt that it was at least worth

the try. By *hashgachah pratis*, one of the children of the home answered the phone, and the mother was informed of the available liver, which saved her life.

A few days later this woman was walking around, all well.

This all happened because of the *tefillos* at the *kever* of Reb Shimon bar Yochai, the place which the Shlah HaKadosh testifies: "Many miracles occur there."

A woman from the Toldos Aharon chassidim had pressure on her eyes, and her eyesight was deteriorating from day to day. She took a CT scan on Lag b'Omer morning. The results would be ready only 24 hours later, so she decided to spend the rest of the day in Meron.

She could hardly see the Toldos Aharon Rebbe's *hadlakah* (when he lit the bonfire outside the grave of Reb Shimon bar Yochai) because her eyes had become very dim. She cried copiously for her *refuah*. Then she went to the cave, and she prayed for a few minutes at the *kever* of Reb Shimon.

The next morning, she awoke with good eyes and no pain. She went to the doctor to hear the results of the CT scan, and the doctor told her that it is very serious, and she needs an immediate operation to save her eyes.

She surprised him when she told him she was better, and she doesn't need an operation. The doctor was shocked. He tested her again, and saw that it was true.

He said she should come back each week to make certain that everything is better.

After seven weeks, the doctor admitted that everything was well, and she doesn't have to come anymore.

It isn't surprising, because she took the first test before going to Meron and the second test after she prayed by Reb Shimon bar Yochai, and before and after aren't the same, at all.

The following story happened with one of our friends (אחד מבני החבורה) in תשע"ה. The *chasunah* of his child was approaching, and he had to travel to *chutz le'aretz* to collect money to cover the many expenses of the wedding. He didn't want to travel, and endure the tests of being in *galus* in *chutz le'aretz*. Especially he didn't want to travel in Elul (the only month he was able to travel) because he generally spent that month learning Torah and preparing for the holy days.

He went to the *kever* of Reb Shimon, and davened that he shouldn't have to go to *chutz le'aretz*. Then he went to the adjacent coffee room, to revive himself with cake and coffee. He met a friend there, who lives in America. The friend said, "I heard you're making a *chasunah*. I want to help you" and he wrote out a check for ten thousand dollars. That was sufficient, he didn't have to travel. (He said, had he traveled, he wouldn't have made more money than that. Now, he got the money, without having to pay for the plane ticket either.)

There's another story that happened to a family I know. They live in Meor Chaim, Tzefas, and their three-year-old child was

hit by a car, *r'l*, and lost conscious. The doctors said they didn't have any cure, and they predicted the worst.

Two weeks before Lag b'Omer, the parents davened at the *kever* of Reb Shimon, and they said, "We want to bring our son, walking on his own, to Meron on Lag b'Omer, so we can give him a haircut, as we originally planned." And that is what happened. Against the doctors' predictions, the boy woke up and was better.

Someone came to Rebbe Dovid Biderman *zt'l*, telling him about his ill son. Rebbe Dovid advised him to daven in Meron.

"I was already in Meron."

Rebbe Dovid Biderman told him, "When a person goes to a doctor once, and he isn't healed, does he stop going to the doctor? He will go again. I advise you to go again and again to Meron, until your son has a *refuah sheleimah*."

Belief in Reb Shimon

It is essential to believe in Reb Shimon. To believe that until today, Reb Shimon is davening for those who come to his grave, and for those who seek to celebrate on his *hilulah*. As the Beis Aharon says, "Whoever believes in Reb Shimon bar Yochai receives *chizuk* from Reb Shimon bar Yochai. Just like Hashem is for all, so is Reb Shimon for all — even for the lowly ones (אפילו לפחותים)."

The more one believes, the more he can receive.

The Torah tells us that Rachel Imeinu asked Yaakov to daven for her that she bear children (*Bereishis* 30:2). Yaakov responded, התחת אלקים אנכי, "Am I in G-d's place...?"

Rebbe Yehoshua of Belz *zt'l* explained that Rachel wasn't one hundred percent certain that Yaakov could help her. She was doubtful. This is indicated by her words, הבה לי בנים ואם אין מתה אנכי, "Bring me children, and if not, I am like dead." Why did she say ואם אין, "and if not..."? It seems she wasn't certain Yaakov could help her. Therefore, Yaakov couldn't help her, because a tzaddik can only help the people who believe in him.

Hashem can help everyone: those who believe in Him and even those who don't.

Yaakov told Rachel, if you don't believe in me, I can't help you. התחת אלקים אנכי, I am not like Hashem, Who helps even those who don't believe in Him. I am a tzaddik and my ability to help you is dependent on your belief in me."

Once, on Lag b'Omer, the Divrei Shmuel of Slonim *zy'a* told the following story: A wealthy businesswoman, who worked in exports, loaded a ship with merchandise. Before the ship set sail, she went to Reb Shimon bar Yochai's *tzion* to pray that the ship together with all the merchandise reach their destination. But she couldn't get close to the *tzion*, because there was another woman in front of her praying. This woman was praying for three hundred rubles to marry off her child. The wealthy woman

quickly took three hundred ruble from her purse and gave it to her so she would leave, and make room for her to daven there. When she began her prayers, she said, "Reb Shimon, you saw that the woman before me received her request immediately. She prayed and was answered immediately. May my requests also be answered immediately."

The Divrei Shmuel said: The amazing thing is that this wealthy woman didn't pray that in the merit of the *tzedakah* she just gave, the ship should reach its destination. Her words reflected her belief in the power of *tefillah* at Reb Shimon bar Yochai's *tzion*. She realized that the woman in front of her received the money in the merit of her *tefillos*, and therefore she requested that her *tefillos* should also be answered.

Lag b'Omer is Everywhere

It's important to mention that the salvations that take place on Lag b'Omer can take place in any part of the world, not solely in Meron. Tzaddikim performed wonders on this day in the merit of Reb Shimon bar Yochai even thousands of miles away.

For example, Rebbe Moshe of Rozvadov *zt'l* would tell people who needed a salvation —health, *parnassah*, children, etc. — to come to him on Lag b'Omer. He said that this is hinted in the *pasuk* (*Tehillim* 84), לְבִי וּבִשְׂרֵי יִרְנְנוּ אֱלֹהֵי חַי, 'My heart and my flesh sing to the living G-d.' לְבִי is *roshei teivos* for לַבַּיִם, thirty-two days of the Omer. It is followed by בִּשְׂרֵי, which spells רֶשֶׁב, Reb Shimon bar Yochai. יִרְנְנוּ אֱלֹהֵי חַי, we will

sing praises to Hashem for the salvations that come in his merit. Because on Lag b'Omer, everyone receives their salvation and they sing to Hashem.

Rebbe Moshe Rozvadover would say, "There's no time better in the entire year than Lag b'Omer." When nighttime was approaching, he once said, "If I could, I would hold on to the sun with my teeth so it doesn't set, so we don't have to part with Lag b'Omer."

The Divrei Chaim *zt'l* was visiting Reb Eliezer of Dzhikov *zt'l* (the father of Rebbe Moshe of Rozvadov). Lag b'Omer was approaching, and Rebbe Eliezer of Dzhikov said to the Divrei Chaim, "I don't make a *tish* in public anymore because of my weak state, but in your honor I will make a *tish* on Lag b'Omer. Just tell me, though, what time are you free to come to the *tish*?"

The Divrei Chaim replied he would be ready at two in the afternoon.

It was two o'clock, and the Divrei Chaim hadn't yet come. A chassid of the Dzhikiver court went to call the Divrei Chaim, but when he came to the Divrei Chaim's apartment, the *gabai* told him that the Divrei Chaim had closeted himself in a room for several hours and he feared to disturb him. The Dzhikiver chassid was also afraid to disturb the Divrei Chaim at this time, so he left, without telling him that the Dzhikiver Rebbe was waiting for him to come.

Out of respect for his father, Rebbe Moshe Rozvadover *zt'l* felt he had to take action. He courageously went to the

Divrei Chaim, "My father is waiting for you," he said.

The Divrei Chaim brought him into his room. People outside didn't hear what they were saying, they just heard pacing. After a long time, they both came out; Reb Moshe's face was burning like a torch. Sometime later, Reb Moshe Rozvadover said that the Divrei Chaim taught him the secret of Lag b'Omer.

We see from these stories that tzaddikim who lived far from Eretz Yisrael also made an issue of Lag b'Omer, as they understood the potential and the greatness of this holy day.²⁸

It all depends on how connected you are with the holiness the day, and with your emunah in the Tana, Reb Shimon.

Consider a house situated right next to the electric company, yet the house is dark. There's no electricity. The reason is because the wires aren't connected. And you have someone living on the other side of the city and his home is

bright and illuminated. That's because the wires of his home are connected. More important than your location is your connection. If you're far from Meron but your heart is connected, you are close. Likewise, if you are in Meron, but your heart isn't connected, you are far.

There's a Yid from America who travels annually to Eretz Yisrael for Lag b'Omer. One year, in תשנ"ג, he was imprisoned, *rachmana litzlan*, and couldn't go. That bothered him immensely. His son tried to comfort him, "You can't go to Reb Shimon, but I'm certain Reb Shimon will come here."

The father didn't know what his son was talking about.

That Lag b'Omer, a fire broke out in prison. The Jewish prisoners took advantage of the fire and danced "Bar Yochai..." The next day, due to the fire, they were all released. They couldn't go to Reb Shimon, but Reb Shimon came to them.²⁹

28. We can compare it to a doctor who invents a medicine, and distributes it around the world. The doctor doesn't have to be near the ill patients for them to benefit from the medicine. Similarly, Reb Shimon bar Yochai's influence is all over the world, and whoever takes his medicine will be healed, spiritually and materially. Obviously, it is better to take the medicine right next to the doctor that invented it, so the doctor can make certain you take the right amount and check up on your situation. So too, those who go to Meron certainly earn many extra benefits.

29. There's a person who was detained while awaiting his trial. *Askanim* told him that as it appears, he would be sentenced. When Lag b'Omer came he cried. He wished he could be free and travel to Meron for Lag b'Omer, as he usually did. He vowed that if he is saved in the merit of Reb Shimon bar Yochai on that day, he will go to Meron to praise Hashem for the salvation. Not long after making this vow, a guard came to his cell and brought him to a judge. He was found innocent and was immediately released. He came home, dropped off his belongings, and set out for Meron. The family tried to convince him

Even fFrom the Distance

The Gemara (*Pesachim* 51:) states, כדאי הוא ר' שמעון בן יוחי לסמוך עליו בפניו ושלא בפניו, “Reb Shimon is worthy we should rely on him, both in front of him and not in front of him.” Implied in these words is that even those who aren't able to come to Meron, they can rely on Reb Shimon's merits and earn holiness and salvations on this day.

Reb Shimon wrote the *Zohar*, and his lessons on the revealed side of Torah are written throughout the Mishnayos and the Gemara. Studying those lessons is like being in Meron at his grave.

As the Meor Einayim (*Shabbos*) teaches, “[Studying the *sefarim* of a tzaddik] is like השתמחות על קברי צדיקים, praying on their graves, because...the *chiyus* of the tzaddik is found [in his *divrei Torah*]...”³⁰

Reb Shimon bar Yochai himself says (*Yevomos* 97.), “When you repeat *divrei*

Torah [of someone who was *niftar*], his lips speak from the grave.”

Similarly, Reb Shimon bar Yochai (*Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Sisa* 3) says that tzaddikim don't rest, even after their demise, because when their students say their *divrei Torah*, the tzaddikim say it along with them from their graves. The Midrash states as follows:

It states (*Koheles* 5:11), והשבע לעשיר איננו מניח לו לישון, “The satiation of the wealthy don't let them sleep.” The pasuk isn't referring to financial wealth. “The wealthy” are those who are wealthy in Torah. They can't sleep because when one is great and wealthy in Torah, and had many students, even when he dies his students don't let him sleep. They sit in beis medresh and repeat the lessons he taught them...and they don't let him sleep in the grave... This is the explanation והשבע לעשיר איננו מניח לו לישון, “The satiation of the wealthy don't let them sleep.”

to remain home, and to celebrate with the family. “You're tired,” they told him. “You went through so much...” He told them about his vow. He was able to spend several hours in Meron before Lag b'Omer was over, thanking Hashem for the salvation.

30. The Birchas Avraham said, “Studying the Torah of tzaddikim is greater than going to their gravesite. When one prays by *kivrei tzaddikim* the souls of the tzaddik and of the person praying there connect. Since the soul of the tzaddik is bound to the Torah he taught, it's possible to connect with tzaddikim everywhere, through studying their holy teachings. This is hinted in Chazal (*Yerushalmi Shekalim* 2:5), אין עושים נפשות לצדיקים דבריהם הם זכרונם, This means דבריהם, their *divrei Torah*, הם זכרונם, is how we can have a connection with them.” The son of the Sfas Emes (Berzhan) writes in the introduction, “I heard from my father *zt'l* that it is better to study the *sefer* of a tzaddik than to go to his grave. By studying his *sefer* in depth and by being connected immensely to the holiness of his *neshamah* above, holiness will be bestowed on him... The one studying is also bestowing goodness to the tzaddik, as it states דובב שפתי ישנים, he is causing the tzaddik to speak words of Torah from the grave. They are being *mashpia* each other.”

Therefore, it is recommended to study the lessons of Reb Shimon on Lag b'Omer, as this will give us a connection to Reb Shimon, regardless whether we are close by or far away.

Furthermore, Sefer Chasidim (224) teaches "Whoever repeats *divrei Torah* in the scholar's name, the scholar will pray for them and speak in heaven for their benefit..."

The Rebbe Resha'b of Lubavitch *zt'l* says that when one studies the *divrei Torah* of a tzaddik, a *malach* from *malach* Michael's camp, goes to the tzaddik to tell him that someone is studying his *sefer*, because the *malachim* know how happy tzaddikim are when they hear that someone is studying their *divrei Torah*.

The Yaaras Dvash (vol.2, *drush* 7) teaches, "When you repeat *divrei Torah* that a tzaddik said, the *neshamah* of the tzaddik is clothed in those studies, and he stands there, with you... Dovid therefore said, אגורה באהלך עולמים, 'I will dwell in the tents of Torah in both worlds' (*Yevamos* 96:). Because he will live in the eternal world, and also in this world, whenever people repeat something he taught. "

The Rebbe of Zalavitz *zy'a* in his *sefer Bris Avram* (end of *Shabbos Hagadol*) writes, "I heard from Reb Yisrael Baal Shem Tov *zt'l* that after a tzaddik's *petirah*, he is unable to rise from one level to the next before he is judged for

even the smallest transgressions. After they judge him for the smallest *aveiros* (קלות שבקלות) he still can't go to a higher level. However, when people down below, speak about his ways and they repeat his *divrei Torah* the tzaddik can rise to a much higher level. This happens each time people speak about the tzaddikim who were *niftar*. The tzaddik goes up, and also the people who are speaking are elevated."

The Beis Avraham (Noach) teaches, "At the *yahrtzeit* meals of a tzaddik, also those who never know him and never studied any of his *divrei Torah*, nevertheless...when people gather and they speak about his ways, and they review his *divrei Torah*...they become connected with the tzaddik..."³¹

Yeshuos for the Public

We discussed the *yeshuos* and miracles that happen for the individuals who go to Reb Shimon's *tzion*, and daven there for salvations. In this section, we discuss the miracles and salvations that happen to the community, in Reb Shimon's merit.

The *Zohar* says that Reb Shimon bar Yochai once saw that a great darkness was coming down to the world. Reb Shimon said to his son, Reb Elazer, "Come with me, and we will see what Hakadosh Baruch Hu is planning to do to the world."

They found an angel, tall like a high mountain, and thirty flames of fire were

31. The Yismach Yisrael taught, "When you mention a tzaddik in this world, this brings goodness to all of Bnei Yisrael."

coming out of its mouth. Reb Shimon asked the angel what it was planning to do. The angel replied, "Hashem said that in every generation there must always be at least thirty tzaddikim similar to Avraham Avinu... But now, there aren't thirty tzaddikim like Avraham in the world, and therefore Hashem sent me to destroy the world."

Reb Shimon bar Yochai said to the *malach*, "Go back to Hakadosh Baruch Hu and tell him, 'The son of Yochai is in the world.'"

"The angel went to Hakadosh Baruch Hu and said, 'Master of the world, You certainly know what Reb Shimon bar Yochai told me to tell You.'

Hakadosh Baruch Hu said, "Go and destroy the entire world, and don't pay attention to what the son of Yochai says."

The angel returned. When Reb Shimon bar Yochai saw the angel again he said, "If you will not leave, I will decree that you will never return to your place in heaven. I will send you to a forsaken place [and you will be lost, forever]. Therefore, listen to what I tell you. Go to Hakadosh Baruch Hu and say, 'Even if there aren't thirty tzaddikim in the world, twenty tzaddikim are also sufficient. As Hashem told Avraham (18:31), *לא אשחית בעבור העשרים*, 'I will not destroy if there are twenty tzaddikim.' And even if there are only ten, that is also enough to protect the world from destruction, because Hashem said (18:32), *לא אשחית בעבור העשרה*, that He will not destroy the world if there are ten

tzaddikim. And even if there are fewer than ten tzaddikim in the world, if there are two tzaddikim in the world (namely Reb Elazar and myself) it is also sufficient. As it states, *על פי שני עדים יקום דבר*, 'with two witnesses, the existence,' and *דבר* is the world, as it states (*Tehillim* 33), *בדבר ה' שמים נעשו*, 'With Hashem's *davar* [speech] the heavens were made.' And if there aren't two tzaddikim in the world, one tzaddik is also enough, as it states, *צדיק יסוד עולם*, the tzaddik is the foundation of the world."

At that moment, a *bas kol* came forth from heaven and said, "Reb Shimon, fortunate is your lot. Hakadosh Baruch Hu puts His decrees in heaven, and you annul them from below. About you it is written (*Tehillim* 145), *רצון יראיו יעשה*, 'Hashem does the will of those who fear Him.'"

The *Zohar* (*Rus* 104) relates: Reb Shimon traveled and came to Lud. People took him around the city and showed him several dead people lying about, due to a plague. Reb Shimon said, "How can it be that I am in this city and there's a plague? I declare the plague should stop!"

A *bas kol* was immediately heard. It was saying to the bad angels, "Leave this place, because Reb Shimon bar Yochai is here. Hakadosh Baruch Hu decrees in heaven, and Reb Shimon annuls the decrees on earth below."

Reb Chanina was in Lud when this happened, and he repeated it to Reb

Meir. Reb Meir said, "Who can tell all the praises of Reb Shimon bar Yochai. He is similar to Moshe Rabbeinu, who 'stood between the dead and the living and stopped the plague.' Reb Shimon has an aspect that Moshe Rabbeinu didn't have, because Moshe Rabbeinu had to stand between the dead and the healthy to stop the plague, while Reb Shimon annulled the plague with his words."

Reb Shimon bar Yochai said, "I can exempt all people [living in my lifetime] from the judgment [that no one will be punished for their sins]. If I take along Reb Elazer, too, I can redeem people from the judgment from the beginning of Creation until today. And if we take [the merits of] Yosam ben Uziyahu³² [along with us] we can redeem the entire world from judgment from the day the world was created until the end of time" (*Succah* 45:).³³

The Chidushei HaRim zy'a said: Every

year, on Lag b'Omer, Reb Shimon once again cries out his renowned statement, "I can exempt the entire world from the judgment and from punishment!"³⁴

How does Reb Shimon bar Yochai do this? How can sins be forgotten and negated? To answer this question, Reb Akiva Eigar *zt'l* (in *Gilyon HaShas*) tells us to study *Avos d'Reb Nosson* (ch. 16).

In *Avos d'Reb Nosson* (16) Reb Shimon teaches that Hashem takes into account our *yetzer hara*, and thereby He forgives our sins. Because it states, **כִּי הוּא יָדַע יִצְרָנוּ**, "He knows our *yetzer hara*." Hashem knows our many challenges, that the *yetzer hara* is continuously coming to us, luring us to sin. Therefore, we aren't so guilty for the transgressions, for they were caused by the *yetzer hara's* influence.

To express this point, Reb Shimon bar Yochai tells the following *mashal*:

32. Rashi writes that Yosem ben Uziyahu "was a tzaddik, more humble than other kings, and excelled in *kibud av*. About him it states, **בֶּן יִכְבֵּד אָב**, 'a son honors his father' (*Malachi* 1) because all the days that his father had *tzaraas*, and Yosem judged the nation, as it states, **וְיִתְּם... שׁוֹפֵט** (*II Malachim* 15) he didn't place the crown on his head as long as his father was alive, and all his judgments that he passed, he attributed them in the name of his father."

33. After *sefiras ha'omer*, some say **לִמְנַצַּח בְּגִינֹת** (*Tehillim* 67). This chapter has forty-nine words (excluding the first *pasuk*). The kabbalah experts teach that one should concentrate on the word that corresponds to that day. For example, the thirty-third word of this chapter (excluding the first *pasuk*) is **אֵל-הַיָּם**, and therefore on the thirty-third day of the *omer*, one should concentrate on that word. **אֵל-הַיָּם** is an appropriate word for Lag b'Omer, since **אֵל-הַיָּם** is *roshei teivos* for **אֵל-הַיָּם** מִן הַדִּין "I can redeem the entire world from judgment."

34. The Binyan Yehoshua says that Reb Shimon redeems solely those who are called **יִשְׂרָאֵל**. Therefore, everyone should seek to be a proper Yid, and then he will be redeemed from sin on Lag b'Omer.

A king had an infertile plot of land, which never produced anything at all. Some people rented the field, promising to pay ten *kur* of wheat annually. That means that each year they had to supply the king with ten *kur* of the produce, and the rest they could keep for themselves. However, after plowing, fertilizing, sowing, and irrigating the field for an entire year all the field produced, was one *kur*.

The king rebuked them. The deal was for ten *kur*.

They explained, "Our master, our king; you know that this field has never earned you any profit. After working hard on the field, we enabled it to produce only one *kur* of wheat."

Reb Shimon bar Yochai concludes, "This is the same defense the Jewish nation says to Hakadosh Baruch Hu. They will say, 'Master of the world, you know that the *yetzer hara* lures us to sin. As it states (*Tehillim* 103), כִּי הוּא יִדַע יִצְרָנוּ, and therefore, we have an excuse for our poor output.

According to Reb Akiva Eigar, this is the claim that Reb Shimon bar Yochai uses to free us from judgment and punishment. He tells Hashem to take into consideration the hardships that people endure, plus the strong *yetzer hara*, so whatever they do achieve is remarkable.

With this claim, everyone is acquitted.

Rashi tells us of a different means Reb Shimon bar Yochai employs to free everyone from judgment. Rashi writes:

"[Reb Shimon bar Yochai says that everyone is freed from judgment] 'in my merit because I take their sins on myself. Thereby they are free from the judgment.'"

Every year on Lag b'Omer, Reb Shimon once again announces, "I can redeem the entire world from judgment." The only condition is to believe in Reb Shimon bar Yochai, as the Beis Aharon writes "Whoever believes in Reb Shimon bar Yochai gets *chizuk* from Reb Shimon bar Yochai."

Yes, Klal Yisrael can earn amazing salvations on this day. All we need to do is to celebrate and to pray. Primarily, we have to pray that we merit the *geulah sheleimah*, speedily in our days.

The Tzvi LaTzaddik of Bluzhev *zt'l* said "It is impossible to know when the *geulah sheleimah* will come, but I think it will be on Lag b'Omer, on 'Reb Shimon's day,' because it is a very pure day, a day for salvations."

Rebbe Mordechai Chernobyler *zt'l* wrote to Reb Avraham Dov of Ovritch, the Bas Ayin, when the Bas Ayin moved to Eretz Yisrael, "Pour your eyes out at Reb Shimon. If I could go to Eretz Yisrael, I would go to Reb Shimon's grave and I would pray there and storm the heavens until Moshiach comes."

Therefore, even as each person davens for his personal salvation, we mustn't forget to pray for Moshiach. May he come speedily in our days, amen.