

WHAT SET OFF THE MEKALLEL [BLASPHEMER]? / LAG B'OMER

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD #986 -- The Child of a Jewish Mother and a Non-Jewish Father -- Not As Simple As You Think. Good Shabbos!

What Set Off The Mekallel?

Parshas Emor contains the *mitzvah* of the *Lechem HaPanim*: "You shall take fine flour and bake it into twelve loaves; each loaf shall be two tenth *eph*s. You shall place them in two stacks, six to the stack, upon the pure Table, before Hashem. You shall put pure frankincense on the stack, and it shall be for a remembrance for the bread, a fire-offering for Hashem. Each and every Sabbath day he shall arrange it before Hashem continually, from the Children of Israel as an eternal covenant. And it shall belong to Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place; for it is most holy for him, from the fire-offerings of Hashem, an eternal decree." [Vayikra 24:5-9]

Each Shabbos, the *Kohanim* placed the twelve loaves on the Shulchan [Table]. The loaves remained there the entire week. The following Shabbos, the *Kohanim* removed the loaves from the Shulchan, placed new loaves on it and ate the loaves that they removed. In commemoration of this ritual, in some Chassidic circles, it is customary to have 12 challahs at the table when reciting the *HaMotzi* blessing on Shabbos.

Despite the fact that the Challahs lay on the table the entire week, the Talmud says that the bread remained fresh from Shabbos to Shabbos. Not only did it not become stale, the bread remained warm the entire week, as if it had just been baked. The Gemara [Chaggia 26b] writes that on the Festivals, the *Kohanim* lifted the Shulchan to show the fresh loaves to the people, saying "See how dear you are before the Almighty -- miraculously, the loaves are removed (a week later) in the same state that they were placed upon it."

The Mishna in Avos [5:5] enumerates ten miracles that occurred in the *Beis HaMikdash* on a daily basis. For some reason, the Mishna does not mention this miracle. The *Kohanim* also did not call attention to any of the other miracles in front of the Festival pilgrims. The *Kohanim* did not point out that there were never any flies in the *Beis HaMikdash*, that the smoke went straight up, or any of the

other wondrous events mentioned in the Mishna in Avos. Of all the miracles that took place in the *Beis HaMikdash*, only the fact that the twelve loaves stayed fresh the whole week was singled out to highlight the endearment of the Jewish people to the Almighty. Why? What is the symbolism of this?

Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin in his sefer *Pri Tzaddik* writes that *Chazal*, the *Kohanim*, and indeed the *Ribono shel Olam* were trying to send a message to *Klal Yisrael*. The twelve loaves corresponded to the twelve tribes. With this miracle, Hashem wants to say, "These challahs are so dear to me -- they stay warm from one Shabbos to the next -- because you are dear to me." Each loaf, representing another tribe, symbolizes the love and endearment the Almighty feels for each segment of the Jewish people.

Classic Rabbinic literature emphasizes that the 12 tribes each had individualistic ways of serving the *Ribono shel Olam*. Despite the fact that we all have the same Torah and the same 613 *mitzvos* and despite the fact that we all believe in the same Master of the Universe, every tribe approached their Divine Service with different nuances of worship. For this reason, it is brought down in *halacha* that a *Beis Kenesses* [House of Prayer] should have twelve windows. The Magen Avraham and other commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch note that this symbolizes the fact that every tribe has a unique path to Heaven. Through each window, so to speak, passes the unique prayers of a different tribe of Israel.

I do not know how it was in the days of the Patriarch Yaakov, in the Wilderness, or in *Eretz Yisrael* when every tribe lived in their own section of the country. However, if you look around *Klal Yisrael* today, you see that there is tremendous diversity within our nation. There are Chassidim, Misnagdim, Sephardim, and Ashkenazim. Within the Sephardim, there are Yemenites, Moroccans, Egyptians and Syrians -- and they certainly do not all daven the same way! They all have their own nuances of *nussach*. Among Ashkenazim, there are Litvaks, Hungarians, Germans and the whole gamut of *Klal Yisrael*. As long as everybody abides by the Shulchan Aruch -- whether they wear a Streimmel or do not wear a Streimmel, whether they wear a black hat or do not wear a black hat, all these nuances that we see today, are all the same to the Almighty.

This is the message of the twelve tribes and the twelve challahs: See how beloved you are before the Almighty. The *Ribono shel Olam* does not have a problem with our "differences" -- as long as we are all keeping the same Torah.

Rav Tzadok says that now we can understand the next parsha in the Torah. "The son of an Israelite woman **went out** -- and he was the son of an Egyptian man -- among the Children of Israel; they contended in the camp, the son of the Israelite woman and the Israelite man." [Vayikra 24:10]. The Medrash asks, "From where did he go out?" Chazal say something very interesting (Rashi cites this opinion of Rav Berechyah): "He went out from the immediately preceding passage."

The *mekallel* was "ticked off" by the passage describing the *Lechem HaPanim*. He said, "What kind of

business is this? Is it appropriate to serve one's King with week old bread? If this is the nature of this religion, I want to have nothing to do with it!" He then cursed the Name of G-d.

This is certainly strange behavior. Out of all the things in Torah that one might chose to take issue with, this *mekallel* focused on the *Lechem HaPanim*! What is this all about?

Rav Tzadok says that the *mekallel* was bothered by something other than the fact that the bread was a week old. Those twelve challahs represent the sanctity of every one of the twelve tribes. This individual had no tribe because he did not have a Jewish father. He was therefore lacking in complete *Kedushas Yisrael* [full Jewish sanctity]. This is a classic example of sour grapes. The people are told, "See how dear you are before the Almighty" and he feels left out. He has a problem with G-d's endearment with the members of the twelve tribes, because he does not possess that same sanctity. Therefore, his reaction is to curse the whole thing. This is what set off the *mekallel*.

We always read Parshas Emor between Pessach and Shavuot. We read it during the days of *Sefiras Ha'Omer*, almost always in close proximity to Lag B'Omer. Lag B'Omer represents a day in which we suspend the mourning practices of *Sefiras Ha'Omer*, during which we mourn the disciples of Rabbi Akiva, who died during this interval. Inasmuch as the disciples stopped dying on the 33rd day of the Omer, we cease mourning on that day.

Why did the students of Rabbi Akiva die? It is because they did not show proper respect towards one another. This is a very difficult teaching of Chazal to understand. How could Rabbi Akiva, who was the author of the teaching that "You shall love your fellow man like yourself" is the greatest principle in the Torah, have had thousands of students who did not show respect to one another? A person may speculate that the above referenced differences that always seem to manifest themselves may have caused these students to be a little intolerant of the practices of some of their fellow students.

Reading Parshas Emor, the incident of the *mekallel* and the story of the *Lechem HaPanim* during this period of the year sends an appropriate message during the days of *Sefira*. Even though someone else might do things differently, nevertheless, it does not matter to the *Ribono shel Olam* -- all 12 tribes are dear to Him -- it should not make a difference to us either.

What Are We Celebrating on Lag B'Omer?

The Ramoh writes in Shulchan Aruch regarding Lag B'Omer that we increase somewhat our joy on this day and we do not recite thereupon *Tachanun*. There are many reasons given for why Lag B'Omer is a cause for rejoicing. Rav Chaim Vital, a disciple of the Ari z"l, writes in the Shaar HaKavonos that Rav Shimon Bar Yochai said that one should make a *simcha* out of the day of Lag B'Omer. That is why thousands and thousands of people go to the gravesite of Rav. Shimon Bar

Yochai in Meron on this date. Ostensibly, it is supposed to be the day of his Yartzeit (even though the Chida says this is not the case).

The more conventionally accepted reason why we make a minor Yom Tov out of Lag B'Omer (cited by the Meiri in Tractate Yevamos) is that this is the day the students of Rabbi Akiva stopped dying. This is very strange. When do we ever make a Yom Tov out of the fact that people stopped dying? It is the equivalent, Rav Asher Weiss writes, of a person who has seven sons. They die one after the other until all seven are dead. Would anybody think of making a Yom Tov because now his sons stopped dying? Rabbi Akiva had 24,000 students who all died. They stopped dying on Lag B'Omer. Under these circumstances, is it appropriate to set up a day of rejoicing on the day of Lag B'Omer?

The Rema m'Pano (R. Menahem Azariah da Fano [1548-1620]) writes a novel idea: Really Rabbi Akiva himself was supposed to die. There was a decree from heaven -- for whatever reason -- that this great teacher of Israel would be taken from the nation at this time. The *Ribono shel Olam* did *Klal Yisrael* a tremendous favor and instead of taking Rabbi Akiva, took the equivalent thereof -- 24,000 of his students! In this way, Rabbi Akiva was preserved. This gives us a bit of an insight into why Lag B'Omer is a Yom Tov. We can now better understand the context of the death of Rabbi Akiva's students. They were ransom, so to speak, for their teacher.

The Chida says further: After Rabbi Akiva lost the 24,000 students, he moved south and took five students (Rav Meir, Rav Yehuda, Rav Yossi, Rav Shimon, and Rav Elazar ben Shamua). They became the established Torah leaders of the subsequent generation. If any of us, Heaven forbid, would suffer anywhere near the tragedy Rabbi Akiva suffered, we would no doubt throw up our hands in futility and bury ourselves in a hole somewhere and never again seek out the light of day. Rabbi Akiva had the fortitude to go ahead and restart his entire Torah teaching enterprise. Indeed, there is almost not a single *daf* (page) of Gemara in the entire Talmud that does not mention at least one of these five disciples of Rabbi Akiva.

Now, it all makes sense. The fact that the students died was an atonement for Rabbi Akiva. In lieu of those 24,000 students, Rabbi Akiva himself survived. Rabbi Akiva saved the Talmud. He saved *Klal Yisrael*. This speaks to the greatness of Rabbi Akiva, to have undergone such a terrible personal tragedy and yet to persevere.

Now we understand what Rav Shimon ben Yochai meant. Rav Shimon ben Yochai is the author of the statement "Heaven forbid that Torah should be forgotten from Israel for it states 'It shall not be forgotten from the mouth of his descendants.' [Devarim 31:21]" [Shabbos 138b]. Perhaps this is what Rav Chaim Vital means to say in the name of Rav Shimon bar Yochai. The reason Rav Shimon bar Yochai said to make a Yom Tov on Lag B'Omer was because on Lag B'Omer, when the students stopped dying and Rabbi Akiva was saved, Rabbi Akiva ensured the continuation of Talmud and learning amongst the Jewish people.

For this alone, it is worthy to make a celebration, a holiday called Lag B'Omer. This speaks to the

hidden ways of the Almighty. Why did the students need to die? Why was Rabbi Akiva himself deserving of death? We will never know these things. However, we can derive from this episode the greatness of Rabbi Akiva -- not only in his learning but in his personal perseverance and resilience.

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