

Seasons of Celebration

Shabbat Emor 5781

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Last night, at Mount Meron, in northern Israel, some 100,000 ultra-Orthodox Israelis gathered to celebrate the joyous if minor festival of Lag B’Omer, a holiday unknown to most American Reform Jews. Tragically, some forty-five celebrants were trampled to death in a stampede, and about 150 others were injured.ⁱ Aside from ignored pandemic restrictions, the gathering was not unusual. In fact, except for 2020, when the celebration was strictly prohibited, the crowds are even larger most years. This morning, the *New York Times* reported: “Critics have warned for years that the site’s patchy infrastructure cannot safely handle large crowds.”ⁱⁱ

Israeli authorities may be expected to conduct an inquiry into last night’s catastrophe. For us, though, a simpler question arises: What were these people celebrating? What is Lag B’Omer? The answer is long, but it may teach an important lesson: Jewish celebrations have significantly changed from the time of the Torah to our own day. In every generation, our people have redefined seasons of celebration, relevant and responsive to every age.

To describe Lag B’Omer, I need to start by explaining the context in which it occurs. By coincidence, the earliest kernels are found in this week’s Torah portion, which includes perhaps the earliest descriptions of ancient Israelite—and later, Jewish—holidays. Tomorrow morning, Danette will read what Leviticus has to say about Shabbat, and Rebecca will read our most ancient—and, surprisingly scant—description of Rosh Hashanah, albeit without mentioning that holiday’s name. A much longer section describes the period between Passover and Shavuot—again, without the name of either of those festivals, which apparently came later. Beginning on the second day of Passover,ⁱⁱⁱ ancient Israelites were commanded to “count off seven weeks[, ...counting] until the day after the seventh week—fifty days.”^{iv}

Our sages describe this period as the time of “counting the *omer*.” *Omer* refers to a sheaf of grain; and the idea, not clearly articulated in the Torah, is that ancient Israelites brought one such sheaf to the Temple each day during the spring harvest between Passover and Shavuot. Observant Jews, including some Reform Jews, recite a blessing each day, counting the days of the *omer*.

This practice was set aside by our Reform founders, who found it meaningless. After all, few modern Jews are farmers—and if we are, but live outside of Israel, the harvest may not come at the precise time it does in the Holy

Land. Moreover, there is no Temple to which to bring any sheaves of wheat or barley, and Reform Jews do not pray for the reestablishment of Temple rituals. Still, more than a few of our Reform contemporaries have renewed the meaning of counting the *omer*. The practice may build a deeper connection to our faith's ancient Israelite roots. Counting also serves as a reminder of the journey from Egypt to Sinai: God freed us from bondage with the goal of forging a new covenant with the revelation of the Torah.

The time of counting the *omer* has become a period of semi-mourning in traditional Judaism. The Talmud teaches that thousands of Rabbi Akiva's students were killed in a plague during this season one year.^v As a result, weddings and other festivities are prohibited throughout the period of counting the *omer*—that is, throughout the bulk of the spring, from Passover to Shavuot. As you may imagine, forbidding spring weddings would be most unpopular, and most Reform rabbis do not observe this prohibition. Instrumental music is also banned during these seven weeks, which impacts our community-wide observances of Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, since even mournful music is not allowed.

By tradition, though, the plague ceased for one day, on the thirty-third day of the counting, and therefore weddings and other celebrations—heck, even instrumental music—are permitted on that one day, known as Lag B'Omer, which this year began last night at sundown and ends with the onset of Shabbat this evening. Also, by tradition, Lag B'Omer marks the *yahrzeit* of an important second century rabbi, Shimon bar Yochai, who is credited with writing the Zohar, a foundational text of Jewish mysticism. The celebration that ended in catastrophe last night took place at his grave.

All Israeli Jews celebrate Lag B'Omer, though most do not go to Mount Meron or think about Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Instead, bonfires and archery are popular amusements on this festive day, as family and friends gather to celebrate. And, since the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate controls all Jewish marriage in Israel, weddings are permitted only on this one day out of fifty, so many Israelis attend at least one Lag B'Omer wedding.

The period of counting the *omer*, an entirely agricultural celebration, praising God for bounteous crops, in the Torah, was transformed by the ancient rabbis into a period of remembrance, mourning the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's students. In short, a celebration was turned into a period of grieving, interrupted by one day of festivity. That change is one example of the ways in which the holidays described in this week's Torah portion have transformed throughout the ages. Adaptation and change in Judaism did not begin with the advent of our Reform

Movement in the nineteenth century. Instead, ours is an ever-evolving religious tradition.

Take, for example, Passover—in this week’s portion called *Chag HaMatzot*, “the Eternal’s Feast of Unleavened Bread,” or the festival of matzah. We are told of a “passover offering to the Eternal,” and we are commanded, “You shall eat unleavened bread for seven days.”^{vi} However, no mention is made of the Exodus, which you and I know to be the primary purpose for celebrating Passover.

The author of Leviticus did not forget to mention the most important part of Passover. Much more likely, the festival of matzah existed long before that springtime harvest festival was associated with that great moment of liberation. Within the several centuries of the Torah’s authorship, Passover morphed from a purely agricultural festival into one that marked the central historical and moral event in Jewish history: We are a people who celebrate God’s gift of our own freedom by seeking liberation for others.

Now, in our own day, no more radically than our predecessors during Torah times, our celebration of Passover has evolved. Many of us have added Miriam’s Cup to our Seder tables, marking the contribution of that first female prophet and of all women, whose roles in Jewish history and present are too often downplayed or ignored. We have added an orange to our Seder plates, emphasizing that, like every section of the orange, every portion of our Jewish people is equally integral to our covenant—including Jews of color, converts to Judaism, gay, lesbian, transgender, and nonbinary Jews, alongside straight, cisgender people whose families have been Jewish for 100 generations.

In every age, our festivals have evolved to meet the needs of the day and to assure that traditional celebrations remain relevant. Let us continue to renew our seasons of celebration. Then, may we always celebrate with joy.

Amen.

ⁱ Isabel Kershner, Eric Negourney and Mike Ives, “Stampede at Israel Religious Celebration Kills at Least 45,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 2021.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ I have not delved into the rabbinic debate about what is meant by “the day after the sabbath” in Leviticus 23:15, but am describing the rabbinic decision about how this phrase is understood.

^{iv} Leviticus 23:15-16.

^v Yevamot 61b.

^{vi} Leviticus 23:4-8.