



The Beauty of Every Jew Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller

The *sifrei halacha* (books of Jewish law) state that *Lag Ba'Omer* should be celebrated with "*kzat simcha*" – some joy. The famous reason for this joy is that the students of Rebbe Akiva stopped dying on that day. But the reason they stopped dying was because there were no more students left to die! Is that a reason to celebrate?

Let's examine why they deserved death. The Sages say that they did not treat each other with *kavod* – respect – and therefore they were stricken with a disease that caused them to choke to death. The term *kavod* can also be translated to mean heavy. This heaviness implies recognizing another person as significant. It means making him feel that you want to listen to him, and that he has a worthwhile message that only he can convey.

What makes a person unique? Externally, we may share similar characteristics, but internally our souls are vastly different. Rabbi Akiva's students failed to recognize that every Jew has infinite value and has a distinctive approach – simply because he is different than all other people. They were punished with choking – a state where a person cannot take in air. Failing to give *kavod* to another person means ceasing to take in *ruach* – spirit. When a person does not honor another Jew, it shows that he has stopped appreciating that person's unique spirit.

Every Jew deserves *kavod*, but especially a *talmid chacham* – Torah sage – because

his soul is entwined with Torah. Really knowing someone means knowing his thoughts. Learning Torah means knowing Hashem's thoughts and bonding your mind to Hashem's mind. A *talmid chacham* learns Hashem's Torah and grows so close to Him, that Hashem's divinity flows through their *middot*. So when one gives *kavod* to a *talmid chacham* one in essence gives *kavod* to that part of Hashem that lives inside every great Jew.

Why do we celebrate on *Lag Ba'Omer*? We rejoice that Rabbi Akiva did not succumb to despair after his monumental loss. We marvel at his exceptional fortitude in gathering five new students and transmitting to them the Oral Tradition we have today. Rabbi Akiva taught, "*V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho, zeh klal gadol ba'Torah* – Love your friend as yourself, this is a prime principle of the Torah." Torah takes you to a place where you can find Hashem. The first place where you can find Him is within the heart of every Jew.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai was one of the five students of Rabbi Akiva. He revealed the secrets of the Torah – how to find the divine spark inside oneself and in other people. Rabbi Shimon said to come to his tomb on the anniversary of his death, *Lag Ba'Omer*, and to rejoice. The Maharal quotes the Zohar, which says it is easier to build a connection with a *tzaddik* after his death, because then he is no longer constrained by physicality. Some aspect of the *tzaddik's* spirit remains at his resting

place and it wishes to give of itself. However, the degree to which you identify with the *tzaddik* is the degree to which the *tzaddik* will identify with you. On *Lag Ba'Omer* when we visit Rabbi Shimon's tomb we are in essence saying, "Rabbi Shimon, you brought *penimiyus* (inner reality) into the world, we want to see *penimiyus* and goodness in ourselves and in other people. In the merit of this give us what we need to accomplish our mission in life."

If you don't merit to be at the actual tomb on *Lag Ba'Omer*, let this not discourage you. Put joy in your heart and find the place within you that responds to this profound message. Then you can experience true *simcha* on *Lag Ba'Omer*.