

Counting the Omer and Emerging from the Cave

Today is Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of the counting of the Omer. We are in the midst of the days between Pesach and the holiday of Shavuot, and it is during these days we count the Omer, the 49 days from the second evening of Passover to Shavuot. This a time of inner growth, from servitude to our inner Pharaoh, to freedom and revealing the best in ourselves, our Divine inner light.

While the Omer connects two joyous holidays, Passover, and Shavuot, it is also a period of semi-mourning. According to the Talmud, many years ago during the Omer, God caused a plague that killed thousands of the students of the great Rabbi Akiva because his students were treating each other with great disrespect. The Talmud teaches us that on the 33rd day of the Omer, God brought the plague to an end. And so Lag B'Omer has become a day of celebration.

An additional reason that we celebrate Lag B'Omer is related to a disciple of Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai who died on Lag B'Omer. The Talmud tells us that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai fled from the Roman rulers in Jerusalem, and spent years hiding in a cave, sustained only by a well of water and a carob tree. In the cave he studied the deep secrets of the Mystical tradition (Kabbala) and thus he is held in great regard.

I can relate to this being in a cave for a long period of time. We have each had our own journey through this past year. I don't think I need to describe our pain, grief, loss, and at the very least, uncertainty that we have experienced. But we should not be alone in this experience.

Our Talmud teaches us, "A person to whom a calamity has occurred should make it known to the public, so that many people may entreat God's mercy for them."¹

There are certain prayers that are said only when a minyan, a community of ten, is present. This includes the Kaddish. We are not to be alone when we say Kaddish. This is why our tradition insists that during shiva, people visit the mourners so that they are not alone.

¹ BT *Hullin* 78a

And indeed with community, our Talmud teaches, “When the community is in trouble, a person should *not* say, “I will go to my house and I will eat and drink and be at peace with myself.””²

Each of us is integral and essential to creating and maintaining community. So much so, that in our Haggadah, the wicked child is described as the one who excludes themselves from community.³

And so, it is not only the kaddish that requires a minyan to recite it. The kaddish, Barechu, and other prayers require a minyan because they are call and response. It takes a community to respond.

A prayer that we often skim over quickly or most often ignore, is right in our Mishkan Tefillah prayerbook, just below the MiSheberach prayer. It is the Gomeil, and this prayer requires a minyan.

Why? Because this is a prayer that one recites when one has survived a life-challenging situation. This includes an illness, surgery, a hazardous trip, including traveling by boat or plane.

The prayer begins as the individual recites *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech haolam, sheg'malanu kol tov*. Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has bestowed every goodness upon us.

And the congregation responds:

Amen. Mi sheg'malchem kol tov, Hu yigmolchem kol tov. Selah.

Amen. May the One who has bestowed goodness upon us continue to bestow every goodness upon us forever.

Why does this require a minyan?

One answer is that it is a call and response prayer. But I think it's more that our Jewish wisdom teaches us that we should not be alone after surviving a life-challenging situation. We think it's all over by then, but what we have lived through is something that we often keep inside, thinking that we do not want to burden others with what we have gone through.

² BT *Ta'anit* 11a

³ *Mekhilta*, on Exodus 13:8

But when we say this prayer aloud, we realize we are not alone. We are encouraged to reach out for listening, for compassion, for community. We all live through pain, suffering, uncertainty, and anxiety. And here our community responds in prayer with us.

None of us comes through life unscathed, and in the face of pain, some of us respond with anger, and others with tears. But while we live, we have choice. We can choose to open our hearts and mind to love, help, compassion and listening. We can love and be loved, be compassionate and receive compassion, listen, and be listened to, and share our pains and our joys. Real living takes risk and courage. Real living takes place in a community of faith.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l wrote, “Life can be full of risk and yet still be a blessing. Faith doesn’t mean living with certainty. Faith is the courage to live with uncertainty, knowing that God is with us on that tough but necessary journey to a world that honors life and treasures peace.”⁴

Let us recite the Gomeil together, as individuals, and as community.

And let us say, Amen.
Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Lisa Bock

⁴ Sacks, Jonathan, *From Optimism to Hope*, pg 66.