



Lag B'Omer - 003 Inner Bonfire

Growth In Soul, Time, and Place

Generally speaking, there are three ways how one can receive spiritual growth: through his soul, through certain times, or through certain places.^[1]

- 1) Soul** - If a person grows spiritually through the soul, it means that he has succeeded in inspiring himself to receive new levels of spiritual growth. This can happen either through directly inspiring his own soul, or if he hears others who inspire him.
- 2) Time** - When a person receives spiritual growth because of certain times, it is because there are special spiritual gifts contained in those times that allow for growth; examples of this are Shabbos and Yom Tov. Time-based growth can affect the person as well and help him grow spiritually, even if the person hasn't yet managed to elevate his soul to the point that he can attain this growth independently.
- 3) Place** - A person can also receive a spiritual boost by being exposed to a certain place - for example, by going to a holy place, such as Eretz Yisrael, or a holy burial site of a *tzaddik*.^[2]

These are the three general ways of how a person can receive spiritual growth [later it will be mentioned that one can also receive growth from another person, such as being inspired by another person, or by a *tzaddik*, or from hearing an inspirational person].

The Advantage of Growth In Soul Vs. Growth Through Time and Place

However, there is a fundamental difference between receiving growth from one's soul [which is more direct], with receiving growth from time or a place [which are external factors]: When a person attains growth from his own soul, he has reached the new levels on his own, and this results in a more permanent change for the soul.

Of course, even when a person attains growth via his soul, he can still have ups and downs from his level, but it will only be a temporary fall, for he has ultimately achieved a new level for his soul via his inner exertion to get there. It will have become easier for him to get back to that newly attained level, because he still has within him the root to get there, now that he has acquired it within himself.

In contrast, any spiritual growth attained from a certain time or place is external only, and it will be dependent on the holiness of the time or place. It is also temporary and therefore it does not retain the same permanence as soul-based growth.

Though people may feel temporarily elated after visiting certain holy places, they often soon resume their routine life [and sink back to their previous spiritual level]. When a time of growth is over - for example, when Shabbos or Yom Tov ends - or when a person leaves a certain holy place, the actual spiritual effects of the holiness fade. He is only left with a certain impression of the previous growth, a shadow or reminder of what he once reached and what he could yet achieve. We can see it clearly.

People go to certain holy places and feel spiritual elation there, but after that, they go back to their routine life, and all of the inspiration is forgotten.

When spiritual growth comes from a certain time or place, it is similar to when a person becomes spiritually uplifted by another person. Since the other person's inspiration is external, the effect is more likely to be temporary unless a person works hard to integrate it into his own soul. When the other person leaves, the spiritual effect often dissipates.

Tools To Maintain Inspiration

Thus, a person's *avodah* (inner task) is two-fold. He can reach higher levels of internal spiritual growth by working hard on himself and using tools that can assist with permanent change. He can also realize that any lasting benefits of growth dependent on external holiness (time, place or person) may be fleeting and merely provide a temporary impression unless he works hard to integrate it through corresponding internal spiritual work.

There are pros and cons to being inspired by external factors such as holy people, times or places. The pros are that a person is able to receive a much higher spiritual boost than his current level. One can still receive those great levels, relatively quickly, without working hard to elevate one's soul. On the other hand, the disadvantage of external spiritual elevation is that a person will struggle to maintain the high level after the holy time, place or person has disappeared. A person may experience frustration when recalling his temporary boost and at his failing to maintain it afterwards.

This is a very subtle but important point, which, when one is aware of it, it can cause misconception. A person may experience great elation on a certain Shabbos and feel that he has ascended spiritually. However, what happens on Sunday? He remembers how he felt on Shabbos, and then he tries to relive the spiritual high. However, since his spiritual growth in this instance was sourced purely from a holy day [and it wasn't matched with corresponding internal growth], the effects will dissipate with time; trying to recreate Shabbos on Sunday when we have not grown internally is living in a fantasy world.

Certainly it is possible for us to feel the spirituality of Shabbos even on Sunday, but only if one has worked on himself to a point where he is able to reach the levels independently, and by acquiring the inner tools that would enable him to maintain the level of Shabbos for afterwards. Without either of these two factors, then after Shabbos a person is only left with a faint "imprint" of Shabbos. This 'imprint'^[3] can certainly instill in him a burning desire to return to those moments of elation, but one will still need to implement these two points in order for the spiritual growth to stay with him.

When a person is aware that all the levels he has reached is only through his mental capacities (*mochin*\mind) – meaning, he is aware that these are all temporary moments of elation, but that they haven't yet been etched into his soul - then he views these levels as something delightful which Hashem has given to him, and he also views them as an 'indicator' that shows he has grown spiritually. But if a person overdoes the "indicator" and is always thinking about these levels, when really hasn't yet acquired them – he is just imagining things. Usually, this problem exists by people who became very inspired from reading a *sefer* or when they hear a Torah tape.

When it comes to growth we receive from times or places, the danger [of self-delusion] is greater. This is because at the time that the person felt the spiritual growth – such as Shabbos – there was a true feeling, and it is hard for a person to free himself from the intensity of the feelings he remembers. Yesterday, the feeling was there, but today, the feeling is gone.

We can give a simple example that helps us understand this idea very well. On Sukkos, a person

shakes his *lulav* and *esrog*. If someone comes to shul on Chanukah with his *lulav* and *esrog*, he would be a laughingstock. Everything has its time and place. Yet, those who have yet to internalize and maintain the spiritual growth of the holy days throughout the rest of the year are dependent on the spiritual boost of the external, physical *mitzvos*. Their spiritual level is reliant on these physical times, places and actions so they yearn to connect this way all year or at inappropriate times.

Heart Matters Are Not Understood Every Day

To what will this apply to? In the coming lines, we will discuss a point that is really above our level. We must realize that the coming concepts are really above our level, for we have not acquired them yet.

On *Lag Ba'omer*, the spiritual gifts contained in this day are that the "gates of wisdom are opened". This essentially means that that one's soul on this day can receive levels which he normally can't absorb. But we must understand that the levels we can attain on this day are temporary and they only last for the day of *Lag Ba'omer*.

At first glance, this may sound strange. One might say, "If I have already comprehended it, how can it be that I will lose my comprehension of it?! If you told me yesterday that two plus one is three, then why would I forget about this the next day?!"

But that is the mistake. The soul's wisdom does not refer to intellectual matters; rather, it refers to words that come alive in one's inner world of the soul. Intellect and understanding are not the same thing. Intellect is referred to as *seichel*, while understanding, *havanah*, is *avanta d'liba* ("understanding of the heart"). There are many smart people in the world, but knowing something with your brain is not the same thing as absorbing something in your heart; there is a very big difference between the mind's intellectual knowledge and the heart's knowledge, understanding.

Thus, if a person is aware in advance that whatever he reaches on *Lag Ba'omer* will not last when it ends, then he will know how to receive the spirituality of this day properly. He will be less likely to lose heart when the levels he has attained on this day inevitably disappear, and less likely to pressure that it was supposed to remain permanently. Instead, one will simply have an inner push to return to these levels and internalize them [by doing the soul work that is involved].

This is possibly the meaning of the statement in Chazal that "Every day, the words of Torah should be to you like new." What does this mean? A lot of ink has been spent on explaining this. But it appears to mean that even if you understood something yesterday, that doesn't necessarily mean that you will understand it tomorrow. A matter may have entered your intellect, but has not yet been cemented in your heart. Sometimes the next day brings additional understanding deeper than the previous day's level, if one has managed to purify oneself in the interim.

We are referring to deep, subtle matters which must be *lived*, in order to be understood and internalized. We are often familiar with only an intellectual understanding of a matter, which is usually permanently retained. In contrast, heart understanding is unique in that it is not anchored in the heart in the same way as intellectual knowledge is anchored in the brain. Thus, with heart understanding, there is a risk that its gain will merely be temporary and ephemeral (unless we do constant, inner *avodah* to maintain it).

This distinction is crucial to understanding the wisdom of the Creator. Our intellect is cold, simple, and rational. In contrast, heart matters, such as searching for Godliness, are a "burning fire". Only the heart can understand Godly matters. And the heart is accessed through *avanta d'liba*, an inner understanding, which can only be accessed during certain times.

The Mystery of Remembering Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai

We will speak a little about what is relevant for *Lag Ba'Omer*, but as we said before, we should remember that it's only relevant for *Lag Ba'Omer*; after this day passes, we are left with nothing but a 'mark' from it. Therefore, a person should not attempt to grow further from that 'mark' after *Lag Ba'Omer* ends, and if he does, he should be warned in the same way that the people were warned not to ascend Har Sinai when Moshe was receiving the Torah.

It is somewhat of a mystery. Throughout all the generations, there were many *Gedolim* and *tzaddikim* who are not remembered so much on their *yahrtzeit*^[4]. People remember the *yahrtzeit* of Dovid HaMelech^[5], but there is almost no one who knows what day of the calendar the *yahrtzeit* of our own *Avos* (forefathers) is. There are all kinds of traditions that state which days of the year they died on, but for some reason, there is no clarity in this matter. Only one *tzaddik*, who came much more than the *Avos* - the Sage, Rav Shimon Bar Yochai - is so remembered. Everyone goes to his grave on this day (*Lag Ba'Omer*). Why does he get so much attention, more than all the other *tzaddikim*?

We should think about this. If we are rejoicing in something and we don't know what to rejoice about, then such rejoicing is superficial; our happiness has to come from our soul, or else it is just by rote and will not amount to anything. So we must know what we are rejoicing about on *Lag Ba'Omer*.

The Special Time of Lag Ba'Omer

It is written in Koheles (3:1), "*For every time.*" Chazal comment on this that there was a time for Adam to enter Gan Eden, and there was a time for him to leave Gan Eden; there was a time for Noach to enter the Ark, and there was a time for him to leave the Ark. There was a time for Avraham to be circumcised, and there was a time for him to circumcise his children."

We can learn from this *Midrash* that long before Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai passed away on *Lag Ba'omer*, this day was already sanctified. Thus, our outlook on this day doesn't have to begin with Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai definitely brought the meaning of this special time into the dimension of the soul as well, because long before he lived, this day was already precious. It was a day that inherently contained inherent spiritual gifts.

Let us now reflect: what is the inner meaning of this day?

Lag Ba'Omer and Amalek

Lag Ba'omer falls out on the 18th of the month of Iyar. The *gematria* (numerical value in *Lashon HaKodesh*^[6]) of the word "*Iyar*",^[7] together with the number 18^[8], is equal to the word "*Amalek*".^[9] In other words, there is a connection between Amalek and this day. Soon, we will explain the connection.

Sadness - Not Connected To The Root

Whenever a person is sad, this really comes from the fact that he isn't connected to a root. He is like a branch disconnected from its root. The root has a 'root' as well to it: the lack of connection between the person and Hashem. By contrast, happiness is when there is connection to our Source.

It is written, "*With hardship shall you bear children.*" The pain of child labor is called "*etzev*", which can also mean "sadness". Birth is a separation of the baby from its mother; when the baby was in its mother, it is considered part of the mother. Now, it has disconnected from its mother - this is the "*etzev*"\sadness of giving birth.

Childbirth, and the *etzev* which follows it, reflects the concept that a person has to be integrated with his Source. The purpose of man is to integrate himself with his root, and keep connecting himself to his roots until he arrives at the root of all roots, the Creator.

On Yom Tov we have a *mitzvah* to be happy. Yom Tov is “*moed*”, which comes from the word “*vaad*” – a meeting. When there is a meeting, there is connection, and thus there is happiness.

The Meaning Behind the Bonfires

There is a *minhag*^[10] on *Lag B’Omer* to light bonfires. We don’t just light small fires like we light for Shabbos and Yom Tov. We light big fires – bonfires, which are called “*lehavah*” in Hebrew.

The inner meaning of this is to show us that we need to have a big “fire”, a *lehavah*, in our hearts, for Hashem. If a person has this inner fire, he is inwardly connected to *Lag Ba’Omer*. If a person is just lighting physical bonfires, but his soul is cold inside, he is not truly celebrating *Lag Ba’Omer*.

It is written, “*The house of Yaakov will be a fire, and the house of Yosef will be a big flame.*” This is referring to the inner layer of a Jew’s soul, the burning desire for Hashem. At first there is a small fire, and then it becomes a huge flame, a *lehavah*. When a person increases his inner fire for Hashem until it is a big flame, then he can integrate with Hashem.

In other words, bonfires on this day are not just superficial acts of lighting big fires. It is meant to remind us of our innermost point of the soul, which is like a great, fiery desire to be connected with Hashem.

Countering The ‘Separation’ Caused By Amalek: Connecting To Hashem

It is well-known that the evil force of “Amalek” causes disparity in Creation. Chazal say that Amalek attacked us in *Refidim*, from the words “*rafu y’deihem b’Torah*”, implying that “our hands were weak in Torah”. When a person’s hands go weak, he loses connection to what he is holding. Our hands were weak then in “holding” the Torah - there was a weakening in our connection to Torah; and that enabled Amalek to attack us.

Torah is called “*words of fire*”^[11] - the Torah is a ‘fire’, but we on our own must turn it into a big flame, a “*lehavah*”. This is referring to the concept of becoming totally integrated with Hashem.^[12]

The power that is inherent in the day of *Lag Ba’Omer* is essentially the power to become connected to the Creator - the opposite of Amalek’s agenda, who wants to cause us to be separate from the Creator. This is also the inner meaning of what it means to “erase Amalek” from our midst, and thereby remove its evil. The “great flame” that can be reached on this day - integrating one’s self with Hashem - is what can prevent Amalek from coming to weaken us.

Amalek weakened our “hands” in Torah. What does this mean? When our hands become weak, we lose connection to what we are holding; thus there was a weakening in our connection to Torah. But why is this part of the body chosen to symbolize our connection to Torah? Don’t we learn Torah with our mouths and minds, not our hands?

The answer to this is that there are two points contained here. On one level, a person can only connect to something with his “hands” - in other words, when he is holding onto it. You use your hands to hold onto something, such as a person who is drowning and catches a piece of wood to hold onto. Thus the “weakened hands” in Torah meant a lack of connection to Torah.

On another level, the Zohar states that Torah without fiery feelings of love and awe of Hashem does

not ascend to Heaven. In other words, although the generation was learning Torah, they were lacking a certain connection to it; they weren't connecting themselves to Hashem through it. Amalek "weakening our hands" in Torah meant that the force of Amalek can disconnect a person from the root of his Torah learning: Hashem.

The Power Contained In Lag Ba'Omer: Overcoming Doubt

The power contained in this day [*Lag Ba'Omer*] is essentially the ability for a person to remove himself from all the obstacles that hold him back from closeness to the Creator.

The main obstacle which holds us back from being close to Hashem is the force of Amalek, as is well-known. Amalek's power thrives on *safek* (doubt). When a person has doubts about something, he cannot connect to it, as a result.

To illustrate, consider a person who comes to a crossroads and is faced with choice of following one of two paths. If this person chooses one path but lacks certainty and thinks in his heart the whole time: "I'm not sure about what I'm doing...", he cannot be properly connected to the path he is taking. Even if he made the right choice, his doubt and uncertainty block him from connecting to it. In contrast, when a person is confident in himself and his purpose and role and choice, he is able to connect to what he does.

Doubts prevent a person from truly connecting to Hashem in an inner way. Even if a person is taking the right path towards Hashem, if he is doubtful about what he's doing, then that means he is not really connected to the path he is taking, which means he is not really connected with Hashem.

How can a person leave doubt and enter into the inner world of the spiritual? A person needs to become *sure* about the truth that he knows about! This will eradicate his doubts. How can a person become absolutely sure about the inner truths? The truth is actually very clear. When a person understands it, it is then that he leaves all the doubts.

Hashem Is Here, There, and Everywhere

Compare this to a person who wants to get from Jerusalem to Bnei Brak. He doesn't know if he should go right or left or straight ahead. Whichever way he takes, he is doubtful, because he has no idea if he will end up in Bnei Brak. But once a person is in Bnei Brak, he has no doubts about where to go - because he is there. This is because if you're *there*, you don't have doubts about where you are.

A person must realize that in whatever "*derech*" (path) he takes, all of the many different paths essentially bring him to this one and only point: Hashem! There is no such thing as a valid "path" that doesn't bring you to Hashem. It doesn't matter if a person is happy, sad, or suffering; all of these are situations that, in the end, can bring you closer to Hashem.

So what are people not sure about? A person knows that Hashem is at the end of the path, but he's not sure if he's taking the right path. He may be thinking, "Who says it's the right path for me...?"

The deep perspective is for a person to realize that Hashem is found everywhere, in every situation, and therefore, he has nothing to be doubtful about. He doesn't doubt the 'path' he is taking which will lead him to the truth, because he is secure in the knowledge that all paths lead to the Creator, for the goal is always to reach closeness with the Creator.

Above The Perspective of 'Pesach Sheini'

Lag B'Omer often falls out within the seven days of the time period known as "*Pesach Sheini*"

(observed on the 14th of Iyar). When we had the *Beis Mikdash* and we were able to bring *korbonos*, there was a *mitzvah* of *Pesach Sheini*, for those who were ritually impure on Pesach and couldn't bring the *korbon pesach* on the 14th of Nissan; or for those who didn't make it to Jerusalem on time for Yom Tov. Those who didn't make it were held back due to the 'place' they were in, whereas those who were impure were held back due to the situation of their soul - they were distant from Hashem, thus couldn't come.

But there is an inner point in which one can know and feel in his soul that Hashem resides inside him, always, even when he is in a state of impurity. Such a person had no need for *Pesach Sheini*. In the physical world, a person needed *Pesach Sheini* if he was ritually impure, but in the inner world of the soul, once a person comes to the recognition of feeling Hashem in his soul, he doesn't need "*Pesach Sheini*" there. This, the fact that *Lag B'Omer* always falls out within the "seven days of *Pesach Sheini*" and it reveals a certain heavenly light: that Hashem is found even amidst our state of impurity (just like there are seven days of the first Pesach, so is there a concept that there are seven days of the second Pesach).

"There Is No Place That Is Empty From Him"

When a person is aware that Hashem is found even in the lowest place where he has fallen to, he doesn't need any "hands" to lift himself up.

If a person thinks simply that "Hashem is Heaven, but I live on this earth", and that he must try to somehow 'ascend' to Heaven - then he will need his "hands" to lift himself upwards [and he won't be able to get there]. But when a person knows clearly that Hashem is found in any place - for "There is no place empty from Him" - then even when he has fallen low, he can still arrive at a point of clarity in which he sees how Hashem is there at any place, time or situation. There is no amount of spiritual impurity that will be able to get him to have *any doubts* about this.

We rectify the evil of Amalek in Creation, essentially, by realizing how Hashem is with us *even* when we are in a lowly situation. Hashem is found with us even as we are amongst the lowest levels of impurity - even Amalek.

Thus, practically speaking, in order to gain from this day of *Lag B'Omer*, we need to search for the Creator - and because He is everywhere, we can find Him at any moment, in any place, and in any time.

May we merit to arrive at the innermost point - the "*lehavah*", the "great flame" that is within us, represented by the bonfires we light, which can remind us of a burning desire for Hashem; and may we merit the Redemption, speedily.[\[13\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) This is based on the concept of "Olam, Shanah, Nefesh" (World, Time, and Soul) - everything exists in three dimensions: place, time, and soul [Sefer Yetzilah, III]

[\[2\]](#) Note from the sefer: (the sefarim hakedoshim mentioned that a tzaddik's grave is as holy as if it were in Eretz Yisrael, even if it is outside Eretz Yisrael),

[3] In Hebrew, “roishem”

[4] memorial day

[5] Shavuos

[6] The Holy Tongue

[7] 221

[8] $221+18 = 239$

[9] The word “Amalek” is equal to 240. (As is well-known, in the system of Gematria, the word itself counts as one)

[10] custom

[11] Yirmiyahu 23:29

[12] “hiskalelus” - integrating

[13] Editor’s Note: As a supplement to this *derashah*, refer to ***Fixing Your Fire_006_Conceit_Handling Inspiration***

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