



INNER BONFIRE

GROWTH IN SOUL, TIME, AND PLACE

Generally speaking, there are three ways to grow spiritually: through one's soul, through certain time periods, or through certain physical locations.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 based on certain time periods, it is because there are special spiritual gifts contained in those times that allow for growth such as Shabbos and Yom Tov. Time-based growth can affect a person 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.

THE ADVANTAGE OF GROWTH IN SOUL

However, there is a fundamental difference between receiving growth from one's soul [which is more direct], and with receiving growth from time or a holy place [which are external factors]

When a person attains growth from his own soul, he has reached the new level on his own, resulting in a more permanent change.

Of course, even when a person attains growth via his soul, he can still have ups and downs, but it will only be a temporary fall, for he has ultimately achieved a new level,

via his inner exertion to get there. It will become easier for him to get back to that newly attained level, because he still has [embedded] within him the root to get there, since he acquired it within himself.

In contrast, any spiritual growth based on a certain time or holy 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 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 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 holy places and feel spiritually elevated but then they return 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 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 advantages

¹ Everything exists in three dimensions: place, time, and soul as explained in Sefer Yetzirah, III. This is based on the concept of "Olam, Shanah, Nefesh"

² The sefarim hakedoshim mention that a tzaddik's grave is as holy as if it were in Eretz Yisrael, even if it is outside Eretz Yisrael".

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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 or place or person has disappeared. One may become frustrated when recalling his temporary boost and at his failing to maintain it afterwards.

This is a very subtle but important point. Misconception could result if one is unaware of it. 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 like 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. Without either of these two factors, one is only left with a faint "imprint" of Shabbos after Shabbos. This 'imprint' 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 were only through his mental capacities, then he views these levels as something delightful which Hashem has given to him. Why? He is aware that his mental capacities were all temporary moments of elation, but that they were not yet etched into his soul. He also views them as an 'indicator' that shows he has grown spiritually. But if a person is always thinking about these levels, but really hasn't yet acquired them, then he is just imagining things. Usually, this problem occurs when people become very inspired from reading a *sefer* or hearing a Torah lecture.

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 one 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 that they yearn to connect this way all year or at inappropriate times.

HEART MATTERS ARE NOT UNDERSTOOD EVERY DAY

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

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 the inner world of the soul. Intellect and understanding are not the same thing. Intellect is referred to as *seichel*, while understanding, *havanah*, is known as "*avanta d'liba* (*"understanding of the heart"*).³ 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 of understanding.

Thus, if a person is aware in advance that whatever he reaches on *Lag BaOmer* will not last when *Lag BaOmer* 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 himself 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.*"⁴

3 Rashi, *Chagigah* 13b

4 Sifrei, Va'eschanan 8

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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 solidified 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 like a "burning fire." Only the heart can understand Godly matters, not the intellect. And the heart is accessed through *avanta d'liba*, an inner understanding, which can only be accessed during certain times such as *Lag BaOmer*.

THE MYSTERY OF REMEMBERING REBBI SHIMON BAR YOCHAI

We will speak a little about what is relevant for *Lag BaOmer*, but as we said before, we should remember that it's only relevant for *Lag BaOmer*. After this day passes, we are left with nothing but an 'impression.' Therefore, a person should not attempt to grow further from this 'impression' after *Lag BaOmer* ends. 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*. People remember the *yahrtzeit* of Dovid *HaMelech* [on Shavuot], but there is almost no one who knows what day of the year the *yahrtzeit* of our own *Avos* are. 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 later than the *Avos* – the Sage, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai – is remembered. Everyone goes to his grave on this day of *Lag BaOmer*. 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 BaOmer*.

THE SPECIAL TIME OF LAG BAOMER

It is written in the *Midrash* "*For every time.*"⁵ *Chazal* explain 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 BaOmer*, this day was already sanctified. Thus, our outlook on this day doesn't have to begin with Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who 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 spiritual gifts. What is the inner meaning of this day?

LAG BAOMER AND AMALEK

Lag BaOmer is on the 18th day of the month of Iyar. The *gematria* of the word "*Iyar*," together with the number 18, is equal to the word "*Amalek*."⁶ In other words, there is a connection between Amalek and this day.

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.*"⁷ 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

5 Koheles 3:1

6 Numerical value of Iyar is 221+18 = 239. The word "Amalek" is equal to 240. (As is well-known, in the system of Gematria, the word itself counts as one. Thus, Amalek/240 is equal to Iyar/239, and therefore there is a parallel between these two concepts).

7 Beraishis 3:16

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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* on *Lag BaOmer* 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 BaOmer*. If a person is just lighting physical bonfires, but his soul is cold inside, he is not truly celebrating *Lag BaOmer*.

It is written, “*The house of Yaakov will be a fire, and the house of Yosef will be a big flame.*”⁸ 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. They are 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. Amalek attacked us in “*Refidim*,” and *Chazal* explain that “*Refidim*” is from the words “*rafu y’deihem b’Torah*” “their hands were weak in Torah,” implying a lack of connection to the Torah. When a person’s hands become 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.

Of Torah it is written, “*Are My words not like fire, so says*

Hashem?”⁹ – the Torah is like a ‘fire’, and it gives the person the power to enlarge its fire. Then, on our own, we must turn it into a big flame – a “*lehavah*.” This is referring to the concept of becoming totally integrated with Hashem.¹⁰

The power that is inherent in the day of *Lag BaOmer* 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. When our hands became weak, we lost our connection to what we were 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.

Another point to be emphasized is, as the *Zohar* states, that if one learns Torah without feelings of love and awe of Hashem, such Torah learning does not ascend to Heaven. In other words, a person can be learning Torah, but he hasn’t yet gotten to the “fire” of Torah; his “hands are weakened in Torah” – he is missing the “hands” that can raise him higher.

When Amalek attacked, the generation had certainly been learning Torah, but they were lacking a certain connection to it on their level. They weren’t riding the “fire” of the Torah that ascends to the root; they weren’t using the power of the Torah which elevates man. Man is really a part of the Torah’s essence, and the Torah is what connects a person to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.

The power contained in the day of *Lag BaOmer* is essentially the ability for a person to remove himself from all the obstacles that hold him back from closeness to the Creator.

FROM BILVAVI ON THE HOLY DAYS

⁹ Yirmiyahu 23:29

¹⁰ “*hiskalelus*” – integrating with Hashem; see the end of “*Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh*” vol. I.

⁸ *Ovadyah* 1: 18-21