

## SEASONS OF THE MOON

The Month of Iyar

Iyar / 5758 April 27, 1998 - May 25, 1998

The formation of the Jewish People started on the eve of the Exodus in the first month, *Nissan*, and culminated with the giving of the Torah at Sinai in the third month of *Sivan*.

This nation-building process is symbolized in the progression of the first three astrological symbols: *Aries*, the lamb, symbolizes the unity of the group. In a flock the lamb feels itself identical to its neighbor. Also, just as sheep follow a shepherd, the Jewish People accepted the leadership of Moses.

Our month, the month of *Iyar*, is symbolized by the *Shor*, the bull, which desires to dwell in isolation. *Iyar* is therefore a time of intro-

### THIS MONTH'S SIGN Shor / Bull

spection and self-development, a time of preparation for receiving the Torah in *Sivan*. However, there were times when the Jewish People also exhibited the rebellious qualities of the bull and “bucked” the leadership of Moses of Aharon when they rebelled in the desert during this month.

This process of individual growth is connected to the counting of the *omer* — which takes place mostly in *Iyar*. But when the individual is over-emphasized this can lead to disaster, as happened when the students of Rabbi Akiva all died because they failed to give each other enough respect.

There are times in life where we have breadth of vision. When everything fits into place. Where we feel we are standing

on the top of a high plateau and we can look over our lives with the confidence that we know where we are going. And there are other times. Times when we can't seem to see our hands in front of our faces; times where our vision is limited to getting out of bed successfully.

There are times when our vision can be extremely limited. For example, when we are mere babies our vision extends about as far as our feeding bottle. The mitzvah of *bris mila* comes at the time when man's intellect is at its least, when he knows virtually nothing about what is going on around him.

The Midrash teaches “Rabbi Yochanan said ‘Never let the mitzvah of the *omer* be light in your eyes, for through the mitzvah of the *omer* Abraham merited the land of Canaan as an inheritance. As the Torah says ‘I will give to you and your seed after you (the land of Canaan) on the condition that you guard My *bris* (covenant).’ And what, said Rabbi Yochanan, is this *bris* referring to? The mitzvah of the *omer*.”

One might ask, what has the *omer* to do with *bris mila*? The Torah is clearly talking about *bris mila* at that juncture. What connection did Rabbi Yochanan see between *mila* and the *omer*?

The mitzvah of *mila* is the least conscious of *mitzvos*. It is performed involuntarily on a person when he is but eight days old;

### OUT OF MIND

when he doesn't even know what a mitzvah is, let alone how to have the correct concentration and intentions while doing it. And yet, it was through this least conscious mitzvah that Avraham inherited the Land of Israel and was able to bequeath it to his progeny for all time.

If *mila* represents the minimum level of intellect as far as the individual is concerned, the mitzvah which represents the minimum intellect on the national scale is the mitzvah of the *omer*. This offering made from barley offering was brought in the *Beis Hamikdash* on the second day of Pesach.

When the Jewish People left Egypt they were like a fetus just emerging from the body of a beast. A beast called Egypt which wallowed in the forty-ninth gate of spiritual impurity — the lowest place on Earth. The comparison to the fetus emerging from the body of an animal finds its representation in the nature of the *korban omer* which was made from barley — the staple food of animals.

That's what Rabbi Yochanan was saying. “Never let the mitzvah of the *omer* be light in your eyes...” The mitzvah of the *omer* is like the mitzvah of *mila*. Even though *mila* is performed when intellectual involvement is minimal,

when there is no conscious intent, nevertheless it was this that gave Avraham *Eretz Yisrael*. Similarly, the mitzvah of the *omer* ‘should not be light in your eyes,’ for even though it happened at a time when the vistas of the Jewish People were very limited; when they had just come out of Egypt and they were like a fetus



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emerging from the body of an animal, nevertheless it was this little mitzvah, this mitzvah done when the mind of Israel was so diminutive, that brought the Jewish People to stand at Sinai and receive the Torah.

## THE 49 STEPS

When a person looks forward to something very much, when he fixes his gaze on a special moment in the future, he counts the days to that event. When the Jewish People left Egypt, even though their new-found freedom was very sweet to them, their gaze was fixed on a moment that Moshe told them would arrive seven weeks later — the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

From the second night of Pesach, every night for seven weeks, we count the days that have passed on this spiritual journey from Egypt to Sinai. We call this process “The counting of the omer.”

The emergence from Egyptian slavery marked the beginning of the physical freedom of the Jewish People. On the spiritual plane, however, we were still sunk in the morass of Egyptian immorality and spiritual pollution. 210 years of Egyptian slavery had brought us very low — down to the 49th level of spiritual corruption. We were standing at the door to the 50th level. The ultimate level of no return. In seven short weeks, Hashem brought us from the brink of spiritual abyss to the highest level of all the generations — the generation of knowledge, the generation who were fit to receive the Torah. It was this generation who had vanquished the angel of death, and had ascended to the level of Adam before the sin of eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

Sometimes, when we think of spiritual greatness, it seems so far away from us — another galaxy. We think to ourselves that we could never be really spiritual. It's all too difficult. We're too enmeshed in the physical world and its baubles and its lures. All it took was seven short weeks for the Jewish People to rise from the pits of pollution to the heights of closeness to the Creator. But the key to their success was that their gaze was Heavenward. As Oscar Wilde put it “We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”

When we fix our eyes on the stars of spiritual greatness, when we turn our heads Heavenwards, Hashem draws us close to Him and the distance between Heaven and earth is a mere seven weeks.

## THE HIDDEN LIGHT

If you're flying over Israel on the night of Wednesday, May 13th, of this year and you look down out of your plane, you will see thousands of bonfires dotting the landscape as far as the eye can see. For that Wednesday night will be *Lag B'Omer* — the 33rd day of the omer: The 33rd day of counting the seven weeks between Pesach and Shavuot.

Throughout history, the period of the omer has been fraught with tragedy for the Jewish People: 1,900 years ago, all 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died during the omer because they failed to give each other enough respect. Exactly 900 years ago, whole Jewish communities were obliterated in Germany during the First Crusade. Men, women and children were slaughtered, and Torah scholars burned alive. 250 years ago, Ukrainian peasants under the leadership of a petty aristocrat called Bogdan Chmielnicki, aided by Dnieper Cossacks and Tartars from the Crimea unleashed a massacre comparable in its viciousness to that of the Nazis:

In the synagogue in Nemirov, the Cossacks used ritual knives to slaughter the inhabitants. In that town alone, 6,000 men women and children were butchered.

In remembrance of Rabbi Akiva's students and the other tragedies it is the custom to refrain from things that bring joy to the heart: Weddings are not held; we refrain from cutting our hair as is the custom of a mourner.

But why do we light bonfires on the 33rd day of the Omer?

When all 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva's students had died, the world was desolate. The Torah had been forgotten. There were no pupils to go out and teach and disseminate the light of Torah. Rabbi Akiva traveled to the rabbis of the South and taught them his Torah. On *Lag B'Omer* he laid his hands on the heads of these, his last pupils, giving them *semicha* (rabbinical ordination). And from that day, the world began to brighten from the Torah's light by virtue of these students. As the day of their ordination was the 33rd day of the Omer, we light bonfires in *Eretz Yisrael* to symbolize the great light that the Torah represents.

Another event that occurred on *Lag B'Omer* was the departure from this world of the great Talmudic sage Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. On the day of Rabbi Shimon's passing a great light was revealed to his students when he uncovered many of hidden secrets of the Torah. This was written down in the *Zohar* (lit. “shining”). The bonfires symbolize the light of the hidden wisdom that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai revealed on *Lag B'Omer*.

## TWO SPRIGS OF MYRTLE

*He was hurrying between  
the twilight's embers  
To welcome the Shabbos Queen.  
In his hands - two sprigs of myrtle  
To guard, To remember  
The Hand unseen.*

*And all those years we spent  
Up to our necks,  
Our souls were clothed  
In nothing more than sand -*

*We could burn the world  
With eyes of fire,  
But it's enough,  
It's enough -  
That there are two  
Such as you and I.*

Sources: *This Month's Sign* - Avnei Nezer, Shem MiShmuel, Rabbi M. Glazerson; *The Hidden Light* - Rabbi Elyahu Kitov translated by Rabbi Nachman Bulman; *Out Of Mind* - Nesivas Shalom; *Two Sprigs Of Myrtle* - Talmud, Shabbos 33b

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