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## Today's Torah

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**Lag B'Omer**  
**May 12, 2020 - 18 Iyar 5780**



**By: Rabbi Dr. Michael Berenbaum**  
**Professor of Jewish Studies**  
**American Jewish University**

### Enough Regard One for Another

#### Lag B'Omer and the Plague

Lag B'Omer has a special meaning this year.

Lag B'Omer is the thirty third day of the Omer, that period of seven full weeks from the second night of Passover to Shavuot, literally the festival of weeks, the Bikurim Festival, when the first fruits were brought to the Temple in Jerusalem and the festival on which Jews commemorate the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai.

According to the Talmud 24,000 students of Rabbi Akivah died of the plague during the Omer and

plague ceased for but one day, the 33rd day of the Omer. Jews traditionally remembered this tragic period by refraining from haircuts and weddings, from celebrations and music. Lag B'Omer was the sole exception.

Parenthetically, in the Holocaust, the Omer was the most intense period of killing. Hungary was invaded by the Germans in March 1944 within ten days of Purim. Passover 5704 was not a time of liberation but of ghettoization and between the 15th of May and the 8th of July 1944, 437,402 Jews were deported on 147 trains – destination Auschwitz. Four of five were gassed upon arrival. So there was a second plague that afflicted the Jewish people at this season and this one was without a day's reprieve. It is appropriate that these days be marked by extra sadness.

How is Lag B'Omer observed? Many a child remembers his hurried trip to the busy barber. Three year old boys, whose hair is not shorn until they are three, receive their first haircut that day – a custom observed to this day in Meron on the site of the grave of Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai, and many a Jewish couple eagerly count each of these Omer days leading to their wedding held on this 33rd day, a very special day. Bonfires are lit in Israel especially at Rabbi Shimon's grave.

We who have been shut in, unable to attend school or to go to work, unable to go to attend synagogue or to shop because of the social distancing required to slow the progress of the Covid19 pandemic can appreciate as never before this historical memory and the exaltation that must have marked the day the plague ceased – even if but one day.

For Rabbinic Jews human suffering had a divine message; human anguish is perceived as divine punishment, personal and communal. In truth, this is one aspect of rabbinic teaching that haunts me and that challenges me, one that I protest and one with which I contend. Having spent my life studying the Holocaust, I cannot regard what happened to the Jews as punishment for their iniquities nor am I willing to see Hitler, the Nazis, their collaborators and enablers as instruments of God but let's set that argument aside for another day.

As a religious Jew, I stand within my tradition and engage its sacred days year by year, contending with them and wrestling with them and experiencing them anew year by year. Even if they do not change, I do change from year to year, my experience of life changes, and this year I am particularly struck by what Rabbinic tradition presents as the reasons for the plague – *Rabbi Akivah's students did have enough regard one for another. (Yevamot 62b)*

The words resonate anew for me this year as while I am not sure that this is the reason for the plague that we are currently experiencing ***I am certain that the only way to defeat this plague is to have enough regard one for another.***

*Enough regard* to observe social distancing, *enough regard* to care for one another, *enough regard* to find new and creative ways to comfort the afflicted, to visit the sick, to care for the needy, to provide for the widow and orphan, to feed the hungry, to educate the child, to be alone and yet find a way not to be lonely.

We desperately need *enough regard* to pull together even as we are apart and not to pull apart by coming together without regard for one another.

We have seen remarkable heroism by those on the front lines who have *enough regard* to staff and clean our hospitals, to treat those who are ill even as they may pose a danger, to deliver our food, to stock our shelves, to work day and night to identify and combat the disease, to patrol our streets and to identify, order, manufacture and deliver what is needed to save lives and to protect the people saving lives.

And we need leaders who have *enough regard* for the intelligence and the collective wisdom of their people to tell us the truth, to demand the best of us so that we can come through this moment in history together with enough regard for one another.

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**Rabbi Dr. Michael Berenbaum**, is the Director of the Sigi Ziering Institute: Exploring the Ethical and Religious Implications of the Holocaust and a Professor of Jewish Studies at the American Jewish University. The author and editor of 20 books, he was also the Executive Editor of the Second Edition of the Encyclopaedia Judaica. He was Project Director overseeing the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the first Director of its Research Institute and later served as President and CEO of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which took the testimony of 52,000 Holocaust survivor in 32 languages and 57 countries. His work in film has won Emmy Awards and Academy Awards.

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## Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

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Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies  
American Jewish University  
15600 Mulholland Drive  
Los Angeles, CA 90077  
310-440-1218  
[www.aju.edu/ziegler](http://www.aju.edu/ziegler)

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