

The Fire to Improve Lag Ba'Omer

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Every year, Lag Ba'Omer brings to mind the character of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and his unique Torah. On this day, sages alongside simple people praise Rabbi Shimon, a phenomenon that is very puzzling. There is no other Tanna who is so celebrated on the day of his death, or who is frequently mentioned in songs about his greatness. It is even harder to understand this when we take a look at his character and his Torah. Rabbi Shimon's deep Torah does not necessarily apply to everyone, and as the Gemara (*Brachot 35b*) said, "Many did the same as Rabbi Shimon but did not succeed." The question is why Rabbi Shimon is so widely admired? What is relevant about his character to all of us?

The Gemara (Shabbat 33) tells of a discussion between Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Shimon pertaining to the Romans. Rabbi Yehuda praises them for their actions, since they established marketplaces, bridges and bathhouses. Rabbi Yossi was silent. Rabbi Shimon responded and said "Everything that they established, they established only for their own purposes." In response to this statement, the Romans issued a death sentence to Rabbi Shimon. Rabbi Shimon then went into hiding; he began by hiding in the Bet Midrash until his fear of being discovered led him to enter a cave.

In his book 'Ein Aya' on Masechet Shabbat (Vol. 1), Rav Kook explains that Rabbi Shimon's sharp opinion derives from his deep way of looking at things. Rabbi Shimon recognizes that despite the apparent good, the root of the matter is rotten. While those things the Romans introduced may seem nice and pleasant, their foundation is evil. Rabbi Shimon identified that the root of the Romans was evil and cruel, and therefore he disapproved of attributing any kindness to them. This, says Rav Kook, is in keeping with Rabbi Shimon's character – he examines the root of the matter, and if the root is rotten, he cannot restrain himself from criticizing and speaking against it.

However, as we know, the world is not that simple. In our world, we do not always see the hidden – only what is evident on the surface. Beyond Rabbi Shimon's sheer audacity to speak about the ruling power in this way, the Romans feel threatened by his penetrating view, and therefore Rabbi Shimon had to hide to save himself.

There might be an additional dimension here; Rabbi Shimon's probing observation also expresses his lack of acceptance of the current reality. According to Rabbi Shimon, there is no such thing as "perhaps." Everything must be pure and perfect, and as long as this is not the case, Rabbi Shimon will not accept reality. Rabbi Shimon will not give up on anything and it is impossible for him to compromise and wait for things to unfold. As far as he is concerned, the world must achieve wholeness, until no evil or wickedness remains. In this sense, we can see that it wasn't that Rabbi Shimon couldn't stand the Romans – he in fact couldn't stand the world itself. Thus, after leaving the cave where he had hidden for 12 years, he destroyed the fields of the Jewish farmers he saw toiling the land – for how they could give up the scared study of the Torah for worldly matters?! As long as the world is incomplete, it cannot bear such a demanding or total demand for holiness and purity and therefore Rabbi Shimon was hiding not only from the Romans but from the world itself.

Perhaps that is why we all celebrate Rabbi Shimon's memory. Every year, we rekindle the fire of truth within ourselves. We light bonfires and attempt to awaken this value, and we strive to improve ourselves more and more. Thus, at the end, we hope to reach a situation that, "a fire will always burn on the altar and will not be extinguished" (Vayikra Ch. 6).

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