

Dvar Torah for Lag b'Omer

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May 19, 2011



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Based on *Likutey Halakhot, Hekhsheh Keilim* 4:1–4

“Tzaddikim are greater in their death than they were in their lifetime” (*Chullin* 7b).

Why is Lag b'Omer (the 33rd day of the Omer-Count) such a great celebration? Not because Rebbe Akiva's students no longer died prematurely, but because it is the anniversary of Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai's passing. Celebrating the death of a Jew, particularly of a tzaddik, doesn't sound like a very Jewish thing to do. What's going on? Reb Noson takes us on an interesting journey as he answers this question. (This is a long dvar Torah. Maybe print it out.)

Creation, until God created Adam and Eve, was all raw material, material that needed *tikkun* (fixing and repair). A Jew's function in this world is *tikkun*, to see to it that every part of Creation with which he interacts is used in such a way that *daat* (God-awareness) increases. If one is successful at this, it is considered as if he created the world.

That's right—any part of Creation that you use in performing a mitzvah, you've created. The more holiness, purity and *daat*

you invest in a mitzvah, the more you create the specific pieces of Creation connected to that mitzvah. When the prophet said (Isaiah 43:1), "Jacob your creator," he was speaking on behalf of God: "My world, My world, who created you? Jacob created you" (*Vayikra Rabbah* 36:4). This means, says Reb Noson, that every Jew (in proportion to his personal level of sanctity and mitzvah-observance) is considered the creator of the world. Because as much as you know Torah, the point is to live by it. Your goal is that your every act reflect *daat*, awareness of Who created you.

Now, even before the Torah was given at Sinai there were tzaddikim, people with a lot of *bona fide daat*. Nonetheless, until the Torah was given, Creation was tenuous because humanity's *daat* was insufficient. The presence of a few scattered tzaddikim (even with disciples) could not make the world more God-aware in a long-term, self-sustaining way. Unless there was a nation, a people, whose individual members were committed to introducing *daat* into every venue of life, Creation would remain meaningless. Yet, the point of having such a people (Jews) with such individuals (you!) would only help if they had a *daat*-inducing guide to live by and lived by it. That *daat*-inducing guide, if you haven't already guessed, is the holy Torah. (We're getting to Lag b'Omer.)

But what happens if you made a mistake and failed to keep to the Torah's guidance? You reached a certain level of belief and observance, but botched getting to the next level. With all that you've achieved, you still couldn't get to the next level up. Or, God forbid, you didn't even do what you were capable of doing. You know better than to do *that*. From where, oh where, will your *tikkun* come? It can only come from a level higher than the one you reached. Who's going to send it to you? The tzaddik.

The only way to make Jewish progress is by being with the tzaddik. To be with the tzaddik means a few things. It means serving him.* It means hearing what he has to say and studying

his teachings. It means observing his behavior, how he puts Torah into practice. What happens from being with the tzaddik? You gather more and more of his *daat*, even if it is only a few crumbs at a time. Eventually, no matter how badly you botched it, you will pick up enough of his *daat* to undo your mistakes and go forward.

Why does getting *daat* from the tzaddik help more than what we get on our own? The *daat* we get from the tzaddik has already produced positive results. (He's a tzaddik, right?) So learning it from him, even by osmosis, is more powerful. So no matter what happens, no matter how bad it gets, the most important thing is to never give up your connection with a true Torah teacher, with a tzaddik.

(Don't think for a moment that your unsuccessful attempts are zero. Every effort you make to become a better Jew, to live by the Torah, is forever. No attempt or sincere desire to improve Jewishly is ever lost. In other words, those "unsuccessful" attempts are mitzvahs!)

One more thing we need to know in order to understand why we celebrate the anniversary of a tzaddik's passing, in particular Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai's. A tzaddik is greater in death than in life. The tzaddik toils his entire life to repair and fix (the) Jewish people so they can return to their Father in Heaven. However, the Devil works like the devil, especially now at the end of the exile, to distance Jews from God. The tzaddik never slackens his efforts, but so far, the Devil is winning. More people are giving up the fight to grow in faith and observance.

By cultivating his *daat*, the tzaddik gains more recognition of the Creator's greatness, namely the kindness, compassion and goodness that He bestows. As he recognizes that compassion, the tzaddik channels it into the world. Unfortunately, due to our many sins, in order to succeed in helping us, the tzaddik has to rise to a level that cannot be had while alive.

Although he must die, he continues to work until he finishes what he has begun, i.e., to fix everything, come what may.

This is the meaning of the verse (Isaiah 57:1), "The tzaddik is lost, but no one notices. People who do kindness die, but no one understands. The tzaddik passes away because of the evil." Why does the tzaddik die? Because of the evil of the generation. Nonetheless, he can fix anyone who chooses to draw close to him via his teachings and his kosher students. For even if the student is of small stature, if he is a genuine student, then he receives some measure of the tzaddik's spirit (which is continuously drawn into the world) and share it with others.

This is the reason for the great joy that there is on the anniversary of Rebbe Shimon's passing. We celebrate because he continues to work our *tikkun*, in part by his holy *daat* that he left behind, the holy Zohar, about which he said (Zohar 3:124b), "With this, [the Jews] will leave exile."

The world has always depended upon "deceased" tzaddikim and their prayers for us. Even Moshe Rabbeinu invoked the merit of the Patriarchs in his prayers for the Jewish people. In our day and age the temptation to not believe and to indulge every whim is exceedingly strong. It cannot be overcome without making use of the *koach* (power/energy) of the tzaddikim of the past, who are stronger now than ever before. May their merit protect us; may we absorb their *daat* and live by it. Amen.

agutn Shabbos!
Shabbat Shalom!

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*Serving a tzaddik often means doing menial tasks for him, like making his coffee or going to the bank for him.