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THE RADIANCE OF TORAH

THE SEDRA¹ TELLS US ABOUT THE ANNUAL CYCLE OF THE FESTIVALS, including the idea that between Pesach and Shavuot there is the counting of the Omer². A further layer of Jewish teaching explains the significance of the 33rd day of the Omer, which falls this Sunday, 2nd May. In Hebrew the letters *Lamed* (30) and *Gimmel* (3) form the number 33, so this day is called Lag B'Omer.

Lag B'Omer is celebrated all over the world, and particularly in Israel, with outings, bonfires and a carnival atmosphere. There will be splendid parades with children from all sectors of Israeli society. There are floats on Jewish themes, with music, entertainment and inspiring talks.

Another scene of activity will be at Meron in the hills of the Galilee, near Safed. Soon after Shabbat has ended there will be crowds of men, women and children. Bonfires will be lit; there will be dancing and singing. There and also round the world, on Sunday many little boys will have their traditional first haircutting ceremony at the age of three. Meron is the resting place of the Rabbi and Sage, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, famous as the author of the masterpiece of Kabbalistic teachings, the Zohar. Lag B'Omer is the anniversary of the passing of Rabbi Shimon about 1800 years ago. This day is his festival, expressing what he stood for: a unique perspective on Judaism and the Jewish people.

The word 'Zohar' means 'Radiance'. The Zohar presents a

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mystical commentary on the Torah in which a luminous, spiritual dimension of its meaning is revealed. These teachings have been transmitted through the ages and in our time are most accessible through the book Tanya, written two centuries ago by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi. The teachings of the Zohar, properly explained, help a person to discover his or her pathway, leading towards the goal to transform our material world and physical lives into a realm where the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, can be revealed.

One of Rabbi Shimon's teachings is: "Three knots are bound to each other: G-d, the Torah and the Jewish people."³

This means two things. The first is that the link of the Jew to G-d is through the Torah. In other words, through the study of Torah and observance of its teachings the Jew is bonded to G-d. This is easy to understand, and corresponds to many other teachings of the Sages. The second idea is more rare: the Jew is also linked directly to G-d in a way which is independent of his or her connection with the Torah. The essence of the Jew is bonded to G-d in a way which transcends Torah.⁴ This is the third knot, directly joining the Jew and G-d.

A similar teaching is found in the introduction to the chapter from Ethics of the Fathers studied on Shabbat afternoons: "Every Jew has a share in the World to Come."⁵

Even if one's actions are less than perfect, the individual is connected with the Divine by an unbreakable bond. Ultimately this inner spiritual reality will show itself in the practical life of the person - sooner or later. Hence we can say with confidence that he or she truly has a share in the World to Come.⁶ How is this potential revealed? Here too, the Zohar helps us, with Rabbi Shimon's famous saying: "For us, it all depends on love..."⁷

Rabbi Shimon's Zohar and the works like Tanya which makes it accessible are permeated by this view. Through revealing the warmth and love of the spiritual aspect of Judaism these teachings express our ultimate goal: to bring peace and holiness to all humanity. For this reason Lag B'Omer is celebrated with joy, as the festival of the inner, radiant dimension of Jewish teaching and life.

1. Leviticus chs.21-24. 2. Lev.23:15-16. 3. See Zohar III, 73a. 4. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 14 pp.169-70. 5. From Mishna Sanhedrin 11:1. 6. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol.17, pp.343-46. 7. Zohar III 128a.

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SEDRA EMOR

AS IMPORTANT AS A COHEN?

It was a Shabbat morning and Michael was in the Synagogue. Unusually for him, he was paying attention to the events around him. They took the Torah out of the Ark and they brought it to the Bimah in the centre of the Synagogue, and the reading of the Torah was about to begin. A “ssshhhhh” came from the Beadle, and everyone slowly quieted down.

The Gabbai called out someone’s name. He was a Cohen. Michael noticed young Mr Stanley Cohen who had been standing on the other side of the Synagogue. He came up onto the Bimah. The first Torah reading commenced. Michael tried to follow in his own Chumash.

A few minutes later the Gabai again called out someone’s name, to come for the second Aliyah. This was a man who was a Levi. Michael noticed the rather elderly Sam Lewis, who often gave him sweets. Uncle Sam, as the boys privately called him, went up the steps of the Bimah and said the blessings on the Torah.

The next person to be called up was Michael’s own father! When he eventually came back from the Bimah, everyone nearby shook his hand, and so did Michael.

“Dad” said Michael to his father after the service had ended, “why is it that the first person to come up was a Cohen, the second a Levi and third one, you, a Yisrael? Why can’t a Yisrael go first?”.

“Now that’s a good question” said his father. “Basically, G-d chose the Cohanim to work for Him as Priests in the Temple. They brought the offerings. And in this week’s Sedra there are special laws for the Cohanim. So therefore we respect him and give him the first reading of the Torah”.

“Oh, so that means he is better?” said Michael. “It’s a shame I wasn’t born a Cohen”.

“Oh no,” said his father. “First, it’s my fault you weren’t born a Cohen, since the son of a Cohen is a Cohen. Second, I am not sure if that means he is better. It means he has a special role.”

“Okay,” said Michael. “So he has a better role, and therefore he ends up better”.

“Look,” said his father “you have hands and feet, which one is more important for you when you play football?”

“Now that’s a good question” said Michael “I think I need both.”

“But which one is better?” asked his father again.

“I don’t know, maybe the head” Michael said thoughtfully.

“You’re right,” said his father. “Anyway, maybe this helps us understand the Cohen issue. Everybody has a different role, but from G-d’s perspective each person is really necessary, whatever his role, a man or a woman, a Cohen, a Levi or an ordinary Israelite, an adult or a child. Everyone is important.”

“Okay,” said Michael. “So G-d thinks I am really important even though I am only a Yisrael....”

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