

# So happy to be sad

by Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Jewish Funds for Justice • May 4th, 2007

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav is famous for saying, “it is a great mitzvah always to be happy.” While this line is often understood as an endorsement of pure joy, uninterrupted by the realities of life, Rabbi Nachman specified that the experience of joy should be balanced by a daily encounter with the misery of the world. Only one who experiences joy can understand how dark and depressing the world can be.

I was thinking about this line as I contemplated the fairly mysterious holiday of Lag B’omer, which we will celebrate this Sunday. This holiday (literally: the 33rd day of the Omer) falls during a period that has traditionally been one of mourning. During the period between Pesach and Shavuot, we count each day, as a means of preparing ourselves to move from the moment of liberation to the creation of a covenantal community at Mount Sinai.

In post-Talmudic times, the Omer period became a time of mourning. The traditional explanation for this mourning was that a plague (or perhaps a political persecution) befell the students of Rabbi Akiva, twenty-four thousand of whom are alleged to have died during this period. While there is a fairly wide spectrum of opinion on the question of what this mourning period should entail, many Jews do not get married during all or part of this period, and some do not shave, get haircuts, or listen to live music. As the story goes, Rabbi Akiva’s students stopped dying on Lag B’omer, and this day therefore became a celebratory day, when the prohibitions of the Omer period are suspended. (when I was in Hebrew school, this was known as the day when we got ice cream for snack)

Lag B’omer is also said to mark the death of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a mystical second century figure whom the medieval authors of the Zohar (the central mystical work of Judaism) credited as the author of this work. On Lag B’omer, thousands of people make a pilgrimage to Mount Meron (in northern Israel), where Shimon bar Yochai is supposed to be buried. While one might expect the yahrtzeit (death anniversary) of a significant figure to be a moment of sadness, the yahrtzeit of this mystical figure is filled with joy, as mystics believe Bar Yochai to have revealed his most important secrets on his deathbed.

Whatever we might think about the historicity of the stories of Akiva or Bar Yochai (both of which are told in an exaggerated fashion that makes it difficult to distill the historical nugget), we can note the emphasis in both on balancing joy with mourning. (Or: in the words of Kohelet, made famous by Pete Seeger, “there is a time for weeping and a time for dancing; a time for wailing and a time for dancing.” [4:4]) Moments of joy make us more attuned to the pain of life, and the experience of pain makes us more appreciative of the moments of joy.

Those of us on the left tend to focus much more on the pain around us—after all, it’s easy to see that funding for social services is declining, immigrants are dying trying to enter this country, children are being left alone as their parents are deported, the Supreme Court is slowly chipping away at a women’s right to choice, workers are being mistreated and underpaid, . . .the list goes on.

It is less common for us to spend time celebrating what is good about our world: the immigration movement has mobilized millions of people, many of whom have never before been involved in a political issue; there is a good chance that the minimum wage will (finally) go up; and thousands of created and talented people are finding ways to make their own communities slightly better places to live.

The omer period gives us a chance to mourn, each in our own way. But on Lag B'omer, let's ask ourselves: what can we celebrate?