



## SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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***Don't keep your Torah to yourself***

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ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל  
Emil W. Herman  who loved and supported Torah learning.

# Bechukosai

## *The Hope of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai*

In the Israeli media recently, there was a special program on Lag B'Omer, the festive Jewish holiday centered on the ancient town of Miron. Among other things, the program interviewed a person in Miron who related that 30 years ago, he hadn't had any children.

At the time, a rabbi had advised him to travel to Miron, the burial place of the legendary Sage Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai, and pray to G-d there for children. Likewise, the rabbi said, he should resolve that when he has a boy, to name him Shimon after Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai.

So this Jewish man told the rabbi that he was concerned about making such a promise because his father-in-law had recently passed away and according to Halachah (Jewish law), if they had a boy, they would need to name him after his mother's father. But the rabbi remarked: If so, pray that you have twin boys, and then you'll be able to fulfill both conditions! You'll be able to name your son after your wife's mother, and you'll be able to name your son after Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai.

And so the man did what the rabbi advised and indeed, he had two boys! He named one of them Mordechai after his father-in-law, and the second one was named Shimon after Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai.

On the night of Lag B'Omer itself, the TV program interviewed the son Shimon himself, who at the time was already a young married man.

But the connection between Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai with blessings for children obviously didn't begin just 30 years ago.

In one of his talks (Sichos Kodesh 5740 Vol. III, pg. 53), the Rebbe brings down the story in the Midrash of how Rabbi Shimon would dispense blessings for children in his lifetime.

The story is told that a married couple from Tzidon (in what today is Lebanon) came before Rabbi Shimon and told him that they had been married already for ten years but still hadn't yet had children.

Now according to strict halachah, however, it is permissible for a childless couple to get divorced after ten years just so they could start anew and then maybe have kids. But they, the couple told Rabbi Shimon, loved one another and did not want to get divorced.

Rabbi Shimon advised them to separate lovingly and in mutual agreement. And so, since they had gotten married with a party, Rabbi Shimon advised them to also part from one another with a party—a “divorce party.” (I think that today, it's become a sort of trend.)

So the couple listened to Rabbi Shimon and threw a party.

In the course of the party, when the husband had had plenty of good wine, he turned to his wife and said, “I love you very much, and since I am, thank G-d, a very wealthy man, I intend that before we go our own ways, you choose whatever you want from all my property, and you’ll get that item as a gift from me.” (This was before the concept of dividing the estate—today, that husband would probably not be so generous!)

At the end of the party, the husband was good and drunk, sitting in his seat like a rock. The wife ordered her servants to pick up the husband, who was asleep in a drunken stupor, and carry him to her parents’ house, which they did.

In the middle of the night, when Mr. Husband came to and shook off his drunkenness a bit, he found himself in his ex-in-laws’ house. So he turns to his ex-wife and asks her, “What’s going on here?”

She reminded him that yesterday at the party, he had suggested to her to take any object she should so desire—and so she chose to take... her husband!

But right after this amusing episode, the couple found themselves in a dilemma, and they again went back to Rabbi Shimon and told him exactly what was going on. Rabbi Shimon saw how much they loved each other and how much they still wanted to live together, and so he prayed for them until they were answered and they had children.

The Midrash concludes, “This teaches you that just as G-d remembers those who are barren, so too do Tzadikim remember those who are barren” (Pesikta D’Rav Kahana Chap. XXII, Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabbah Chaps. 1, 4).

Likewise, it is told that with the Mitteler Rebbe (Rabbi Dov Ber Shneuri (1771-1827), the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rebbe of Chabad), Lag B’Omer was one of the best holidays, especially with regards to getting his blessing for children (Hayom Yom for Lag B’Omer). The Rebbe himself would also give many blessings for children specifically on Lag B’Omer.

Now the reason that Lag B’Omer is connected with Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai is that this day is the day on which he passed away, his *yahrzeit*. And before he passed away, he willed that the day of his passing be made into a holiday, to the extent that the day is referred to as “*yom hilulah*,” which actually means “wedding day.”

In the world of Judaism, up until the period of the Rashbi, a *yahrzeit* was considered a sad day on which the deceased would be remembered and their passing mourned once again. And as it’s done to this day on the *yahrzeit* of Moshe Rabbeinu, which falls on the 7<sup>th</sup> of Adar, a lot of people have the custom of fasting on *yahrzeit* days and increasing prayer and *tzedakah*. However, Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai innovated a new approach to the entire idea of the *yahrzeit*; he said that on the day of passing, the soul merits a special elevation in the worlds above and is happy about it. And so everyone who has any connection to the soul needs to rejoice together with it.

And indeed, in the Jewish calendar, there are two *yahrzeits* that are opposite from one another: On the 7<sup>th</sup> of Adar, we mark the *yahrzeit* of Moshe Rabbeinu with fasting and prayer. On the other extreme, the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the Omer is marked by Jews the world over as the *yahrzeit* of

Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai, complete with parties and dancing everywhere. (See Hisvaduyos, Lag B'Omer, 5735; Sichos Kodesh Vol. II, pg. 86, et al.)

And so it's no wonder that there are (relatively) very few people who know about the 7<sup>th</sup> of Adar in the first place—because when it comes to fasting, you don't have too many clients. On the other hand, the day of Lag B'Omer became a Jewish holiday everywhere you'll find Jews.

The most interesting point is that there is a deep connection between these two days.

In the Torah portion of Beshalach, Rashi writes that the day on which the Mon stopped falling was on the 7<sup>th</sup> of Adar; “When Moshe died on the 7<sup>th</sup> of Adar, the Mon stopped descending” (Shmos 15:35). In one of his letters (printed recently at the end of the Hisvaduyos booklet by Vaad Hanachos B'Lahak, Parshas Emor), the Rebbe writes that in the writings of the Arizal, it's brought down that the Mon actually *began* to fall on Lag B'Omer (not like Rashi's opinion on the verse).

And so, there is a strong and essential connection between these two days related to the starting and ending of Mon.

From Heaven came the concept that on the day on which the Mon began to fall—which is the most prolonged miracle in the history of the Jewish Nation (as opposed to all other miracles which occurred just once, like the Splitting of the Reed Sea or the Plagues in Egypt, each of which lasted one week)—there should also be a day of joy for the Jewish Nation, a joy that is connected with miracles.

On the other hand, the day of the 7<sup>th</sup> of Adar, the day on which the Mon stopped falling—meaning, the day on which the miracles stopped—is marked as a day of prayer, fasting and charity.

And now we come to this week's Torah portion of Bechukosai.

Parshas Bechukosai comes after Parshas Behar, and in most years, these two Torah portions are read together. Regardless, we find these two extremes in these two Torah portions: Joy in the portion of Behar, and somberness in the portion of Bechukosai.

The Torah portion of Behar is filled with optimism and hope. It talks about coming into the Holy Land, of the Yovel celebration held every 50 years, of each man getting his field and his inheritance back and of freedom in the world. It's very uplifting.

But in the portion of Bechukosai, which we read this week, we read all these dreadful curses—so much so that the custom is that nobody is given an Aliyah when the actual curses are read. Instead, the custom is that the baal korei, the reader, himself takes that Aliyah, and he isn't called up by name. He just steps up and starts reading.

However, for this Shabbos, we might say that we only have the theme of Lag B'Omer in our Torah reading.

Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai taught us that even things that seem like curses, like in the Torah portion of Bechukosai, are really in their truest spiritual essence only hints for wonderful blessings.

So when we proceed with an optimistic outlook on life, then we discover that only good things come from G-d, Whose nature it is to do good for his creatures.

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