

Emor 5780

Emor in Lockdown

Rabbi Dr Andrew Goldstein
9 May 2020
Mosaic Liberal



So, we find ourselves Zooming on the 15th day of Iyar and the 30th day of the Omer and the day after Pesach Sheni. Pesach Sheni, not a lot of Liberal Jews knew about this one, though it's in the Torah to allow people who for one reason or another couldn't observe Pesach on its right date to do it a month later; but suddenly rabbis have quoted it to justify, in this current emergency, the celebration of weddings, or the holding of stone-settings or memorial services, months after they were originally planned to be. It shows the Bible had common sense helping people to cope with emergency situations...unlike Orthodox rabbis who will not allow people to say *kaddish* even if hundreds are attending a virtual funeral service on Zoom.

Sefirat ha-Omer... the Omer, we read about in the Torah, Sefirat Ha-Omer, counting the days, though counting days in this lockdown has become difficult: one day merging into another. But counting is the only actual thing mentioned about this period in our portion this morning, no other rituals or customs. However, in early rabbinic times it became a period of semi mourning with no weddings, celebrations, dancing nor hair cutting allowed. Well I, like you have been barber less for 6 weeks now and by the end of lockdown will hopefully have the strength of Samson with flowing locks. Tradition links this custom to the time of the Bar Kochba wars against the Romans, when thousands of Jews, either fighting the enemy or as civilian victims lost their lives and coupled with this was a terrible plague that affected the Jews in Judea. War & plague, topical words & thoughts at this very moment.

Yesterday was meant to be a significant VE day, 75 years after the end of another War. Originally meant to be a special day with good old street parties, but sadly downgraded due to this wretched modern plague. Maybe we will need a VC day...victory over Corona virus day...Bimheyra V'yameynu, soon and in our days.

Though I can't remember the actual VE day, being a mere two and a half years old, I'm sure one or two of you on line have stories to tell about it. But I do recall the years of austerity that followed, though I don't think I realised how hard it was, particularly for my mother with the rationing of food. My only significant memory is that one day, walking home from Birmingham Hebrew School I saw my first bunch of bananas in a shop window and ran up the hill to tell my mother. She accompanied me back down to the shop, only to find the bunch was a window display made of china. But this we know, though we long for the end of lockdown and the victory over this pandemic, life after will be not unlike those after V.E. Day of 75 years ago.

If yesterday was Pesach Sheni and VE Day, next Tuesday is also significant...though I suspect none of us will note or celebrate it. For it is Lag B'omer, the 33rd day of the Omer. Lag B'omer, probably based, as does May Day, on a very ancient folk festival. It is said that all over Europe this time of year was a time of restrictions on celebrations...because it comes at a crucial time for farmers: will the crops ripen on time, how will the harvest turn out, will the workers turn up? But one day the restrictions were lifted...just think of May Day in old rural England with maidens dancing round the maypole and the Morris dancers jingling and the men boozing. I have no doubt there was a similar high spring day in ancient Judea, but this was too light-hearted a reason for celebrating, especially during war-time. And so, the legend developed that during this Omer period, 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva's students died, of the plague...but on one day only did the plague end... of course on Lag... the 33rd day of the Omer. And so festivities could replace mourning. And from the 16th century another tradition arose that on this day Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, the supposed author of the Zohar, the source book of Jewish mysticism, died and this led the kabbalists to institute a strange Yahrzeit and it's a curious Yahrzeit as it is celebrated with bonfires and dancing and simchas.

I wonder if in Israel this year, the pious will be allowed their pilgrimage to Meron, near Safed where it is said Rabbi Shimon was buried. Hundreds of thousands schlepping there to commemorate the Yahrzeit, though reports in the press have sadly shown certain *haredim* flouting lockdown laws with impunity. Rabbi Shimon is a curious figure. He lived in the 2nd century CE and was a devoted pupil of Rabbi Akiva. And following his teacher's example he became a radical and vocal opponent of Roman oppression. I love one of his reported sayings: "All the Romans have done is for their own purposes: they built market places, but only for prostitutes to stand there. They built bridges but only to levy tolls. They built beautiful baths, but only to refresh themselves so they could kill more Jews." You can see why he got into trouble and the Romans sought to execute him and so, according to legend he ran away with his son and hid in a cave, just studying Torah. Twelve years later he heard that the Emperor had died and so he emerged from his cave but was distressed. He saw the farmers getting ready to harvest their crops, the markets open and busy. Life back to normal. He upbraided the farmers for wasting time harvesting when they should be studying non-stop. They laughed at him. He cursed them and wherever his eyes fell the fields were consumed with flames. Until a voice came from heaven "Have you left your cave to destroy my world? Go back to your cave and study your ways." All very Monty Pythonist, maybe, but I think an interesting comment on our own times. What will the world be like when we come out of lockdown?

The first time Bar Yochai came out of isolation he was angry, frustrated, self-absorbed and self-righteous. His reaction was to point the finger at those trying to get back to normal life. But he did learn and after further reflection in his cave, he had changed and he went on to become one of the leaders of the Sanhedrin, and the teacher of Rabbi Judah Ha-nasi...who formulated the Mishna to define future Jewish life. Bar Yochai came out of isolation to help build the future of society and the Jewish world. I can only hope we as individuals and as a nation and across the world can have learnt just a few of the lessons this pandemic has taught us. About a need for greater self-sufficiency, of the need for sufficiency - not over abundance, of the meaning of neighbourhood and helping each other out...I'm sure you know the lists as well as me. Of thinking about the future of our very planet not just our

present greed. And finally, I thought of another person in self-isolation in a cave...the prophet Elijah who ran away from Queen Jezebel who sought his life, for wiping out her prophets of Baal. During his isolation in his cave, his frenetic anger dissipated, and he emerged to go out and appoint his successor, to build for the future. And you will know the other reaction on emerging: that God was not in the wind or the fire or in the thunder... but in a small, still, murmuring voice. He had found God again not in anger or zealotry, but in simple reason and quietness. Whatever else this period of lockdown has done for us, whatever this service by Zoom has done for you, it has certainly brought many back to their Judaism. When we emerge from our caves, may this enthusiasm and sense of calm and reason, stay with us to help us live and build a safer, healthier and more peaceful future.