

Yearning for Our Plague to End: Lag Ba'Omer 2021

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Haircuts

After a month of mourning Mom
I took myself to the beauty shop
for a manicure and a trim

readying myself -- mostly --
to enter the world again. During
thirty-two days of the Omer

some of us hold off
on haircuts, mourning
24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva

who died in a plague sent
by God. The God I know
doesn't do that, though

three million have died
from COVID-19
around the world so far.

Avoiding haircuts during mourning
is old-fashioned, *frum*, but
some haven't stepped in a salon

in over a year -- fearing death, or
protecting essential workers from
a virus we might not know we had.

Now, with vaccinations
it's time for shears and clippers,
combs floating clean in Barbicide.

Am I prepared to relax back
into the shampoo chair, let hands
massage my scalp with fragrant soap,

discard what's deadened
and emerge ready -- mostly --
to enter the world again?

R. Rachel Barenblat

The Mark

What will be the first thing I do?

Getting a haircut.

Taking the subway down to Sunset Park to get a facial

In a basement beauty shop next to 8th Avenue.

Hugging friends; dropping the mask.

Have people over for dinner.

Go to services, sing sitting shoulder to shoulder.

See a play, a show, a movie.

Going out for dinner

With my love.

The list sounds like fantasy,

The wishful thinking of a yearning soul,

Trying to get back to a life that once was.

We have sat in the cage for too long.

This is not a real mark.

It is more of a sudden awareness

That time has passed.

So many of us

Have discovered their truths:

I don't even like going into the office.

I love regular, home-made dinners.

My baby likes to snuggle with mama.

I love to write poems;

I don't mind if I am not hugging anyone

Except the ones that I love.

Only slowly, gradually, do we leave the cave and the dark.

Former habits are broken.

What once passed unnoticed

Fills us with awe.

I sense my discomfort, sometimes hesitation.

I still don't like leaving the house without mask.

Don't come too close.

Leave me my 6', my freedom to fold laundry;

My salads, my eggs; not waking up.

Don't push me into the open,

I am not ready yet.

My body is tired, I need a vacation;
I need to rest, to soften up.

Blessed are You, in our coming and going,
Let us open this door and this window,
To a soft and easy, breezy beginning.
Slow down our steps,
Into a caring new normal.
Give us a light re-entrance.
Let us begin with love.
Baruch atah ADONAI, b'vo'einu u'v'tzeitenu.

R' Sonja K. Pilz, PhD

Ready for Grief to End



Illustration by Steve Silbert; inspired by "Haircuts" and "The Mark"

What I Know About Lag B'Omer

I don't know anything about Lag B'Omer
Except what I read on Wikipedia
Which tells me a few different things it's supposed to celebrate,
One of which is the end of a plague that killed 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva's students.
And I can't write about that today, our plague isn't yet over.

I like to think about Akiva though,
Because I had a crush on him when I was a kid.
Still do, sort of.
If you're old enough, you might remember in Hebrew School they used up class time with slide shows
That had pre-recorded narrations.
You know, that went DING whenever you were supposed to go to the next slide?
The one about Rabbi Akiva made a real impression.
For one thing,
He was quite handsome in his working man robes,
And romantic, the way he loved his wife
And how he worked so hard to win her.

And I loved the way he studied with children when he decided he wanted to learn.
There was a slide of Akiva sitting in the classroom at a child's desk.
(Though I think I may be making that up, it may just be part of the story
I liked to tell myself about Akiva, my childhood crush.)
I thought of Akiva when I went back to school in my fifties.
So anyway, I'm glad the plague stopped killing his students.

The last picture of the Rabbi Akiva slide show was of him, old, with a long beard,
No longer cute, tied to a stake,
Wrapped in what I remember as barbed wire,
Bleeding and looking up, presumably to God,
Whom he could see because he was saying the Sh'ma.

Oh, also bonfires and haircuts.
Happy Lag B'Omer!

Trisha Arlin

Lag Ba'Omer - An Omer Journal

Day one of the Omer, Chesed within Chesed (lovingkindness). We play outside, celebrate freedom with matzah pizza. Case counts are rising again here, and the new variant is more infectious and severe than last year's. How worried should I be?

Day six of the Omer, Hod (humble splendour) within Chesed. Over 3,000 new cases here. Restaurants, gyms, and salons closed (no haircuts for anyone.) We're only allowed to gather with immediate family. We're in a third wave, more intense than the first two. Keeping a face on for our kids, whose school is going back online. I can't even write how I feel, going like this in the wrong direction, I want to hide under my pillow until it's over.

Day 11 of the Omer, Netzach (endurance) within Gevurah (strength/judgment). Case numbers are worse, and we now can only leave home to get groceries or do essential work or get some exercise or medical care. It's Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, and I read stories of Jewish lives lost to genocide. I am so grateful to be living now, out, with my wife, a parent to our two kids, a rabbi. Free. I think about the work I must do now, here, to fight hatred and discrimination, itself a pandemic.

Day 15 of the Omer, Chesed within Tiferet (glory) and Rosh Chodesh Iyar (רֵאשׁוֹן), whose letters are an acronym for אני יי רופאך, I am Yah, your Healer. I write on Facebook "Goodness do we need that now as much of Canada is in a third wave of the pandemic..."

Day 18 of the Omer, *chai*, Netzach within Tiferet. Highest case count of the pandemic here in Ontario. I don't want to give up, I don't want to let go, I want to keep things moving, I have to, for my kids (for me?), so I channel my nervous energy into baking muffins (always helps) and celebrating Yom Ha'atzmaut dancing to Israeli music. Alive, embodied. And then we plant seeds of cucumber and carrot, parsley and basil, rosemary and red peppers in wee seed starter peat pots and throw soil at each other and it smells good. I take a deep breath.

Day 20 of the Omer, Yesod (foundation) within Tiferet. Thank G/d it's Shabbat. I go to the lake, my refuge, together we watch beavers swimming peacefully while we kayak around them on calm, cold water that reflects the sky, *mayim* and *shamayim* mirroring each other. I wonder if they're building a dam, and whether it will be to keep things out or in.

Day 22 of the Omer, Chesed within Netzach, and per the province of Ontario I am now officially eligible to be vaccinated (I have never been so happy to be over 40!). The federal government, in its budget, promises a national child care programme, partially in response to the *shecession recession* of the pandemic. I think about the moms I know pressured to stop work because of childcare issues in the pandemic. Baruch Hashem. If not now, when.

Day 25 of the Omer, Netzach within Netzach, endurance within endurance. OMG YES. Case numbers are dropping in my city of Ottawa, and more than 25% of Canadians have had at least one vaccine shot. It's snowing outside, but for the first time in weeks I smile. Can I feel hope yet? I don't want to jinx it.

Day 33 of the Omer, Hod within Hod, humble splendour within humble splendour. Hod can also suggest hoda'ah, gratitude. Talmud teaches that during the Omer, 12,000 pairs of Rabbi Akiva's students died from a plague because they didn't treat each other with respect, and that plague stopped raging on Lag ba'Omer. I yearn to know that our plague is ending. I yearn for us to treat each other with respect and loving kindness. May today be our turning point to better days.

R. Dara Lithwick

Co-created by members of [Bayit's Liturgical Arts Working Group](#), 2021.