



On Bows and Arrows

Dena Weiss – weiss@hadar.org

Parashat Emor 5779

Parashat Emor contains the instruction to count seven weeks from the day after Pesah to Shavuot, Sefirat HaOmer. Over the centuries, this period has been associated with a number of significant moments in Jewish history leading to the accretion of many customs and practices unrelated to the biblical counting. Although most of these practices—like not getting married or getting one’s hair cut—have to do with mourning,¹ there is a strange interruption (or cessation) of the mourning that occurs on the 33rd day of the count, Lag BaOmer.² In addition to the pausing of these mournful practices, there are a number of interesting customs associated with the day of Lag BaOmer itself. One in particular, though waning in popularity,³ is worth noting: the custom for children to play with bows and arrows on this day. What is the connection between this strange and somewhat violent custom and Lag BaOmer? And what might it teach us about the entire period of counting the Omer itself?

One explanation for the celebratory quality of Lag BaOmer is that it marks the *yahrzeit* of R. Shimon bar Yohai,⁴ the Talmudic sage (as well as the pseudepigraphic author and primary character of the Zohar). Accordingly, there are those who tie his passing to the custom of shooting bows and arrows.⁵ The Benei Yisaskhar⁶ explains:

¹ See Mishnah Berurah Orah Hayyim 493:2.

² 33 is written as ל"ג and commonly pronounced “Lag” (rhymes with log).

³ There are Hassidic communities in which playing with bows and arrows is still a prevalent custom. In many other communities, Lag BaOmer has morphed into a type of field day with sports and other physical competitions, an unusual way for a Jewish day of significance to be marked.

⁴ Though one might associate the day of one’s passing as a day of mourning, the passing of a righteous person is often considered to bring merit to the community that they leave behind.

⁵ Other explanations include that these war games are meant to commemorate the battles of the Bar Kokhba rebellion. Presumably this is what the Benei Yisaskhar means when he goes on to say: **והוא כעין ללמד בני יהודה (שמואל ב א יח: קשת) it is like to teach the sons of Judah [to use] a bow (Shmuel II 1:18)**. There are also those who explain its origin the way that many have explained the origins of the Chanukah *dreydl*—that the children would use these games as “cover” should they be found studying Torah when it was forbidden.



בני יששכר, מאמרי חודש אייר ג:ד

מנהג ישראל אשר התלמידים בני בי רב יורו בקשת ביום הזה. והנה שמעתי מאת כבוד אדומ"ו הרב הקדוש ר' מנחם מנדל מרימנוב זצוק"ל הטעם הוא, כי בימי ר' שמעון לא נראתה הקשת (עיין כתובות עז ב).⁷ והנה ביום עלותו למרום עושין הסימן הזה, עד כאן דבריו.

Benei Yisaskhar, Ma'amarei Hodesh Iyyar 3:4

It is a custom of Israel that school-age children shoot with a bow (*keshet*) on this day. And I have heard from his honor, my teacher, R. Menahem Mendel of Rimonov, that the reason is that during the days of R. Shimon bar Yoḥai, the rainbow (*keshet*) was not seen in the sky. So on the day of his ascent to heaven, we display this sign.

In the wake of the great flood in Parashat Noah, God established a sign that He would no longer seek to entirely destroy humanity.⁸ The appearance of the rainbow, the *keshet*, after a heavy rain is a reminder to God that He promised not to harm us. It is a sign to us that God could have brought a second great flood and He didn't. However, when R. Shimon bar Yoḥai was alive, his presence was enough to prevent God from even considering destroying the world. Therefore, no sign of the rainbow was necessary and consequently it did not appear. According to the Benei Yisaskhar, the archery bows of the children appear at the same time that the bow in heaven, the rainbow reappears—upon the death of R. Shimon bar Yoḥai. However, this explanation raises its own questions. There have been many righteous people over the course of Jewish history and Rabbinic literature has a robust vocabulary and store of images that it uses to speak of their righteousness. Why is the bow and arrow associated with R. Shimon bar Yoḥai in specific?⁹ Why does his presence, more so than other righteous people, trigger the absence of the bow? And of course, if the bow is a bad thing, a negative sign, and we do not want God to be reminded with it, then shouldn't the children be avoiding bows rather than displaying them?!

Perhaps R. Shimon bar Yoḥai is associated with the absence of the heavenly bow not only on account of his righteousness, but as a reflection of his personality and his approach to life. Maybe the bow and arrow is not merely rendered superfluous by him, but is incompatible with him in some way. There are two Rabbinic passages that demonstrate R. Shimon bar Yoḥai's total commitment to learning Torah and his "all or nothing" personality:

⁶ R. Tzvi Elimelekh Shapira, 1783-1841, Poland.

⁷ An earlier source for this is Talmud Yerushalmi Berakhot 9:2.

⁸ Bereishit 9:11-16.

⁹ It is also said that the rainbow did not appear during the times of King Hizkiyah. However these are the only two figures in Rabbinic literature associated with the absence of a rainbow.



ספרי דברים מב

רבי שמעון בן יוחי אומר: אין לדבר סוף! קוצר בשעת קציר, חורש בשעת חריש, דש בשעת שרב, זורה בשעת הרוח, אימתי אדם למד תורה? אלא כשישראל עושים רצונו של מקום, מלאכתם נעשית על ידי אחרים, שנאמר **ועמדו זרים ורעו צאנכם וגו'** (ישעיה סא:ה), וכשאינם עושים רצון המקום, מלאכתם נעשית על ידי עצמם, ולא עוד אלא שמלאכת אחרים נעשה על ידם, שנאמר **ועבדת את אויביך וגו'** (דברים כח:מח).

Sifrei Devarim #42

R. Shimon bar Yoḥai says: There is no end to this! [If a person] reaps in the time of reaping, plows in the time of plowing, threshes in the time of heat, winnows in the time of wind, when will a person study Torah? Rather, when Israel acts according to God's will, their work will be done by others, as it says, **The foreigners will stand in and herd your flocks** (Yeshayahu 61:5) and when Israel does not act according to God's will, they will do their own work, and not only that, but the work of others will be done by them, as it says: **And you shall serve your enemies** (Devarim 28:48).

In this passage, R. Shimon bar Yoḥai demonstrates his clear disdain for the normal way that people go about making a living. Growing and harvesting crops is too time consuming, an unabidable distraction from the Torah learning which should be a person's sole pursuit. Under persecution by the Romans, R. Shimon does get the opportunity to live the life of total Torah learning that he advocates for during his years hiding from his pursuers in a cave:

תלמוד בבלי שבת לג:

...אזלו טשו במערתא. איתרחיש ניסא איברי להו חרובא ועינא דמיא והוו משלחי מנייהו והוו יתבי עד צוארייהו בחלא. כולי יומא גרסי. בעידן צלויי לבשו מיכסו ומצלו והדר משלחי מנייהו כי היכי דלא ליבלו. איתבו תריסר שני במערתא. אתא אליהו וקם אפיתחא דמערתא. אמר: מאן לודעיה לבר יוחי דמית קיסר ובטיל גזירתיה?! נפקו חזו אינשי דקא כרבי זרעי, אמר: מניחין חיי עולם ועוסקין בחיי שעה! כל מקום שנותנין עיניהן מיד נשרף. יצתה בת קול ואמרה להם: להחריב עולמי יצאתם?! חזרו למערתכם...

Talmud Bavli Shabbat 33b

[R. Shimon bar Yoḥai and his son R. Elazar] went and hid in a cave. A miracle took place and a carob tree and a spring of water were created for them. They would take off their clothes and sit buried up to their necks in sand, learning for the entire day. At the time of prayer they would get dressed and pray covered up and then they would take off their clothes so that they would not wear out. They sat in the cave for twelve years until Eliyahu came and stood at the entrance to the cave. He said, "Who will notify bar Yoḥai that the Caesar has died and his decree is nullified?!" They went out and they saw people who were plowing and planting. He said, "They are abandoning eternal life and engaging in temporal life!" Every place where they set their eyes was immediately burned. A heavenly echo emerged and said to them, "Did you come to destroy my world?! Go back into your cave..."



These two anecdotes are illustrative of R. Shimon's approach. According to him service to God through the study of Torah must be constant and relentless. Burying one's own body in sand in order to study is praiseworthy, but burying a seed in the ground to grow food is a waste of time, a focus on the temporary and fleeting over what truly matters. This is the opposite of a bow mentality. When one shoots with a bow, as opposed to when one uses a more direct or hand-to-hand weapon or tool, the act is divided into two very discrete moments. First one pulls the bow close to one's body, a moment of tension in the bow and in the human being, a moment of focus and presence. Then one releases the bow. While the arrow flies to its target, the bow is slack and the human needs to allow the arrow to fly unimpeded. An arrow does not fly unless it is left alone. The bow's refractory period is critical to the arrow's success.

A bow mentality allows for periods of focused intensity and also for moments of rest and rejuvenation. R. Shimon bar Yoḥai believes that there is no time for rest, no purpose to it. He does not see a way to divide one's energies between different projects that support and enable one another. R. Shimon bar Yoḥai's approach is to hammer and hammer, stab and stab continuously; he is not equipped to release. Although R. Shimon bar Yoḥai does not have a bow mindset, he does seem to have arrows,¹⁰ the disapproving fire that he sends forth from his eyes.

The other major Talmudic figure associated with the time of Sefirat HaOmer is R. Akiva. Traditionally, this time commemorates the loss of his students through the military revolt of Bar Kokhba and the spiritual malady of mutual disrespect.¹¹ This can add another layer to understanding the imagery of the arrow in specific and can help us understand why it is that school-children do the shooting according to this custom. Tehillim refers to young men as arrows:

תהלים קכז:ד

קְחִצִּים בְּיַד־גִּבּוֹר כֵּן בְּנֵי הַנְּעוּרִים:

Tehillim 127:4

Like arrows in the hand of a warrior so are the young men (lit. sons of youth).

And Rashi explains that these young men are actually the students of one's youth.

רש"י שם

כֵּן בְּנֵי הַנְּעוּרִים - התלמידים שאדם מעמיד בנעוריו.

¹⁰ In fact, R. Yoḥanan explicitly compares fire to arrows. See Talmud Bavli Bava Kama 21b-22a.

¹¹ Talmud Bavli Yevamot 62b.



Rashi on Tehillim 127:4

So are the sons of youth—The students that a person establishes in his youth.

The language that Rashi uses for these students is almost an exact quotation from R. Akiva himself!

מדרש תנחומא (וורשא) חיי שרה ו

רבי עקיבא אומר בבקר זרע את זרעך (קהלת יא:ו), אם העמדת תלמידים בנערותך, אל תחדל לך מלהעמיד בזקנותך, מעשה ברבי עקיבא שהיו לו שלש מאות תלמידים בנערותו ומתו כלם, ואלולי שהעמיד שבעה תלמידים בזקנותו, לא היה תלמיד שיהא קורא על שמו.

Midrash Tanhuma (Warsaw) Hayyei Sarah 6

R. Akiva said, **In the morning you should plant your planting** (Kohelet 11:6)—If you established students in your youth, do not refrain from establishing [them] in your old age. A story about R. Akiva who had 300 students of his youth and they all died, and were it not for the seven students he established in his old age, he would not have a student called by his name.

Students have the important quality of an arrow. In their youth, they are saturated with the influences of parents, teachers, and peers and then they need to be released to find their own targets, to accomplish what they need to. A child who is treated like an arrow will grow up to be a successful adult, but a child who is never released and never freed, can not reach their potential. Students are only effective once they are deployed, but there is a risk of releasing them from the sphere of influence and allowing them to fly off on their own. Perhaps the students play with the bows and arrows to remind their teachers and parents that children are indeed arrows and that they need to be released at some point from the bow.

This is in line with the perspective of R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapiro,¹² the Piasecno Rebbe, author of the Hovot HaTalmidim. In his introduction to the parents and teachers he writes that the best way for students to learn is to harness their desire for independence, to give them a sense of responsibility to themselves:

חובת התלמידים, מבוא

לא די ללמד את הנער רק שחוב עליו לשמע לקול המחנך ותו לא, כי לא יועיל בזה בלבד, כי לסוף יראה את רבו למתנגדו ועריץ זר עליו כנ"ל. העקר הוא להכניס בלב דעה זו, שידע שהוא - הנער בעצמו הוא עקר המחנך, לא קטן ונער הוא, רק נצר מטע ד' בכרם ישראל הוא, ועליו הטיל ד' חוב זה לגדל ולחנך את נצר זה, את עצמו לעץ גדול עץ החיים ולעשותו לעבד ד' צדיק וגדול בתורה...

¹² 1889-1943, Warsaw.



Hovat HaTalmidim, Introduction

It isn't sufficient to teach a child that they listen to the teacher and that's it, for this alone will not be effective. For in the end he will look at his rabbi as his adversary and like a foreign tyrant. The fundamental [approach] is to insert this mindset into his heart—that he should know that he, the child himself, is the real teacher. He himself is not just a small kid, but a planting of God in the vineyard of Israel, and God has entrusted him with the obligation to raise and direct this planting—himself—into a great tree, a tree of life, and to make himself into a servant of God, righteous and great in Torah...

In some ways, it's much harder to use a bow and arrow because it is a method that entails some loss of control. An arrow can be intercepted by even a slight wind. The archer needs to have a large amount of faith and a willingness to wait as the arrow travels towards its target. Students are like arrows because you must release them and you must have faith in them. Just as the Hovat HaTalmidim teaches that the students have to be their own teachers and be given some free reign, the teachers also have to learn from the bow and arrow. We need to allow ourselves to engage in moments of intense focus and then give ourselves times to absorb and grow. We need to relax and get a little bit of distance in order to hit the target. The mindset of R. Shimon bar Yohai is that study is relentless. The mindset of the bow is that learning is episodic. The intensity needs to wax and wane.

This bow mindset is also reflected in the culmination of Sefirat HaOmer, the holiday of Shavuot—referred to in the Torah as Atzeret. The biblical calendar of agriculturally-based religious holidays divides the year neatly into two halves. On the 15th of Elul, we celebrate the fall harvest with Sukkot and six months later, the spring harvest coincides with our celebration of Pesah. Each of these festivals lasts for seven days and then is followed by an extra gathering, an *atzeret*, at its conclusion. However, the *atzeret* celebrations of Sukkot and Pesah differ in their timing. The concluding festival of Sukkot, now called Shemini Atzeret, happens immediately at the conclusion of the holiday, giving Sukkot the feeling of being an eight day celebration, whereas the *atzeret* of Pesah arrives a full seven weeks later with the arrival of Shavuot.

Rashi¹³ explains that the reason for Shemini Atzeret is that God has gotten used to our company, the closeness created during the duration of Sukkot, and He does not want to allow us to leave. The *atzeret* that follows Sukkot reflects a separation anxiety, wanting to be on the high of the holiday for as long as we can and a fear of letting it go. During Elul, we recite the Psalm 27, begging God to let us dwell in His house forever. Shavuot, on the other hand, comes as a target, an *atzeret* that we can return to after being away from God for seven weeks. It is a boomerang, a bow and arrow. On Shavuot, we receive the Torah, the tools that we need to

¹³ BeMidbar 29:36.



live independently, to leave the nest. These guidelines must come to us after the experience of self-reliance that Sefirat HaOmer is designed to reflect.

We can't live in a state of constant high tension, can't always live in a state of high stress. And we also can't live in a time of constant closeness, *kavannah*, and spiritual highs. Ours is not the world of R. Shimon bar Yoḥai, we need breaks to live normally, happily, productively. Drawing strength from the intense moments to launch us, flying to our goals. Pulling back to launch forward. Perhaps this is why Sefirat HaOmer is organized around weeks, Shabbatot, as its defining structure. A series of moments of pause which are crucial for us to reach even higher.

Wishing you a Shabbat that counts.

