

THIRTY THREE

Sermon, Kol Chai, Saturday 21st May 2011

Tomorrow we celebrate the strange little festival of Lag Ba'Omer, the thirty third day of the counting of the Omer. The first thing that's strange is that the omer, when we count the days from one festival to the next, became a sad period: to this day it is all but devoid of the happiest occasion in the life of most Jews throughout history, Jewish weddings. Our rabbis in their wisdom linked the sadness to great massacres in the time of the Romans, especially the loss of many of the students of Rabbi Akiva. But that doesn't sound like a real reason to me. I suspect the sadness came first and the explanation came along after. Jewish life and culture is often like that. I can't help thinking that the seven weeks of the omer became a sad time in the Jewish calendar, because it's a happy time after Easter in the Christian calendar. It's what I call the *davka* theory of Jewish history: the other lot do X, so we do Y.

And then even stranger is interrupting the sad time with a happy day, the 33rd day of the omer. In Hebrew you can use letters for numbers so 33 is lamed gimel, or LAG Ba'Omer. Since the twelfth century this has been a time of Jewish parties, outings, bonfires and hair-cutting ceremonies. In the seventeenth century, in the Rhineland they used to close the Jewish schools and the teachers distributed beer and cake to the students at their own expense. Even those who fasted in memory of those who had died in the Crusades at this time of year, would interrupt their mourning on Lag Ba Omer. And so to this day Jewish schools give their students a fun time on Lag Ba Omer and we are holding a picnic tomorrow morning.

So a happy day, but nobody is really sure why. Some say that the massacre of the students of Rabbi Akiva ended on that day, but that's a strange reason to throw a party. No massacre today folks, let's have a party! In the days of Rabbi Akiva, there was serious doubt whether Judaism would be able to continue. The persecutions of the Emperor Hadrian were so severe, and so much knowledge carried in people's heads, that all could have been lost. Yet we are told that after the bad times were over, Rabbi Akiva started again with five new students. Akiva was one of life's great optimists (Babylonian Talmud, Makkot 24b):

The story is told that, as Rabban Gamaliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Akiva were walking on the road, they heard the noise of the crowds at Rome a hundred and twenty miles away. They all fell a-weeping, but Rabbi Akiva seemed merry. Said they to him: Why are you so happy? Said he: Why do you weep? Said they: These heathens who bow down to images and burn incense to idols live in safety and ease, whereas our Temple, the 'Footstool' of our God, is burnt down by fire, and should we then not weep? He replied: That's why I am happy!. If they who offend God fare thus, how much better shall fare they that do obey Him! Said they to him: Akiva, you have comforted us! Akiva, you have comforted us!

But here too the reason for rejoicing seems a bit forced. The other lot are having a party so we're going to have an even better one. It all sounds rather unreal to me.

What is fascinating is to realise that the number 33 has some kind of significance in every religion and in some strange historical events. Take for example the *magen david*, the star of David, which can be seen as two three pointed stars superimposed one above the other, or interlocking, three and three. We name it after King David who ruled in Jerusalem for thirty three years (2 Samuel 5:5). In more recent times, West London Synagogue has been built on the corner which links 33 Upper Berkeley Street with 33 Seymour Place London W1. Many of the special thirty threes are to do with death and birth. Alexander the Great died at the age of 33: Pope John Paul 1st was Pope for just 33 days. In the Torah, a woman when a woman has a son he is to be circumcised on the eighth day, and his mother continues to be ritually impure for a further 33 days (Leviticus 12: 3). Alexander the Great died at the age of 33: Pope John Paul 1st was Pope for just 33 days. The phoenix is a mythical sacred firebird which rises alive from the ashes: the town named after the bird, Phoenix Arizona lies at latitude 33 degrees north. But this year, the number 33 has taken on an added significance. The American Christian preacher Harold Camping says the world is coming to an end at 6 pm this evening. I'm not sure if he knows about Lag Ba'Omer, but if he did it would surely throw his calculations into confusion, because it is undoubtedly a happy day in Jewish tradition. And then we had the 33 trapped miners. When they were rescued in Chile last October, a number of Christian groups saw this as especially significant. It took 33 days drilling to reach them. The rescue began on the date 13/10/10 which adds up to 33 and the rescue shaft was 66 centimetres wide.

Now I'm not trying to suggest there is anything miraculous about all this. Like the codes that many people find embedded in the bible, you can always find something if you look hard enough. But what I am trying to suggest is that the number 33 has long been considered mysterious, so it's not surprising that it pops up in Jewish life as well. The mystery surrounding the number 33 may be the real origin of Lag Ba'Omer. But I confidently predict that the world will not come to an end at 6 pm this evening, and so our Kol Chai picnic tomorrow will be happening on schedule.

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