

Evolving Judaism

Many people think that Judaism is so conservative that it simply doesn't change, and we are still rooted in a tradition that is 3000 years old. The reality is that Judaism is constantly changing. Not always in the same direction and not always as quickly or as dramatically as we might like. And a great example is the period of the *Omer* that we're in at the moment and the celebration of *Lag BaOmer*, the 33rd day of the *Omer*, that we have just celebrated.

The *Torah* simply says that on the day after *Pesach*, one should bring a sheaf of barley, which is the first grain of the new harvest, to the Temple as thanksgiving and hope for a good harvest over the summer. And then count 49 days until the festival of *Shavuot* (Pentecost) which is another harvest festival, for wheat.

Judaism was, initially, an agricultural religion. But the Babylonian exile (586 BCE) for the first time removed Judaism from an agricultural world and placed it in an urban setting. The sanctuary and the temple had gone, and new ways of relating to God and of keeping the tradition alive developed, based around the synagogue, study, and keeping the national aspirations alive.

Eventually, under Persia, Jews were allowed to return to Israel and rebuild the Temple and agriculture became an important feature of Jewish life again. After the Second Temple was destroyed and Jews went into a long period of exile that lasted for 2000 years, the relevance of all the agricultural laws once again lapsed. Only to be revived in our lifetime in Israel (for those who care). The Talmud added a whole slew of new laws, modifications, and customs

In rabbinic literature (*Yevamot 62B*) it says that R. Akiva (50-135 CE) had 12,000 pairs of disciples throughout the land of Israel and at one moment between *Pesach* and *Shavuot* they all died because they didn't treat each other respectfully (surprised it hasn't happened in Israel today)! The Talmud makes no mention of a period of mourning to commemorate the death of R. Akiva's pupils and it is not until the period of the Babylonian *Geonim* around the first millennium that this tradition is mentioned.

Mourning rights in general in Judaism consist of not celebrating weddings not shaving, cutting hair, wearing one's best clothes, buying new ones, or doing things that generally lead to merriment. All of this was associated with mourning for the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. The Bar Cochba rebellion in 134 CE proved to be disastrous on many levels. It divided the nation and religious authorities between those who supported it and those who didn't. The main supporter was R. Akiva who the Romans tortured to death and killed large numbers of his students. There could be a link there, but why wait so long before legislating, and why did the extended period of mourning become such a significant part of Jewish ritual? One theory is that with the exile and being subject to other powers, the rabbis did not want to glorify military action or rebellion against the host authorities.

There are many non-Jewish traditions against marrying during harvest time. Ovid and Plutarch recalled that marriages shouldn't take place during this time of the year. There's a famous Old English rhyme "marry in May and rue the day"! In many farming communities, there was anxiety that evil spirits would come and destroy the harvest. And even in the Talmud, there's an evil spirit called *Tavoach* who threatens destruction leading up to Shavuot (Shabbat 129b).

My favorite explanation is that about 1000 years ago both Christianity and Islam were oppressing the Jews and trying to force us to convert on pain of death. The Crusades started up about this time of the year in the spring which led to massacres. And at Easter, the priests would preach against the Jews for killing Jesus and encourage violence. It was not a good time to be out celebrating in public or displaying joy. So here was an important example of an innovation brought about by historical circumstances.

But what about *LaG BaOmer* the 33rd day of the *Omer*? No mention either till the thirteenth century and adopted by the Kabbalists in Safed as a happy day when the plague affecting *Akiva's* pupils stopped and there was a brief respite from mourning. But more importantly, it was declared the anniversary of the death of Shimon Bar Yochai the seminal Talmudic mystic who with his son hid in a cave from the Romans for 12 years. Originally only the Sephardi mystics made a fuss at Meron in the Gallil where they said he was buried. But then the Chassidim muscled in, leading to huge riotous and drunken crowds that a few years ago resulted in disaster in a mad crush. The day then and now is celebrated with huge bonfires and playing with bows and arrows to fight off the Romans (and current evil spirits)!

All of this has become an integral part of the Jewish calendar even though for two thousand years it never was. Times can and have changed. This is a perfect example.

Nowadays many say that we should adapt this period to commemorate the crimes of the Nazis instead of Romans and Christians. Others will apply this to terrorists too. But of course, when it comes to anything to do with religion there is no way we can all agree. After all the Ashkenazi and Sefardi worlds cannot agree on which days of the *Omer*, the period of mourning runs for and when it ends!

The one thing I have learned about our wonderful religion is that you cannot please everyone, so at least try to please yourself.