
SEFIRAT HA'OMER

& LAG B'OMER

An Opportunity for Personal Growth in Preparation for Shavuot

Counting the Omer is a mitzvah that connects Pesach to Shavuot, the Exodus from Egypt to the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. This period is also a time of mourning for the deaths of the twenty-four thousand students of Rabbi Akiva. A highlight of this period is Lag B'Omer, when Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai revealed the Zohar (Kabbalah) just before he passed away. The Sefirah (counting) period provides a framework to enable us to refine our character, help rectify the loss of the students of Rabbi Akiva, and improve our ability to acquire the Torah in preparation for Shavuot.

This class will address:

- ~ Why do we count the Omer?
- ~ Why do we count up from one to forty-nine rather than the reverse?
- ~ Why do we mourn during this time?
- ~ What is Lag B'Omer and why do we celebrate on that day? Who was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and why is his death a reason for happiness?
- ~ What are the reasons for some of the customs of Lag B'Omer?
- ~ Why is the seven-week period from Pesach to Shavuot especially suited for personal development and growth?

Class Outline:

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SECTION I. THE OMER OFFERING

Before any newly grown grains – wheat, barley, oats, rye, and spelt – may be eaten, the equivalent of one day's worth of barley flour (for one person) must be offered in the Temple on the second day of Pesach, in recognition that all produce is ultimately a gift from God. This offering of barley flour is known as the Omer offering. (Today, without the Temple, the new grains are permitted after the second day of Pesach).

PART A. THE SOURCE IN THE TORAH

1. **Vayikra (Leviticus) 23:9-11 – The Omer offering at the start of the new harvest.**

God spoke to Moshe (Moses) saying, “Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When you come to the land that I am giving you and you reap the harvest, you shall bring the Omer of the first of your harvest to the Kohen. He shall wave the Omer before God to be an appeasement for you; on the day following the Sabbath (the first day of Pesach) the Kohen shall wave it.”

וידבר יקוק אל משה לאמר דבר אל בני ישראל ואמרת
אלהם כי תבאו אל הארץ אשר אני נתן לכם וקצרתם
את קצירה והבאתם את עמר ראשית קצירכם אל
הכהן: והניף את העמר לפני יקוק לרצונכם ממחרת
השבת יניפנו הכהן:

PART B. THE MESSAGE OF THE OMER OFFERING

1. **Chizkuni, Vayikra 23:10 – Showing appreciation to God for the harvest.**

It would not be appropriate to eat from the new harvest without bringing a portion of it as a gift of thanks to God.

אין דרך ארץ שתאכלו מן החדש עד שתביאו ממנו
דורון להקב"ה.

2. **Vayikra Rabbah 28:2 – The Omer shows gratitude to God for providing the crops.**

Rabbi Yannai said, “The way of the world is that a when person buys some meat from the market he must expend much effort and hard work until he cooks it. Yet, while people are sleeping God makes the wind blow and brings the clouds, which cause the plants to grow and nourish the fruits, and we only pay Him the value of an Omer. This is the meaning of the verse: “You shall bring an Omer of the first of your harvest to the Kohen.”

א"ר ינאי בנוהג שבעולם אדם לוקח ליטרא אחת של
בשר מן השוק כמה יגיעות הוא יגע כמה צער הוא
מצטער עד שבישלה והבריות ישנן על מטותיהן
והקדוש ברוך הוא משיב רוחות ומעלה עננים ומגדל
צמחים ומדשן את הפירות ואין נותנים לו אלא שכר
העומר הה"ד והבאתם את עומר ראשית קצירכם אל
הכהן:

3. **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Vayikra 23:10 – Our prosperity and joy of life finds direction and meaning within the context of God and Torah.**

When you have attained, not only freedom, but also national independence which the possession of one's own land gives, and you cut the produce of the land, bring that which the land has produced into your own personal possession, then bring the first Omer that you cut, i.e., the amount that corresponds to one day's food, to the Kohen, to your representative in God's Sanctuary ... This cutting corresponds to the real harvest of the land – wheat, barley, oats, rye, and spelt ... This Omer is brought from the barley, which is the earliest grain to ripen.

To the Omer, the law of waving is added – consisting of horizontal movements in all four directions, followed by moving upwards and downwards. By the procedure of waving, one's material nourishment (flour), one's well being (oil), and one's mental satisfaction with life (incense), which are all represented in the Omer, are stripped of every idea of selfishness. (Represented by our giving the Omer offering to the Kohen who does the waving – see Vayikra 22:10-11.) Then this symbol of our earthly existence, with all its prosperity and joy of life, is placed in the Temple to acknowledge that only through the Torah's ruling influence can we find our dedication to the community and to God.

SECTION II. COUNTING THE OMER

The mitzvah in the Torah is to count the days and weeks from the second day of Pesach until the evening before Shavuot, a total of forty – nine days; a time of preparation which parallels the Exodus from Egypt to the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

PART A. THE SOURCES FOR COUNTING THE OMER IN THE TORAH

1. **Vayikra 23:15-16 – There is a mitzvah to count out each of the forty-nine days from Pesach (at which time the Jews left Egypt) to Shavuot (at which time they received the Torah at Mt. Sinai).**

You should count for yourselves from the day after Shabbat [Pesach], from the day that you brought the Omer of the waving; seven weeks, they shall be complete.

Until the day after the seventh week you shall count fifty days; and you shall bring a new flour offering for God.

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמִּזְחַר הַשֶּׁבֶת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָתְכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר
הַתְּנוּפָה: שִׁבְעַת שָׁבֻעוֹת תִּמְנוּת תִּהְיֶינָה.
עַד מִזְחַר הַשֶּׁבֶת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִישִׁים יוֹם;
וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַה'.

2. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 16:9 – Apart from counting the days, there is also a mitzvah to count each of the seven weeks.**

Seven weeks shall you count for yourselves; from the time the sickle is first put to the standing grain you should begin counting seven weeks.

שִׁבְעָה שָׁבְעוֹת תִּסְפֹּר-לָךְ: מִהַחֵל חֲרֹמֶשׁ בַּקֶּמֶה תִּחַל
לְסַפֵּר שִׁבְעָה שָׁבְעוֹת.

The significance and symbolism of the act of counting 49 days is answered by the following question: why is the Omer offering from barley and the offering on Shavuot from wheat?

3. **Rabbi Aryeh Carmel, Masterplan, Feldheim, p. 205 – The 49-day count is a seven step process from physical freedom (which we share with animals) to a spiritual purpose and destiny (which is a uniquely human aspiration).**

The Omer on Pesach was from the barley harvest. The offering on Shavuot was of wheat. Barley is mainly food for animals. Wheat is food for human beings. The Torah hints to us that physical independence by itself still leaves man – from the Torah perspective – on the animal level. The counting of the forty-nine days signifies a sevenfold refining process and marks our progress to full human status with our acceptance of the Torah at Sinai, seven weeks after the Exodus.

PART B. COUNTING FORTY-NINE DAYS AND SEVEN WEEKS**1. Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Chagigah 17b – Counting days and weeks.**

Abaye said that it is a mitzvah to count the days, as the verse says, “Count fifty days” (Vayikra 23); and it is also a mitzvah to count the weeks, as the verse says, “Seven weeks you shall count for yourselves” (Devarim 16). Furthermore, [at the end of the Omer period] the festival is called “Weeks” (Shavuot).

והאמר אביי מצוה למימני יומי דכתיב (ויקרא כג) תספרו חמשים יום ומצוה למימני שבועי דכתיב (דברים טז) שבעה שבועות תספר לך ועוד חג שבועות כתיב.

2. Talmud Bavli, Menachot 65b – Counting forty-nine days (and not forty-eight or fifty days).

You might think that you must count fifty days and sanctify the fifty-first day. Therefore it says, “They should be seven complete weeks.” You might think that you should count forty-eight days and sanctify the forty-ninth. Therefore the verse says, “Count fifty days.” How so? You must count forty-nine days and sanctify the fiftieth day, just like the Jubilee year.

יכול יספור חמישים ומקדש יום החמשים ואחד? ת”ל שבע שבתות תמימות תהינה; “יכול יספור ארבעים ושמונה ויקדש יום מ”ט? ת”ל תספרו חמישים יום.” הא כיצד? מנה ארבעים ותשעה וקדש יום חמישים (תו”כ).

3. Rambam (Maimonides), Hilchot T’midin U’musafin (The Laws of Continual and Additional Offerings) 7:22-25 – Laws of counting the Omer.

It is a positive mitzvah to count seven complete weeks from the day of the bringing of the Omer, as the verse states, “You shall count for yourselves from the day following the Sabbath” (Vayikra 23:15). It is a mitzvah to count the days with the weeks, as the verse states, “Count fifty days” (Vayikra 23:16). One should count at the earliest time: therefore, one should count at night from the night of the sixteenth of Nisan.

If a person forgot to count at night he may count during the day. Counting should be done while standing, but if one counted while sitting he has fulfilled his obligation. This mitzvah applies to all Jewish men in every place and at all times. Women and non-Jewish slaves are exempt from counting the Omer. Each night before counting one should say the blessing, “Who has commanded us with His commandments, and commanded us regarding the counting of the Omer.” If one counted without a blessing he has fulfilled his obligation and should not go back and make the blessing.

מצות עשה לספור שבע שבתות תמימות, מיום הבאת העומר – שנאמר “וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת” (ויקרא כג, טו); ומצוה למנות הימים, עם השבועות – שנאמר “תספרו חמישים יום” (ויקרא כג, טז). ומתחילת היום מונין; לפיכך מונה בלילה, מליל ששה עשר בניסן.

שכח ולא מנה בלילה, מונה ביום. ואין מונין אלא מעומד; ואם מנה מיושב, יצא. מצוה זו על כל איש מישראל, ובכל מקום ובכל זמן; ונשים ועבדים, פטורין מספירת העומר. וצריך לברך בכל לילה אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וציוונו על ספירת העומר – קודם שיספור; מנה ולא בירך – יצא, ואינו חוזר ומברך.

4. **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Vayikra 23:16 – Significance of counting both the days and the weeks : counting the days reflects the process by which a person achieves physical purity; counting the weeks is to remind us of the Shabbat which testifies that the world belongs to the Creator.**

Counting of days is also found in connection with the *zav* and *zavah* (someone who experienced a bodily discharge which causes impurity). In general, the passing of a period of seven days in the laws of *tumah* and *taharah* (impurity and purity) are given for striving to leave the condition of *tumah* and bringing it to a close, to enter a period of *taharah* on the eighth day. A sevenfold counting of periods of seven days, a counting of forty-nine days, to enter a new condition on the fiftieth day would be the most complete nullification of the *tumah* restraint of being bound by one's senses, and the fiftieth day would bring the most positive entry into the *taharah*-realm of moral freedom. Just as the fiftieth Jubilee year brought a fresh foundation of the Jewish State ... so too the Omer denotes inner moral freedom ... necessary for the reception of the Torah.

In accordance with this, the fiftieth day, i.e. the day after the seven times seven days, has a very similar meaning as the eighth day of *milah* (circumcision). To this we can combine the idea of counting the Sabbath weeks and the counting of the days together, then they appear simply as an emanation from those two institutions – the Sabbath and *milah* – with which God wished to lay the foundation for Israel to be the People of His Law.

Paying homage to God in nature and history and the resulting subordination of man and his position in the world to the service of God, as is taught by the Sabbath, and struggling for moral purity by subordinating one's free will ... as *milah* demands, were established even before we received the Torah. And it is just these factors which the counting of the days and the weeks from the Omer to the Day of Receiving the Torah is to bring home to our minds, each year afresh, as the preliminary fundamental conditions for our great mission in the world.

PART C. REASONS FOR COUNTING

1. **Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 306 – Counting manifests longing and desire for the great and awesome day when we receive the Torah.**

The simple explanation is that the essence of the Jewish people is the Torah, and because of the Torah the heavens and earth and Israel were created, as the verse states, "If not for My covenant [of Torah] day and night I would not have appointed the laws of heaven and earth" (Yirmiyahu/Jeremiah 33:25). [Torah] is the foundation and the reason that we were redeemed and left Egypt – in order to receive the Torah at Sinai and to keep it.

Since the acceptance of the Torah was the goal of our redemption and serves as the foundation of the Jewish people, and through it we achieved our greatness, we were commanded to count from the day after [the first day of] Pesach until the day that the Torah was given. This manifests our great desire for that awesome day which our hearts yearn for just as a servant yearns for shade. We count constantly – when will the day come

משרשי המצוה על צד הפשט, לפי שכל עיקרן של ישראל אינו אלא התורה, ומפני התורה נבראו שמים וארץ וישראל, וכמו שכתוב [ירמיהו ל"ג, כ"ה] אם לא בריתי יומם ולילה וגו'. והיא העיקר והסיבה שנגאלו ויצאו ממצרים כדי שיקבלו התורה בסיני ויקיימוה,

ומפני כן, כי היא כל עיקרן של ישראל ובעבורה נגאלו ועלו לכל הגדולה שעלו אליה, נצטוונו למנות ממחרת יום טוב של פסח עד יום נתינת התורה, להראות בנפשנו החפץ הגדול אל היום הנכבד הנכסף ללבנו, כעבד ישאף צל, וימנה תמיד מתי יבוא העת הנכסף אליו שיצא לחירות, כי המנין מראה לאדם כי כל ישעו וכל חפצו להגיע אל הזמן ההוא.

that we yearn for, the day that we left slavery?
Because counting [towards a certain date] shows
a person that all his desire and longing is to reach
that time.

2. **Rabbeinu Nissim, End of Pesachim (p. 28b in the Rif) – Reminder of the Omer and the offerings in the Temple.**

When Moshe said to them, “You will serve God on this mountain” (Shemot/Exodus 3:12), the Jews said to him, “Moshe Rabbeinu – when will this happen?” He told them it would be after fifty days. Each person counted for himself. For this reason the Sages made [the mitzvah of] counting the Omer. In other words, in our days, when we do not bring any offering or the Omer, we only count fifty days to the [day of] happiness of the [giving of the] Torah, as the Jewish people did at that time. This is certainly only allegorical, for the main purpose [of our counting] is to serve as a reminder of [the Omer and the sacrifices in] the Temple.

בשעה שאמר להם משה תעבדון את האלהים על ההר הזה (שמות ג' י"ב), אמרו לו ישראל: משה רבינו אימת עבודה זו? אמר להם: לסוף חמישים יום. והיו מונין כל אחר ואחד לעצמו. מכאן קבעו חכמים לספירת העומר. כלומר בזמן הזה שאין אנו מביאין קרבן ולא עומר אלא מוחשבין נ' יום לשמחת התורה כמו שמונן ישראל באותו זמן. וזה ודאי דרך מדרש הוא דעיקרא דמילתא זכר למקדש.

3. **Rabbeinu Yehudah HaChasid, Intentions for Shavuot – Determining the day of the Festival of Shavuot.**

Since these days are [when people are] busy in the fields, and there is no one who can tell the villagers whether the month of Iyar is full or lacking [whether it has twenty-nine or thirty days], the Torah says, “Count fifty days,” and immediately afterwards, “It will be a holy day for you.”

לפי שהימים הללו ימי מלאכת השדה ואין מי שיגיד לכפריים אם אייר מלא או חסר, לכך אמרה התורה “תספור חמישים יום” ומיד אח”כ “מקרא קודש יהיה לכם”.

4. **Avudraham, p. 85a – Trigger for teshuvah.**

Because the world is worried during the period between Pesach until Shavuot about the crops and the [fruit of the] trees, God therefore commanded us to count, in order that we should return to Him with a complete heart and beseech Him to be merciful to His creations and to the crops.

מפני שהעולם נתון בצער מפסח עד שבועות על התבואות ועל האילנות, לפיכך ציווה הקב”ה לספור בכדי שנשוב אליו בלבב שלם להתחנן לפניו לרחם על הבריות ועל העומר ...

5. **Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim (Guide for the Perplexed), 3:43 – To elevate and endear Shavuot.**

Shavuot is the time of the giving of the Torah. In order to honor and elevate this day we count the days from the previous festival until it [arrives], like someone who is waiting for a loved one to arrive, who counts the days by the hours.

שבועות הוא יום מתן תורה. כדי לכבד ולרומם יום זה סופרים את הימים מן החג הראשון עד אליו, כמו שהמצפה לאדם האהוב עליו ביותר סופר את הימים בשעות.

This is the reason for counting the Omer from the day that we left Egypt until the day of the giving of the Torah, as this was the ultimate purpose of leaving Egypt: “And I will bring them to Me” (Shemot 19:4).

זה הוא הטעם לספירת העומר מיום הניתקותם ממצרים עד יום מתן תורה, אשר היה הכוונה והתכלית ליציאתם: ואבא אתכם אלי (שמות י"ט:ד).

PART D. COUNTING UP; NOT COUNTING DOWN

1. **Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 306 – Why do we count up from one to forty-nine and not the reverse? Why not begin counting on the first day of Pesach? Since we desire the arrival of Shavuot we do not want to mention the large number of days that remain. We count from the day after Pesach, so as not to detract from the celebration of the Exodus.**

The reason that we count from the [bringing of the] Omer “So many days have passed in our counting,” rather than counting how many days remain, shows our great desire to reach the time [of Shavuot]. Therefore, we do not want to mention at the beginning of our counting such a large number of days that remain until we reach the offering of the two loaves on *Atzeret* (Shavuot). We should not find it difficult [to understand] that once we have passed halfway through the seven weeks we do not count down the few days remaining, as one should not change the nature of the counting in the middle.

Why do we begin counting from the day after [Pesach begins] and not from the first day? The answer is that the first day is entirely dedicated to remembering the great miracle of the Exodus from Egypt, which is a sign and evidence of [the fact that God] created the world, and of the existence of Divine Providence. We may not mix [something else into] that happiness and mention a different idea with it. As such, the counting begins from the second day.

וזהו שאנו מונין לעומר, כלומר כך וכך ימים עברו מן המנין, ואין אנו מונין כך וכך ימים יש לנו לזמן, כי כל זה מראה בנו הרצון החזק להגיע אל הזמן, ועל כן לא נרצה להזכיר בתחילת חשבוננו ריבוי הימים שיש לנו להגיע לקרבן שתי הלחם של עצרת. ואל יקשה עליך לומר, אם כן, אחר שעברו רוב הימים של שבועה שבועות אלו, למה לא נזכיר מיעוט הימים הנשארים, לפי שאין לשנות מטבע החשבון באמצעו.

ואם תשאל, אם כן למה אנו מתחילין אותו ממחרת השבת ולא מיום ראשון, התשובה כי היום הראשון נתייחד כולו להזכרת הנס הגדול והוא יציאת מצרים, שהוא אות ומופת בחידוש העולם ובהשגחת השם על בני האדם, ואין לנו לערב בשמחתו ולהזכיר עמו שום ענין אחר, ועל כן נתקן החשבון מיום שני מיד.

PART E. COUNTING WHILE STANDING

1. **Meah Shearim, Laws of Chodosh and Counting the Omer, p. 105 – The verse that commands the counting has a hint that it should be done standing.**

We have learned from our Rabbis that there is a hint in the Torah that the Omer must be counted while standing. It says, “From the [time the sickle is] first put to the standing wheat you should begin counting” – this [word “standing”] teaches us that one should count while standing.

קבלנו מרבתינו דאסמכתא דספירת העומר בעמידה, מדכתיב 'מהחל חרמש בקמה' תחל לספור, ללמדך שבקימה ובעמידה תספור.

2. **Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 306 – If one counted without standing, the mitzvah is still valid.**

The best way of doing the mitzvah is to count while standing.

ומצוה מן המובחר למנות מעומד.

SECTION III. MOURNING PERIOD

The days between Pesach and Lag B'Omer (the 33rd day of the Omer) are marked by reduced joy (such as not celebrating weddings or playing and listening to live music) because of the tragedies that befell the Jewish people during this period. Some extend this period until Shavuot (which is the 50th day of the Omer). What were these tragedies and how do we respond to them today?

PART A. DEATH OF RABBI AKIVA'S STUDENTS

1. **Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 62b – Rabbi Akiva's students died between Pesach and Atzeret (Shavuot) for showing disrespect to one another.**

Rabbi Akiva says, "If you have learned Torah in your youth you must [continue to] learn Torah in your old age. If you have had students in your youth you must [continue to] have students in your old age," as the verse says, "In the morning plant your seeds and in the evening do not let your hand rest." They said that Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students from Givat to Antiprat and they all died during one period of time because they did not treat each other with respect. The world was desolate until Rabbi Akiva came to the Rabbis of the South and taught them. [They were] Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Yossi, Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua. It was they who re-established Torah at that time.

It was taught that twenty-four thousand students all died between Pesach and Atzeret. Rav Chama bar Abba, or perhaps it was Rabbi Chiya bar Avin, said that they all died a terrible death. What type of death does this refer to? Rabbi Nachman said *askara* (death by choking).

ר"ע אומר למד תורה בילדותו ילמוד תורה בזקנותו
היו לו תלמידים בילדותו יהיו לו תלמידים בזקנותו
שנא' בבקר זרע את זרעך וגו' אמרו שנים עשר אלף
זוגים תלמידים היו לו לרבי עקיבא מגבת עד אנטיפרס
וכולן מתו בפרק אחד מפני שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה
והיה העולם שמם עד שבא ר"ע אצל רבותינו שבדרום
ושנאה להם ר"מ ור' יהודה ור' יוסי ורבי שמעון ורבי
אלעזר בן שמוע והם הם העמידו תורה אותה שעה

תנא כולם מתו מפסח ועד עצרת אמר רב חמא בר
אבא ואיתימא ר' חייא בר אבין כולם מתו מיתה רעה
מאי היא א"ר נחמן אסכרה.

2. **Bereishit (Genesis) Rabbah 61:3 – Rabbi Akiva reminded his new students not to repeat the mistakes of the past: treat each person with love and respect!**

Rabbi Akiva said to his new students, "My sons, the first ones only died because they did not look generously toward one another. Pay attention that you do not act like them."

אמר רבי עקיבא לתלמידיו החדשים: "בניי, הראשונים
לא מתו אלא שהיתה עיניהם צרה אלו לאלו, תנו
דעתכם שלא תעשו כמעשיהם"

3. **Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Mishnas Rabbi Aharon, Vol. III, p. 17 – Why should the students deserve death? Because their lack of mutual respect prevented them from being the true transmitters of the Oral Torah which emphasizes the intrinsic, infinite potential of the human soul.**

To explain [why Rabbi Akiva's students died for a seemingly trivial sin] perhaps we can say that Rabbi Akiva was the foundation of the redaction of the Oral Law, and his students were the ones who would pass on the Oral Law to future generations. Therefore, they had to embody the perfection of all the forty-eight traits through which Torah is acquired (see below Section VI, B). For if they would lack [even one of these traits] they would be lacking in the essence of the acquisition of the Torah, and they would not be able to transmit it in purity and holiness.

Therefore, apart from the fact that God is strict with the righteous to within a hair's breadth, there was also this idea, that since they were lacking in the quality of "Being close with one's fellow students" (which is one of the forty-eight traits), their Torah would be fundamentally flawed. Therefore, they were not worthy of passing on the Oral Law to future generations.

They were also fundamentally lacking in their Torah [learning] because it was not completely pure, and the Oral Law had to be passed on as a complete Torah in every way. Therefore, they did not merit to have the Torah passed on through them, but it was [instead] the Rabbis from the South who merited this. Since the life of the Sages is Torah, as Rambam writes (Hilchot Rotzeach 7:1), they were lacking in the essence of their existence, and that allowed for what happened.

ובביאור הדבר נראה בדרך אפשר, דהרי רבי עקיבא היה היסוד לתושבע"פ, ותלמידיו הם הם שעל ידם היתה המסירה דתושבע"פ לדורות, וממילא צריכים להיות אצלם בתכלית השלימות כל המ"ח דברים שהתורה נקנית בהם, דכחוסר זה הנגה חסר בעצם קניית התורה, כי אינו מקבלה בכל טהרתה וקדושתה

ולכך מלבד הדקדוק עם צדיקים כחוט השערה, היה בזה הענין, דכיון דחסר להם בדיבוק חברים [שהוא א' מהמ"ח דברים], אין תורתם בתכלית כראוי, וממילא לא היו ראויים להיות המוסרים דתושבע"פ לדורות,

וגם דהיה חסר בעצם התורה, דלא היתה במלא טהרתה, ומסירת התושבע"פ לדורות היתה צריכה להיות תורה שלימה בכל עניניה ולכן לא זכו שתימסר תורה על ידם, וזכו בכך דוקא רבותינו שבדרום. וכיון שחיי החכמים תורה כמ"ש הר"מ (הל' רוצח פ"ז ה"א), הרי נחסר מהם עי"ז בעיקר מציאותם, והיה מה שהיה.

PART B. POGROMS AND MASSACRES

1. **Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, Aruch HaShulchan 493:1 – During the Crusades there were massacres during this period of the year.**

The days which are between Pesach and Atzeret have been considered for the past several hundred years by Israel as days of judgement and mourning, as within this short span of time twelve thousand pairs of students of Rabbi Akiva died, as it explains in the Talmud (Yevamot 62b), and they all died of *askara*.

אלו הימים שבין פסח לעצרת, מוחזק אצל כל ישראל זה שנות מאות רבות לימי דין וימי אבל, מפני שבזמן הקצר הזה מתו שנים עשר אלף זוגות תלמידי חכמים תלמידי רבי עקיבא, כדאיתא ביבמות (סב ב) וכולם מתו במיתת אסכרא.

Furthermore, we see that the worst days of the decrees in the hundreds of years of [Jewish life] in France and Germany occurred during this time, as explained in the liturgical poems that the earlier Rabbis made for these days between Pesach and Atzeret. They are full of mourning, lamentation and woe.

ועוד: ראינו שעיקרי ימי הגזירות בשנות מאות שעברו בצרפת ואשכנז הוו בימים אלו, כמבואר מהפיוטים שעשו קדמונינו על שבתות אלו שבין פסח לעצרת. והם מלאים קינים והגה והי.

To help account for the loss of Rabbi Akiva's students, there is a collective responsibility for each individual to improve both his character and Torah study during the Sefirah period, as discussed below in Section V.

SECTION IV. LAG B'OMER

Lag B'Omer is a day of festivity in contrast to the reduced joy from the onset of the Sefirah period. Why is this a happy day?

PART A. RABBI AKIVA'S STUDENTS STOPPED DYING

1. [Avraham Ben Natan HaYarchei, Sefer HaManhig, Vol II, p. 538 – On the 33rd day of counting the Omer, the epidemic rampant among Rabbi Akiva's students abruptly ceased.](#)

I heard in the name of Rabbi Zerachiah HaLevi from Gerona that he found written in an ancient book which came from Spain that they [only] died from Pesach until “Pros” Atzeret ... fifteen days before Atzeret, [which is] Lag B'Omer.

ושמעתי בשם ר' זרחיה הלוי ז"ל מגירונדא, שמצאו כתוב בספר ישן הבא מספרד שמתו מפסח עד פרום עצרת...ט"ו יום קודם העצרת וזהו ל"ג בעומר.

PART B. RABBI SHIMON BAR YOCHAI AND THE REVELATION OF THE ZOHAR

The greatest scholar of the Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) who ever lived was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who was famous for hiding from the Romans for 14 years in a cave where he studied Torah with his son (see Shabbat 33b, and Ben Yehoyada *ibid.*).

Rabbi Shimon died on Lag B'Omer, and on that day he revealed many of the deepest ideas of the Kabbalah to his students. They recorded his teachings in a book known as the Zohar, the Light.

1. [Zohar, Idra Zuta, Devarim, Parshat Ha'azinu, p. 296 – Revelation of the Zohar.](#)

On the day that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was to leave this world he arranged his affairs. His friends came to his room and he said to them, “Now is a time of favor. I can now reveal to you holy things that have not been revealed until now.” ... All that day the fire never left his room, and there was no one who was able to approach as the light and the fire was surrounding him ...

“אותו יום ביקש רבי שמעון בר יוחאי להסתלק מן העולם, והיה מסדר דבריו. נתכנסו החברים לביתו, והוא אמר להם: עתה שעת רצון היא, מילים קדושות שלא גיליתי עד עתה רצוני לגלותן ... כל ההוא יומא לא אפסיק אשא מן ביתא, ולא הוה מאן דמטי לגביה, דלא יכילו דנהורא ואשא הוה בסוחרניה... ואשא הוה להיט קמיה שמעו קלא עולו ואתו ואתכנשו להילולא דרבי

[After he passed away, and they came to bury him] the fire flew into the air and danced before him. A voice was heard [from Heaven] saying, "Come and gather [every year] for the *hilulah* (anniversary) of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai."

PART C. THE MANNA BEGAN TO FALL

1. Chasam Sofer, Responsa, Yoreh Deah 233 – On the 33rd day following the Exodus from Egypt, when the food provisions ran out, the manna began to fall.

It says in the Midrash that from the time the Jews finished the food that they brought out from Egypt they went for three days without bread, and afterwards the manna began to fall. [If we calculate the days] the manna therefore began to fall on Lag B'Omer and it is appropriate to make a remembrance of this.

וכפי דאי' במדרש שמיום שכלה החררה שהוציאו ממצרים הלכו ג' ימים בלא לחם ואח"כ ירד המן א"כ הי' הורדת המן ביום ל"ג בעומר וראוי לעשות לזה זכר טוב.

2. Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr, Ohr Gedalyahu, Moadim p. 153 – Connection of the manna to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: he had risen to the level of holiness of the generation of the Exodus who ate manna.

Lag B'Omer is the anniversary of the death of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was on the level of those who ate manna, as he resided in a cave for fourteen years and God provided him with water and a carob tree with which he was nourished for all those years. It was through Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai that the Oral Torah was revealed, as he was a student of Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva was the foundation of the Oral Law — every anonymous statement of Tannaim is ascribed to the opinion of Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was Rabbi Akiva's student, and the revelation of the secret part of the Torah came through him. It was only possible to reveal it through those who ate the manna. Therefore, it is appropriate that the death of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was on Lag B'Omer, as on that day the manna began to fall. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who was on the level of those who ate the manna, left the world on Lag B'Omer.

בל"ג בעומר הילולא דרשב"י, רשב"י הי' בבחינת אוכל המן, שהי' במערה י"ד שנה ונודמן לו מן השמים מים ועץ חרובין שממנה הי' זן כל הימים שהי' במערה, כי רשב"י שעל ידו הי' התגלות תושבע"פ, שהי' תלמיד של רע"ק, שרע"ק הוא היסוד של תושבע"פ, כולה סתימאה אליבא דרע"ק, ורשב"י הי' תלמידו, ועל ידו הי' התגלות חלק הסוד בתורה, ולא הי' אפשר התגלות הזאת רק באופן שיהי' בבחינת אוכלי המן, ולכן שייך הילולא דרשב"י דייקא לל"ג בעומר, שבאותו היום התחילה ירידת המן כמו שכבר הבאנו בשם החת"ס, ורשב"י שהי' בבחינת אוכל המן נסתלק בל"ג בעומר.

PART D. LAG B'OMER CUSTOMS

1. Toldot HaArizal (Sefer HaAri, 219) – Celebrating at Mt. Meron, Northern Israel at the grave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

In the days of our master (Rav Yosef Karo) they

בימי מרן (ר' יוסף קארו) הסכימו שלא יעשו ישראל

agreed that the Jews would not make a big celebration on Lag B'Omer at the grave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. It seemed to our master and his Beit Din that it was degrading that people ate and danced there. [This decision was] written but not signed. That night our master dreamed of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who said to him that a great plague would befall the people because of this decision. It was his wish that they celebrate on the anniversary of his death. The following day he tore up the decision.

הערביים מחול בל"ג בעומר על ציון רשב"י. ונראה למרן וב"ד שהוא זלזול שאוכלים ומרקדים, ונכתבה ולא נחתמה. בלילה חלם מרן עם הרשב"י וא"ל שתבא מגפה גדולה בעבור זו ההסכמה, כי רצונו שישמחו בהלולא, ולמחר קרע את ההסכמה.

2. **Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Sperling, Ta'amei HaMinhagim, p. 269 – Cutting hair of three-year-old boys.**

Regarding the haircut which is known as "chalakah," Rabbi Chaim Vital writes that it is "a well-known custom." It seems that this custom must be even older than the Rishonim. The Arizal even came from Egypt to Meron to encourage and keep this known custom on the day of feasting and rejoicing.

על ההתגלחת הנקראת בפי ההמון "האלאקע" כותב מהרח"ו שהוא "מנהג ידוע". כנראה מנהג קדמוני עוד מהראשונים. והנה האריז"ל בא ממצרים למירון לאשר ולקיים המנהג הידוע הזה ביום משתה ושמחה.

3. **Letter of Bartenura from Darche Tzion – Lighting bonfires to symbolize the light of Torah that Rabbi Shimon revealed on the last day of his life.**

On the eighteenth of Iyar, the anniversary of the death of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, people come from all around and light big bonfires. In addition, they light many candles because many barren women were remembered [and became pregnant] and many sick people were cured on account of the gifts that they pledged to bring to [the grave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai at Mt. Meron].

ביום י"ח באייר יום מיתתו של רשב"י, באים מכל הסביבות ומדליקים אבוקות גדולות, מלבד מה שמדליקים עליה נרות שהרבה עקרות נפקדו וחולים נתרפאו בנדר ונדבה שהתנדבו למקום ההוא.

4. **Letter of Rebbe Ben Tzion of Bobov to Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Shmerler in Sefer HaMinhagim, p. 263 – Custom of Chai Rotel: donating drink to the needy to merit the birth a child.**

I was asked by one of our people regarding this lofty custom that he heard from people in the land of Israel that they have a fixed custom for those who have no children. They donate *Chai Rotel* (eighteen) *Rotel* (a *rotel* is three litres, i.e. a total of fifty-four litres) of drink at the grave of the godly Tanna Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai on the anniversary of his death. Therefore, I decided to make him my messenger for this mitzvah to mention these names for a blessing:

נדרשתי מאחד מאנ"ש יחיה בענין נשגב היות ששמע מפי אנשי אה"ק ת"ו שקבתה בידם סגלה לחשוכי בנים רח"ל לנדב ח"י ראטל משקה ביומא דהילולא על ציון התנא האלקי רשב"י זי"ע ועכ"י. לכן בחרתי בו לעשותו שליח מצוה להזכיר לטובה את הזוג מאיר בן חיה לאה עם זוגתו שרה בת שינדל שיפקוד השי"ת אותם בזש"ק במהרה בלי שום מכשול ונוק. וינדב עבורם ח"י ראטל משקה כנהוג.

Meir ben Chaya Leah with his wife Sarah bas Shaindel, that God should give them children speedily without any stumbling or damage. He will donate for this *Chai Rotel* of drink, as is the custom.

5. **Rabbi Yaakov Chaim Sofer, Kaf HaChaim 493:26 – Reasons for the joy and festivity: after the epidemic ended, Rabbi Akiva continued to teach five new students, one of whom was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.**

Rabbi Chaim Vital wrote that the reason for the rejoicing is for the students that Rabbi Akiva added afterwards who did not die like those [first twenty-four thousand]...

I wrote this to teach that there is a basis to the custom mentioned above [to go to Meron and celebrate on Lag B'Omer], particularly because Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was one of the five great students of Rabbi Akiva, and therefore his time of happiness is Lag B'Omer.

מיהו ספר"ח ... כתב הטעם שהשמחה היא על אותם תלמידים שהוסיף אח"כ ר"ע שלא מתו כאלו יעו"ש...

וכתבתי כל זה להורות כי יש שורש במנהג הזה הנז' ובפרט כי רשב"י ע"ה הוא מה' תלמידיו גדולים של ר"ע ולכן זמן שמחתו ביום ל"ג לעומר ... עכ"ל.

SECTION V. USING THE SEFIRAH PERIOD TO ACHIEVE SPIRITUAL PERFECTION

The Sefirah period provides the intrinsic framework to enable us to refine our character, help rectify the loss of the students of Rabbi Akiva, and improve our ability to acquire the Torah in preparation for Shavuot.

PART A. SEVEN CYCLES OF SEVEN MIDOT

1. **Rabbi Yaakov Haber, Rabbi David Sedley, Sefiros, p. 11. – Mankind was created in the image of God; the seven weeks of the Omer are dedicated to improving seven aspects of that image.**

Mankind was created in the image of God. It isn't our physical image but rather our character that has Godly potential ... The *sefirot* are a mystical revelation of God's "character." The sefirot represent our finite understanding of the Infinite. There are ten sefirot with which God created and interacts with the world. They are *chochmah, binah, da'at, chesed, gevurah, tiferet, netzach, hod, yesod, and malchut*. These ten sefirot are divided into two categories – the three upper sefirot of *chochmah, binah* and *da'at*, and the lower seven. It is the lower seven sefirot we focus on during the seven weeks of Sefirat HaOmer.

2. **Divrei HaYamim I (Chronicles), 29:11 – The source for the seven sefirot.**

To You, God, are the greatness (*chesed*), the strength (*gevurah*), the splendor (*tiferet*), the eternity (*netzach*), and the glory (*hod*), even everything that is in the heavens and the

לך ה' הגדלה והגבורה והתפארת והנצח וההוד כי כל בשמים ובארץ לך ה' הממלכה והמתנשא לכל לראש.

earth (*yesod*). To You, God, belongs kingship (*malchut*), and You are elevated over every head.

3. **Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr, Ohr Gedalyahu, Moadim p. 150 – We grow by working on the particular character traits relative to each day of the Sefirah.**

The days of Sefirat Ha'Omer are a time to rectify character attributes. The first week is to rectify the attribute of *chesed*: to fix [the attribute of] love that it should be appropriate; the love of God and the love of friends. The second week is for the attribute of strength: to fix the attribute of fear [of God]. And similarly with all the weeks.

ימי הספירה הוא זמן לתיקון המדות, שבוע ראשונה לתקן מדת החסד, לתקן האהבה שיהי' כראוי, אהבה להשיי"ת ואהבת חבירים, שבוע שני' מדת גבורה, לתקן מדת היראה, וכן כל השבועות.

4. **Rabbi Yaakov Haber, Rabbi David Sedley, Sefiros, p. 15 – Understanding the sefirot provide an understanding of oneself.**

For as much as the sefirot reveal about God Himself, they also hold the key to understanding what it means to have been created in God's image. And just as we must apply a unified understanding to the personality of God, we must strive to round out our own personality with the lesson of each sefirah. Therefore, the keys to our opening, maintaining, and repairing our relationship with God are bound up in understanding these sefirot ... Our goal, therefore, during these forty-nine days is to examine how each of the sefirot affects our connection to God, our relationship with each other, and our understanding of ourselves.

5. **Ba'al HaTania, Likutei Torah, Bamidbar (Numbers) – Each sefirah is composed of elements of each of the seven sefirot (e.g. chesed in chesed, discipline in chesed, harmony in chesed, etc.), which correspond to the forty-nine days.**

But in order to get to this high level ... one must count the Counting of the Omer. This is what it means: "Count fifty days" ... that the contemplation of the greatness of the Infinite One, Blessed is He, is forty-nine different aspects, which are alluded to in the verse, "To You, God, are the greatness ..." which are the seven upper *midot*. Each one of them, in turn, is made up of seven, totalling forty-nine. The fiftieth gate is the upper gate, which includes all the aspects, and everything in this is contained within the forty-nine aspects, which are united to a single unity.

אך כדי להגיע למעלה ומדרגה זו ... צריך לספור ספירת העומר; והוא שהכתוב אומר 'תספרו חמשים יום'. ... להיות בחי' התבוננות בגדולת אין סוף ברוך הוא הם מ"ט בחינות והם מרומזים בפסוק לך ה' הגדולה וגו' שהם ז' מדות עליונות וכל אחד כלול מז' הרי מ"ט; ושער החמשים הוא שער העליון הכולל כל הבחינות שבשער ההוא כלולים כל המ"ט בחינות והיו לאחדים באחדות אחד.

6. **Siddur, Sefirat HaOmer – Prayer to focus on improving our nature.**

Master of the Universe ... therefore may it be Your Will ... that in the merit of the counting of the Omer that I have counted may everything that I have damaged in the sefirah of (mention the sefirah of the day) be fixed and may I be purified and sanctified with holiness from above ...

רבנו של עולם ... ובכן יהי רצון ... שבזכות ספירת העומר שספרתי היום יתקן מה שפגמתי בספירה (השייך לאותו הלילה) ואטהר ואתקדש בקדשה של מעלה...

PART B. FORTY-EIGHT WAYS TO ACQUIRE TORAH

1. Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 6:6 – In preparation for Shavuot, each day of the Sefirah we focus on one of the forty-eight qualities of Torah study, and on the forty-ninth day we integrate them.

The Torah is acquired through forty-eight qualities which are: Study, attentive listening, saying one's studies aloud, intuitive understanding, discernment, awe of teachers, fear of Heaven, humility, joy, purity, serving the wise, being close with fellow students, evaluative discussion with fellow students, calmness, knowledge of Tanach, knowledge of Mishnah, moderation in business activity, moderation in worldly activity, moderation in physical pleasure, moderation in sleep, moderation in speech, moderation in merry-making, slowness to anger, having a good heart, having faith in the Sages, accepting suffering, knowing one's place,

being happy with whatever one has, making a fence around one's words, not boasting, endearing oneself to others, loving God, loving His creatures, loving righteousness, loving justice, loving to have one's mistakes corrected, keeping far from honor, not being arrogant about one's knowledge, not enjoying making halachic decisions, sharing another person's troubles, judging others positively, setting them in the path of truth, setting them in the path of peace, teaching calmly, asking and answering, listening and adding insights, studying in order to teach, studying in order to do the mitzvot, making one's teacher wiser, reflecting over one's lessons, and repeating an idea in the name of the person who said it first. For we learned that whoever repeats an idea in the name of the originator brings redemption to the world – as it says in the Megillah, “And Esther told it to the King in Mordechai's name” (Esther 2:22).

...והתורה נקנית בארבעים ושמונה דברים בתלמוד
בשמיעת האוזן בעריכת שפתים בבינת הלב בשכלות
הלב באימה ביראה בעונה בשמחה בשמוש חכמים
בדקדוק חברים ובפלפול התלמידים בישוב במקרא
במשנה במיעוט שינה במיעוט שיחה במיעוט תענוג
במיעוט שחוק במיעוט דרך ארץ בארץ אפים בלב טוב
באמונת חכמים ובקבלת היסורין המכיר את מקומו

והשמח בחלקו והעושה סייג לדבריו ואינו מחזיק
טובה לעצמו אהוב אהב את המקום אהב את הבריות
אהב את הצדקות אהב את התוכחות אהב את
המישרים מתרחק מן הכבוד ולא מגיס לבו בתלמודו
ואינו שמח בהוראה נושא בעול עם חבריו מכריעו לכף
זכות מעמידו על האמת מעמידו על השלום מתישב
לבו בתלמודו שואל ומשיב שומע ומוסיף הלומד על
מנת ללמד והלומד על מנת לעשות המחכים את רבו
והמכוין את שמועתו והאומר דבר בשם אומרו הא
למדת שכל האומר דבר בשם אומרו מביא גאולה
לעולם שנאמר:
אסתר ב:כב) ותאמר אסתר למלך בשם מרדכי.

2. Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Mishnas Rabbi Aharon, Vol. III, p. 13 – Prepare for receiving the Torah by practising the forty-eight ways through which Torah is acquired.

The days of counting the Omer are days of preparation for the giving of the Torah. Since acquiring Torah depends on the forty-eight ways that the Torah is acquired (Pirkei Avot, Ch. 6), it is like all other things which can only be acquired through the appropriate mechanism, like Rav Chaim elaborated. Therefore, it is clear that the way to prepare is through these forty-eight ways.

ימי הספירה הם ימי ההכנה למתן תורה. וכיון שקנין
התורה תלוי במ"ח דברים שהתורה נקנית בהם
(אבות פ"ו) הרי הוא כשאר דברים הנקנים רק בקנינים
המועילים להם, וכמו שהאריך בזה הגר"ח זצוק"ל,
וא"כ מובן שמדרכי ההכנה להתאמן מ"ח דברים
אלה. [והמ"ט יום הם נגד מ"ט שערי בינה וכנגד מ"ט
פנים שבתורה כמבואר במק"א]. והמ"ח ימים הם כנגד

[The forty-ninth day corresponds to the forty-nine gates of understanding and also to the forty-nine faces of the Torah, as explained in a different place.] The forty-eight days correspond to the forty-eight ways that the Torah is acquired. The forty-ninth day is the day of completion for purity and preparation for receiving the Torah...

The reason that this preparation is connected to the Omer is to entrench and implant within us the recognition that everything comes from God, which is the meaning of the Omer, the offering of the first crops.

מ"ח הדברים שהתורה נקנית בהם, ויום המ"ט הוא יום שלם לקדושה בהכנה לקבלת התורה....

והא דהכנה זו למתן תורה נתלית בעומר, היינו להשריש ולנמוע את ההכרה כי הכל מהשי"ת, שזהו ענין העומר, הקרבת הראשית.

PART C. NEW HEIGHTS IN SPIRITUAL ATTAINMENT

1. **Vayikra (Leviticus) Rabbah 28:3 – Directing our free will to spiritual goals.**

Rabbi Chiya taught, "Seven complete weeks they shall be." When are they complete? When Israel does the will of God.

תני רבי חייא שבע שבטות תמימות תהיינה אימתי הן תמימות בזמן שישראל עושין רצונו של מקום.

2. **Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Strive for Truth, Vol. IV, pp. 31-2 – The pleasure of material acquisition inevitably wanes, whereas the pleasure of spiritual attainment remains forever fresh.**

The goal of our counting, the fiftieth day, is the festival of Shavuot, corresponding to the day we received the Torah. On this day we are commanded to bring to God a "new offering" of two wheat loaves ... This offering celebrates our attainment of the spiritual level known as "receiving the Torah," and every spiritual attainment is completely new – a new world in fact – compared to the level previously attained. In the world of materialism nothing is really new. Gratifying one physical desire is very much like gratifying another. The pleasure soon wanes and the chase is on for something "new," but the result is always the same. A surfeit of physical pleasure eventually causes revulsion and a reduction of enjoyment all around. But achievements of the spirit never pall. The sweetness felt in the study of Torah and the inward service of God is constant.

3. **Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Mishnas Rabbi Aharon, Vol. III, p. 14 – The tremendous potential of the individual: the five individual students of Rabbi Akiva were able to replace and continue the spiritual work of twenty-four thousand.**

It is worth thinking about it from the other side – how great was the merit of the Rabbis from the South (who re-established Torah). The Torah should have been passed on through the twenty-four thousand students of Rabbi Akiva, and instead was passed on through these five students. Those who toil in Torah in our generation have a similar reward. [Without them] the world would be desolate, and through these few individuals, remnants [of the Holocaust] whom God calls, "Those who toil in Torah," the Torah is not forgotten from the Jewish people.

כדאי גם להתבונן מאידך גיסא, בגודל הזכות של רבותינו שבדרום, דהתורה שהיתה ראויה לימסר ע"י כ"ד אלף תלמידי רבי עקיבא נמסרה ע"י חמשה תלמידים אלו. וכן הוא לפי ערך גודל זכותם של עמלי התורה בדורנו, שהוא בבחינת והיה העולם שומם, וע"י היחידים, השרידים אשר ה' קורא, העוסקים בתורה, אין התורה משתכחת מישראל.

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