



Yisroel Besser

Mishpacha

VOICE IN THE CROWD

BETWEEN MOUNT MERON AND HAR SINAI

It used to be a thing for parents to contrast their childhoods with those of their children. These days, the *geshmak* just isn't there anymore — the world no longer changes each generation, but every few minutes.

But anyhow, when we were kids, Lag B'omer was a low-key Yom Tov, essentially a school field trip day, a chance for everyone to get out of the classroom on a spring day. (As evidence, I bring you the lyrics of Abie's classic, "The Ninth Man": *When Lag B'omer came around/ it was time to play that game/ Against those boys from Brooklyn/ how we prayed it wouldn't rain...*)

Today, *achshar dara*, our generation is blessed, and even *mosdos* that daven *nusach Ashkenaz* and have a quota of how many chassidishe rebbes can go on their *gedolim*-picture wall have Lag B'omer bonfires and sing the *piyutim* in honor of Rabi Shimon, giving the day the status of Yom Tov.

Those capable of insight in these areas have explained that the light of Rabi Shimon bar Yochai, the inner dimension of Torah and the inner dimension of a Yid, shine brightest in the final gen-

erations of *galus*.

Rabi Shimon bar Yochai had an original take on our generation.

When the chachamim entered the vineyard in Yavne, they said, "The Torah is destined to be forgotten from the Jewish people," quoting *pesukim* to support their argument.

The Gemara brings an opposing view: *Rabi Shimon ben Yochai says, "Chas v'shalom that Torah should be forgotten from Yisrael, as it says, 'Ki lo sishakach mipo zaro — It shall not be forgotten from His children...'"* (Shabbos 138b).

Rabi Shimon looked at us and said, "Those people, in an age when technology will suck *chiyus* out of homes and hearts, when the street will burn with ideas based on devaluing people and erasing boundaries... they will learn Torah."

Every picture of *kinderlach* dancing around a fire on the schoolyard asphalt is a message to him. *You were right, Rabi Shimon.*

And with this in mind, we march from Lag B'omer to Shavuot. Having reaffirmed that the Torah is not forgotten, that it is alive, well, and accessible, we prepare to accept it once again.

A few months ago, just before Pesach, I got to sit in a ballroom with hundreds of teenage boys. Some had long hair and cool shirts, with more shirt buttons opened than is necessary to

allow for unobstructed breathing.

Also, they weren't just learning Torah: they were living through the words of the Gemara. It sounded like Shavuot night in Ponevezh, the full-throated, joyous roar, as they sat in groups and *chazered, chazered, chazered* well-worn pages, as words came forth from somewhere deep inside of them.

This was their precious *bein hazmanim*, a few days before Pesach, and they were happily giving up the day to come to Monsey — some from Brooklyn or Queens, some from Detroit or Toronto, and some who had come specially from South Africa for this, to learn.

What's the catch, right?

No catch. Rabi Shimon promised.

Just sometimes it takes someone like Rabbi Dovid Newman to take care of the details, to remind boys of what they are capable of, to create the framework that allows them to benefit from being part of a team, and to earn the trust of yeshivos who encourage their boys to join the happiest, most confident teenage army in history, the V'haarev Na learning program.

V'haarev Na, Hashem. Make it sweet for us again.

The bochurim of V'haarev Na commit to their *masechta/perek/blatt* and *chazer* it again and again. Then they do it again. They write down each word, even the hard ones, until they understand why the Gemara selected that particular term. At some point, they start to feel the reality that Rabi Shimon identified — that Torah is not outside a person, but inside.

If seeing the majesty of the Alps or the power of Niagara Falls can connect a person to the Creator, standing on the sidelines and watching a V'haarev Na *siyum* can connect a person to themselves. It can foster *emunah* in what a person can do, can know, can love, and *emunah* in what we are part of.

It's 2023 and we are seeing the wonders Rabi Shimon foretold.

Not just in yeshivos and kollelim, which always were and still are the safety deposit boxes of the fire of Har Sinai, but in the weary, jaded eyes of accountants, school administrators, restaurant mashgichim, Amazon sellers, and yes, even rebbeim — eyes that have suddenly become bright again.

There is a revolution happening. During the past decade or so, Rabbi Eli Stefansky discovered thousands of people who hadn't found the *shiur/chavrusa*/format that worked for them, who looked longingly at the chassan Shas gathering dust on their shelf, and wondered if it was even possible to have a relationship. Ask them, any one of them, of any background and dress, and you will see the answer even before they speak: they are alive, driven, and euphoric. Reb Eli has no listeners or followers: he has ambassadors, each one of them exploding with gratitude at the gift they receive each day.

No, the Torah hasn't been forgotten.

Listen to a *shiur* — any *shiur*, on any topic — from Rabbi Sruly Bornstein (there are no excuses: you can tell the app how many minutes you have while you wait for your wife in the parking lot outside Target and it will deliver a *shtickel* precisely suited to your oh-so-busy schedule) and you will feel an enigmatic mix of humility and pride.

Humility at how little we know, how vast and complex is the Torah, but pride at the fact that you feel ownership, like the song he sings is yours. (I have many new friends, listeners as I am, who see each other after the day's *shiur* has been uploaded and exchange smiles, like, "Yeah, yesterday's *shiur* was great, but did you hear Reb Sruly *today*?"")

Rabi Shimon said, "The Torah will not be forgotten," but when you listen to Reb Sruly, you also realize that *you* haven't been forgotten. If you ever had a good day in yeshivah, that part of you comes alive when you hear him learn a Gemara. And if you never did have that day, you will discover that whatever the barrier was, it had nothing to do with you.

We, the generation that didn't have Rabbi Dovid Newman when we were teenagers, have gifted *maggidei shiur* (clearly given extraordinary *kochos* by the Ribbono shel Olam for this reason), bringing V'haarev Na to us.

At the pre-Pesach V'haarev Na event, a teenage *mesayem* approached Rabbi Newman and him to sign a baseball cap. The other boys laughed, seeing a cute teenage joke — *so funny, can you believe Moshe asked him to sign a baseball cap, epic, sick, v'chulu.*

I saw something else. I felt like the months leading up the *siyum* had made that teenage boy feel like a superstar, as Rabbi Newman invested him with a sense of his own power. That kid wanted to take some of that magic and bring it with him to the baseball field, to the rest of his life, and the signature of the rebbi would be a take-along reminder that he was a champion.

The thing is, Rabi Shimon never said that every Yid will be able to hit a ball or throw a runner out at the plate, so the boy is *lav davka* a baseball champion.

In the beis medrash, though, we are promised that if we try, we will remember. We will rediscover what we once felt, and feel the perfect satisfaction of a person who discovers (or better, remembers) why he is alive.

If you were too grumpy, principled, (*litvish*) or pyrophobic to make or join a fire on Lag B'omer, it's not too late. Take a tea light, make a little *hadlakah* for Rabi Shimon, remember his promise — and then go be *mekabel* the Torah.

Again. ●