

# מבשר

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## MEBASSER

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### "A FULL HOUSE"

The festival of Lag Ba'Omer which we celebrate this year on May 12 is traditionally observed as both birthday and *yahrzeit* of one of the greatest Rabbis of all time, R. Simeon bar Yochai (2nd century).

It is concerning his death that the Zohar relates an incident of profound symbolic significance for all time. R. Simeon's friends and disciples gathered in his house to bid him farewell. Raising his head and noticing that the house was full, he wept and said, "once before when I was ill and I thought the end was near, only one person came to see me—R. Phineas b. Yair. Though he was only one man, he was enveloped in a holy flame which never left him. Now, the house is full—but the fire is gone."

R. Simeon's observation certainly has contemporary relevance. We live in an age when everything is measured, when statistics have become a kind of scientific sacrament. Politicians will declare themselves candidates only if a poll will

show they can win. Government often develops policy on the basis of the popularity of a proposed plan—thus, in effect, abandoning its educative and leadership function.

Religion too is usually measured by its success with the crowd. The validity of faith is deemed dependent upon the numbers who declare themselves affiliated. The value of a *mitzvah* is judged by its popularity. As a result, big temples pock-mark the Jewish scene, cavernous sanctuaries where at times-High Holidays, a Bar Mitzvah, a social event—the house is full. But the fire is gone. A dismal draught chills the hearts of those huddled within. For warmth and zeal do not always follow the crowds. The fire of G-d is kindled by inspired souls, not by impressive statistics. One Phineas b. Yair can mean more than a hundred cold, vacuous people.

Loyal Jews need not be distressed by self-declared prophets who, in their blind-



ness, predict doom for Torah. Size has never been a true criterion of substance. A genuine Jewish commitment holds untold surprises for those who swear by the superficialities of the graph-plotters and the poll-takers. A century from today they will still be amazed by our survival and our tenacity!

Matthew Arnold, in a lecture in America, once said that "it is always a remnant that saves the nation and the race." We must add one condition: that, like the disciple of R. Simeon, it be enveloped in a flame of dedication, in intensity of commitment and breadth of vision.

It is difficult, in the circumstances of our society, always to remember this. But on Lag Ba-omer we ought to affirm the principle that Truth often walks alone while Falsehood seeks the vain comforts of the companionship of the many. The "success" of our services or our religious and educational programs must not be measured in numbers alone. Eventually, of course, every individual must be reached with the Torah's message. But first each of us must supply new fuel for the sparks of holiness within us, and fan them into enduring enthusiasm and heroic dedication.

Let us first develop the fire. Then the house will be full, as others gather around to delight in the heat of a true Jewish heart, and the warmth and light of authentic Jewish teaching.

**Norman Lamm**

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