

Dear Chavraya,

As incongruous as it may seem, I have had since childhood a fascination and a fondness for archery. One of my earliest memories, probably from about the time I was four years old, is searching through shrubs and small trees with my father for just the right branch from which to fashion a bow. The right one found and cut, ends notched and string secure, my dad and I would then make arrows out of dowel and use a cardboard box for target practice in the cellar. A few years later, having received by then several bows as a gift from trees, my dad took me to the old Sears and Roebuck in what is now the Landmark Center, to buy me my first “real” bow and arrows. To this day, well worn and scuffed, that red wooden bow with the grip of green tape is still with me, residing in the closet of my study, just behind my desk.

There is, ironically, a natural connection between an archer’s bow and a rabbi’s study, the drawing of a bowstring and the learning of Torah. It is not a connection I would have known as a child. I was drawn more to stories of Robin Hood than to stories of the rabbis. It was many years later that I learned of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, known as RaShbY, and of the bow and arrow as a symbol associated with Lag B’omer, the thirty-third day in the counting of the Omer as we move from Pesach to Shavuous. Wanted by the Romans for sedition, Rabbi Shimon and his son fled to a cave. It was against the law, on pain of death, to teach and to learn Torah, let alone from a wanted man. Rabbi Shimon’s students devised a plan by which they continued to learn with their teacher. They would go out into the fields with bows and arrows, appearing to the Romans as hunters, and then make their way slowly to their master’s cave. So the bow and arrow came to be transformed from a symbol of violence, a weapon in the hands of a warrior or hunter, to a symbol of dedication to Torah in the hands of a scholar. Over time, Lag B’omer came to be called the “scholar’s holiday.”

The *mitzvah* to count the Omer is given in this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Emor*. Through rabbinic interpretation, we come to understand the counting to begin on the second day of Pesach, continuing for forty-nine days, the fiftieth day being a full holiday. A holiday unnamed in the Torah, the rabbis sought to connect that day which comes to be *Shavuous*, meaning weeks, with the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, an event without a holiday. Originally of agricultural significance only, hardly insignificant in itself, counting the days from one harvest to the next comes also to be a counting of days from Egypt to Sinai, investing our freedom with new purpose and meaning. Through the span of Jewish history, numerous tragedies came to be associated with the period of *S’fira/the counting*. By tradition, for a number of reasons, mourning was transformed into joy on the thirty-third day of counting. In Israel, bonfires are lit and bows and arrows can be seen in the hands of children on Lag B’omer. The word *Lag* is derived simply from the letters *lamed* and *gimmel*, whose combined numerical value is thirty-three.

Many years ago, while living in Jerusalem, I was invited to a Bar Mitzvah reception to be held on Lag B’omer. Memories stirred of long ago, I made my way to a field, and there among the shrubs and trees I found the right branch from which to fashion a bow for a young man called to the Torah and celebrating

it on Lag B'omer. Of a bow, and of one called to Torah, the link is intrinsic. The root of Torah and "to shoot," as in directing an arrow to its mark, is the same, *yud, resh, hey*. *Yoreh* comes to mean to teach or instruct, to direct, to show the way. It is the purpose of Torah in our lives, as we are shown the way each day to Sinai. The one who guides, the teacher, *morah* or *moreh*, is of the same root, and so too, parents, *horim*, a parent, *horeh*, as in the one who guides the search for the right branch, the search itself the mark and goal impressed forever upon a tender heart.

This Sunday is Lag B'omer. May it be a time of quiet transformation, as in the passing of the bow from warrior's hand to scholar's, and from leaden clouds to brilliant hues, as the bow inverted in the sky, a symbol of war turned to one of peace, a covenant between Heaven and earth, but upon earth still waiting. And of personal transformation, may we come from the counting to the harvest, days of mourning turned to days of joy, and of direction found.

Shabbat shalom.  
Rabbi Victor