

# Rebbe Shimon, RaM”A, and The Light of Certainty

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## I. *Two Yohrzeits*

One of the better-known reasons for observing Lag ba’Omer is in response to the passing, or the *histalkus*, of the great luminary Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.<sup>1</sup> Far from the conventional depressive notion of death, on this day we celebrate the vastness of the *Tzaddik* as we anticipate the overflow of spiritual light that runs forth from his remembrance. The passing of this great light, in contradistinction to the symbolism of death as degradation, was the final ascension of a soul, interminably yearning to disrobe the constricting bonds of embodiment.<sup>2</sup>

A lesser known aspect of the day is the yohrzeit of Rabbi Moshe Isserles, commonly referred to by his acronym RaM”A. RaM”A died<sup>3</sup> at the young age of fifty-two, on the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the Omer.<sup>4</sup> During most calendar years Lag ba’Omer falls out during the week in which Parshas Emor is read. The same letters that comprise the word Emor<sup>5</sup> are used in the universally accepted title of RaM”A. RaM”A, a Ashkenazi halachik posek of Polish origin, is known primarily for his glosses on the Shulchan Aruch, called the *mappah*, or tablecloth.<sup>6</sup> These clarifying notes serve as the guide towards halachik explication for a significant aspect of the Jewish contingent.

One of the unique aspects of the Jewish calendar is the cyclical nature of its temporality, as opposed to the linear conception of time. In a linear conception of time, each moment may be grasped as a unit in a series of units, each separate-yet-equal to its counterpoint. Cyclical temporality allows present moments to unfold upon and within the past, thus creating a meeting point, through which the “past” dances with the “present” towards the “future”. Ordinarily, the coincidence of these two luminaries passing on the same calendar date, separated by hundreds of years, would be all but meaningless. However, through the looking glass of Jewish time, the thin line of coincidence can be spun into a tapestry of spiritual overlap and significance.

## II. *Psak - Freeing the Kernel of Truth*

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of Lag ba’Omer and its significance, see Rav Yaakov Hillel, *Ad ha’Gal ha’Zeh*.

<sup>2</sup> On the concept of death as elevation of the tzadik, see introduction to *Idrah Zuta* (Zohar III:287b). See the commentary of Rav Menachem Mendel of Shklov in *Mayim Adirim al Idrah Zuta*, pp. 3-6.

<sup>3</sup> He died in 5332, or 1572.

<sup>4</sup> There have been communities that traveled to the grave of Rabbi Moshe Isserles every Lag ba’Omer to commemorate his yohrzeit. See Rabbi Shimon Guttman, *Taglachas Mitzvah* (Jerusalem, 1998) pp. 369-375. In addition to his death on the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the Omer, RaM”A wrote 33 seforim in his short life.

<sup>5</sup> *Aleph, Mem, Reish*.

<sup>6</sup> On the symbiotic relationship between the *Mappah* and the Shulchan Aruch, as well as RaM”A and Rav Yosef Karo, see the remarks of Rav Yitzchak Hutner in *Iggeros u’Ksavim*, pp. 155-162.

The primary goal of RaM”A’s glosses was to clarify the numerous opinions listed by the Beis Yosef as it applied to Ashkenazi communities. The purpose of halachik *psak*, is to uncover the clarified law from within the murkiness of possibility and disagreement. Over time, the halachik directive had been turned and overturned, taking on the garments of doubt and uncertainty. The goal of the *pose”k* is to enter the world of *safe”k* - words comprised of the same letters<sup>7</sup> and thus sharing a spiritual potency - to free the kernel of truth from within the uncertain. The root-word *psa”k* can be interpreted as cutting. Before the halachik *psa”k*, the spark of truth is caught in the confusion of *safe”k*. Two opinions stand before the *posek*, and he must rule which is the correct one. The act of cutting, bifurcating between the right and the wrong, is an act of constriction, or *gevurah*, for the sole purpose of revealing clarity from within the depths of doubt.<sup>8</sup>

### III. Two Torahs - Supernal and Worldly

The source of all halachik discourse is the Torah itself. The Torah is the textual manifestation of Godly thought,<sup>9</sup> the infinite cloaked within the finite. How is it, that in a reality born from with the infinite possibilities of the infinite, doubt runs so rampant? How can it be that the practical details therein, wander within the thicket of confusion? how can it be that the practical details therein, wander within the thicket of confusion and doubt?<sup>10</sup>

In his commentary on the Zohar, **Tiferes ha’Chinochi**, Rav Gershon Henoch Leiner of Radzyn<sup>11</sup> zy”a describes the diminution of reality that came as a result of the *cheit eitz ha’daas tov v’rah*.<sup>12</sup> Prior to discovering the potential of self-consciousness, the imaginative reality of

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<sup>7</sup> *Samech, fei, kuf*.

<sup>8</sup> The aspect of *gevurah* as the cognitive ability to separate and demarcate the boundaries of ideas is stressed by various tzaddikim. For example see the sparse words of the Vilna Gaon in *Likkutei ha’Gra* with the commentary of Rav Yitzchak Isaac Chaver’s *Be’er Yitzchak*, sv. *elu v’elu*, pp. 130-135. See Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzato, *Adir b’Marom*, (Bnei Brak) pp. 46-49. Rav Dov Ber Schneersohn, the *Mitteler Rebbe* of Chabad, wrote often on this concept. See *Shaarei Orah* (Brooklyn) pp. 25-32, *Toras Chaim* (Vol. II), and *Ner Mitzva v’Torah Ohr* (*Shaar Emunah*).

<sup>9</sup> See the short comment of Rav Chaim Volozhiner in *Nefesh ha’Chaim* (Gate 4) regarding the source of Torah that arose within the mind, of God, as it were. See Rav Naftali Hertz Bacharach’s *Emek ha’Melech, shaar ha’shaashuim*, pp. 32-45 for an extended treatment of the primordial Torah, or *olam ha’malbush*.

<sup>10</sup> There are numerous ways to approach this issue, both ontologically and epistemologically. A full discussion on doubt and its treatment in Jewish thought far exceeds the confines of this short essay. Within the revealed Torah, such topics as *sfeik sfeika*, *safeik l’hakeil o’lchumra*, and *hachraah* have numerous volumes attributed to them, such as *Shaarei Yosher*, *Kuntreis ha’Sfeikos*, and *Sheiv Shmaisa* to name a few. The concealed Torah, specifically through the lens of the Arizal, also maintains a focus on the notion of doubt. See for example the sugya of *sfeikos d’reisha d’lo isyada*, described at length in *Eitz Chaim* (*shaar* 13, 2-4). See Rav Aharon Maharil’s *Toameha Chaim Zachu al Eitz Chaim* (Vol. I, on 13, 2-4) at length. Of interest, on the possibility of distinguishing between epistemological doubt vs. ontological doubt, see R. Elchonon Wasserman’s *Kovetz Shiurim*.

<sup>11</sup> He was the son of the Beis Yaakov, Rav Yaakov Leiner of Izhbitz and grandson of the Mei ha’Shiloach, Rav Mordechai Yosef of Izhbitz.

<sup>12</sup> See the comments of Rav Mordechai Yosef of Izhbitz, *Mei ha’Shiloach, Bereshis*, pp.13-14, where he writes, “And the *eitz ha’daas*, this is regarding who is stuck in perpetual doubt as to the true will of God, and this is the aspect of all the difficulties in the Gemara.”

separation, Creation was situated within the objective state of undifferentiated existence. With the experience of *daas*, through the *eitz*, Creation was endowed with self-awareness, and thus subjectivity was born. In the perfected plane of clarified objectivity, or being *mevurar*, the true essence permeated Creation. Each aspect of reality performed its predetermined task, without spilling forth over the delimitations of its essence. In this state, each thing could be identified for what it was, as well as the distinguishing factors that differentiated it from all other things. At this prelapsarian moment, doubt was an impossibility.

The traumatic rupture of this edenic setting took place through Creation's consumption of *eitz ha'daas tov v'rah*. By way of *daas*, knowingness, Creation was lowered into fragmentation. The wholeness of each specific thing shattered into a disarray of combination and admixture. This destructive birth of subjectivity, allowed Creation to elect and choose parts through which being would manifest, while disregarding the rest. Utilizing the Zohar's description of the *eitz ha'daas* as *illana d'irbuvya*, the tree of admixture, and a creative act of psychological hermeneutics, Rabbi Gershon Henoch refers to the *eitz ha'daas* as *illana d'sfeika*, the tree of doubt. In the current state of fallenness, it becomes nearly impossible to separate the right from the wrong and the real from the imaginary. Doubt overtakes clarity as darkness seeps into light.<sup>13</sup>

This transition from clarity into doubt applies to the Torah as well. *Chazal*<sup>14</sup> have disclosed to us the secret of a primordial Torah, *Torah kedumah*. This supernal Torah was said to have been the plaything of the Creator prior to creation. Within the dance of black fire upon white fire, the Torah of ancient days, *atik yomin*,<sup>15</sup> represented the perfected plan of Creation as it germinated within the will of God. This Torah signified the objective reality of a unified existence. Clarified to the point of essentiality, everything shimmered with the light of certainty. With the *cheit eitz ha'daas*, Creation lost the capacity to grasp this supernal Torah, and in its place we received the Torah as we know it, *Torah d'briah*.

#### IV. *Novlei Chochma - Certainty and Doubt*

*Chazal*<sup>16</sup> describe the Torah as *novlot chochma*, residual wisdom. At first glance this appears inappropriate, if not heretical. The description of our Torah as the surplus of something loftier appears to diminish the significance as well as the sanctity of our most sacred text. However, based on the logic above, it is clear that *Chazal* refer to Torah as residue, only in relation to the ancient Torah of objective reality. Just as Creation prior and post *eitz ha'daas* can be measured as certainty against doubt, so too, the supernal Torah and the worldly Torah can be measured as certainty against doubt.

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<sup>13</sup> For an extensive treatment of the *cheit eitz ha'daas tov v'rah* in all of its facets see Rav Shlomo Elyashiv's *Leshem Shevo v'Achloma, Sefer Drushei Olam ha'Tohu, drush eitz ha'daas*, pp. 422-446.

<sup>14</sup> See Breishis Rabbah, 8:2.

<sup>15</sup> See *Likkutei Moharan* (Vol. I, Torah 60) regarding the supernal Torah and its relationship to Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai and certainty.

<sup>16</sup> Bereshis Rabbah, 17.

As the worldly Torah continued to engage with human understanding, *Chazal* developed what we know as *Torah sh'Baal Peh*, the Oral Law. These teachings serve to clarify and explicate the latent content of the *Torah sh'Bichtav*, the Written Law. It is here, in the *Shisha Sidrei Mishna*, as well as the *Talmud Bavli* and *Yerushalmi*, that confusion and doubt conceal the kernel of truth. In the quest for halachik truth, *Chazal* engage in a battle of intellect, cutting through their opponent's opinions, getting stuck in dialectical reasoning. The dust that rises from the warring minds of *Chazal* swells into a cloud of confusion, as *s'feikot* blot out the sun of clarity.

Rav Chaim Vital<sup>17</sup> zy" a, would recall, that while learning halacha, his teacher, the Arizal zy" a, would invest vast amounts of energy and strength to the point of perspiration and exhaustion. When asked why he exerted so much energy into the study of halacha, the Arizal responded, "learning halacha is for the purpose of shattering the *klippos*, and this is the secret of confusion and difficulties. Therefore, one must utilize all of their effort to the point of becoming weak." The *klippos*, or external husks of unrefined spiritual potency, surround and cover the point of truth within the halacha, namely the ability to point with certitude toward the right opinion. Nowhere is the *illana d'sfeika* more felt than the gamut of *Torah sh'Baal Peh*.

While the supernal Torah, or the Torah of the *eitz ha'chaim* discloses the clearing of undifferentiated truth, the Torah of the *eitz ha'daas* is fractured into binary opposition. The *Shisha Sidrei Mishna* become the plane of *kosher/pasul*, *tahor/taamei*, *muttar/assur*, and the learner can no longer separate the right from the wrong.<sup>18</sup> The *tachlis*, or the telos of the text is lost in the polyphony of doubt.<sup>19</sup>

With Creation's exile from the garden, the notion of doubt seeped into the texture of reality. The *lehet ha'cherev ha'mishapeches*, the luminous rotating swords, block reentry, back to the initial state of certitude. The unending stop and go of the swords and cyclical motion of back and forth, enables Creation to wonder - if I could only sneak through at the exact moment, I will emerge unscathed. The doubt of whether the blades are here or there, up or down prevails, and Creation remains paralyzed by the lack of certainty which permeates the human condition.

### ***V. Amalek - the Nation of Doubt***

Throughout Jewish history, the embodiment of doubt has taken on various garments. None more highlighted, however, than the archetypical nation of Amalek. The numerical value of Amalek (240) is equal to that of safek (240).<sup>20</sup> The shared value points to a shared root, and

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<sup>17</sup> *Pri Eitz Chaim, hanhagas ha'limmud.*

<sup>18</sup> Introduction to *Tikkunei Zohar*. See the remarks of the Alter Rebbe of Lubavitch, Rav Schneur Zalman of Liadi, *Iggeros ha'Kodesh*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> For a clear depiction of the sharp contrast between clarified Torah and Torah of doubt, see Rav Chaim Vital, introduction to *Shaar ha'Hakdamos*, printed at the beginning of *Eitz Chaim*. For a deeper understanding see the Vilna Gaon's commentary to *Tikkunei Zohar*, *tikkun 21*.

<sup>20</sup> See the comments of Rav Yitzchak Yehuda Yechiel Shafran of Komarna, in *Notzer Chesed al Avos*, 1:16.

thus, Amalek, the crooked path,<sup>21</sup> represents the radical doubt that disables Creation from uncovering the straight line of truth. Describing the intensity of concentration, or *ameilus*, it requires to cut through the difficulties and confusion of *Torah sh'Baal Peh*, RaMCha"l<sup>22</sup> comments, "The need for *ameilus* is caused by the presence of *Amalek*, who blot out the clarified point of truth. With intense focus and reasoning, we cut through the surplus of *klippa* and come to the truth."

The RaM"l, the *posek acharon*, embarked on the spiritual quest of cutting away the doubt and revealing the kernel of truth within the halacha.<sup>23</sup> This process of *birur*, spreading the light of certainty, weakens the strength of doubt and Amalek. RaM"l is equal to the numerical value of 241. The additional *alef*, when measured against the 240 of safek and Amalek, signifies the potential of overcoming and transcending the notion of doubt and confusion. Through his halachik *psak*, RaM"l was able to clarify and untangle the *sfeikos* represented by Amalek.<sup>24</sup>

## VI. Rashbi - Man of Certainty

Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai, the shining light of the Zohar, underwent a difficult process of clarification before revealing his teachings to the world.<sup>25</sup> Within the darkness of the cave, RaShb"l cultivated the capacity of answering difficulties, being *mevarer sfeikos*.<sup>26</sup> Upon exiting the cave, his fellow sages mourned the lowly physical state he was in. Rebbe Shimon replied, "Woe to you for you have seen me as such? Praiseworthy are you for you have seen me as such! Before I entered the cave I could answer the difficulties with twelve responses, now I can answer the difficulties with twenty-four responses." Caught in the darkness and confusion of the cave, exiled from his home, RaShb"l uncovered new strength to combat the *illana d'sfeika*.

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<sup>21</sup> See Shem mi'Shmuel, Purim, 1920. Amalek is etymologically related to *ikul* and *akalkalot*, crookedness and deviousness. The Shem mi'Shmuel contrasts Amalek with Yaakov Avinu, who is called *Yeshurun*, from the root *yashar*, straight. Yaakov is the root of *Emes*, Truth, as in, "He gives Truth to Yaakov" (Micah, 7:20) and Amalek is the root of crookedness and falsehood.

<sup>22</sup> *Adir b'Marom; tikkunim chadashim*

<sup>23</sup> Regarding the RaM"l as *posek acharon*, and the messianic role this position plays, see the comments of Rav Yitzchak Hutner in his *Iggeros u'Ksavim, iggeres* 112, pp. 202-204. Rav Hutner alludes to the possibility that RaM"l's halachik clarifications serve as a rectification to Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai's claim that before the redemption the Torah, and thus the halacha, will be fragmented amongst the communities of Israel. Rav Hutner quotes older generations in the playful interpretation of the *posuk*, "and the Jewish people left Egypt with a *yad rama* ("outstretched arm")." *Yad rama*, for Rav Hutner, becomes *yad RaM"l*, symbolizing the redemptive character of the RaM"l's work.

<sup>24</sup> With regards to RaM"l's capacity to blot out the doubts of Amalek through his overpowering clarity, see the incredible remarks of Rav Yisrael Dov Ber of Valendik, in his work *She'aris Yisrael*, pp. 134-135.

<sup>25</sup> Shabbos 33b.

<sup>26</sup> See Rav Schneur Zalman of Liadi, *Iggeros ha'Kodesh*, 26, where the Alter Rebbe proves that throughout his years of exile within the cave, RaShb"l learnt the *Shisha Sidrei Mishna* for the purpose of clarifying the confusion and *klippas*. Rav Chaim Elazar Shapira of Munkatch expounds upon this notion at length in his *Divrei Torah, mahadura kamma*, no. 102.

Later on, *Chazal*<sup>27</sup> recount that Rebbe Shimon came to a nearby city and asked, “is there anything here that needs fixing?” He was informed of a field whose status was unknown. The city was in doubt as to whether this field had been contaminated by the impurity of death.<sup>28</sup> RaShb"l stood up, and in an act of spiritual courage, announced that the field indeed was *tahor*, pure. The poisonous sting of death’s sword had not seeped into the field.<sup>29</sup>

Rav Avraham Yitzchak ha’Kohen Kook<sup>30</sup> zy”a, commenting on this passage, reveals that Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai’s main purpose was to spread the light of certainty, *l’harbos ohr ha’vadai*. In a city - and world - paralyzed by the grips of doubt and unable to roam freely due to the dread of death’s impurity, RaShb"l came to conquer the doubt and reveal certainty. It is for this reason that Eliyahu ha’Navi announced Rebbe Shimon’s emancipation at the opening of the cave. Eliyahu, we are told, will come to clarify the doubts that remain. *Teiku*, the acronym for *tishbi yetaretz kushyos v’abayos*<sup>31</sup> becomes *tikkun*, as the doubt and confusion of *illana d’sfeika* is clarified.<sup>32</sup>

### VII. *Lag ba’Omer - Day of Certainty*

Lag ba’Omer, the day when the students of Rebbe Akiva stopped dying, is a day of clarifying the confusion of death. All uncertainty and doubt stem from the awareness of death - a direct result of *eitz ha’daas tov v’rah*. RaShb"l came to purify the impurity of death, to spread certainty upon the fields of doubt. The light of the Zohar is a shimmering hint back toward the Torah *kedumah*, the supernal shine of clarified existence. RaM”A, the posek in whom the redemption of Torah manifested - through the unifying pull of a universally accepted posek - revealed the certainty that dispels the doubts of Amalek. RaM”A<sup>33</sup> fixed the doubts of the worldly Torah and RaShb"l revealed the certainty of the supernal Torah. On Lag ba’Omer we celebrate the *shefa* of certainty that flows from the remembrance of these great lights. The joy of Lag ba’Omer, is the joy of clarifying doubts, *ein simcha k’hataras ha’sfeikos*<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> See Shabbos 33b-34a.

<sup>28</sup> The term used by the Gemara is “*safeik tuma*.”

<sup>29</sup> See Shabbos 34a. The issue discussed by the Gemara is whether this open field is considered a cemetery. This created uncertainty for the Kohanim as to where they were and were not allowed to walk. Rebbe Shimon immediately declared the hard soil pure and marked off the impure, softer soil, thus declaring the field pure, and lending the Kohanim as sense of clarity.

<sup>30</sup> *Ein Ayah, Shabbos 34a*.

<sup>31</sup> Lit. “Tishbi will answer our questions and doubts.” Eliyahu ha’Navi is also called Eliyahu ha’Tishbi.

<sup>32</sup> Regarding the transition from the doubts of *teiku* to the clarity of *tikkun*, see the Vilna Gaon’s commentary on *Tikkunei Zohar, tikkun 3*, and *Likkutei Moharan*, Vol. I, Torah 247.

<sup>33</sup> For the kabbalistic reasoning behind RaM”A’s position as posek acharon, see the comments of Rav Moshe Dovid Valle, *Sefer Likkutim, chelek alef, sv. sefardim v’ashkenazim*, pp. 9-10. See R. Yitzchak Meir Morgenstern’s explanation in *Likkutei Yam ha’Chochma, hilchos tefillin*, pp. 213-214, and *Yam ha’Chochma* (2015) pp. 168-170.

<sup>34</sup> Lit. “there is no joy like the resolution of doubt.” Although RaM”A did not create this well known aphorism, see *Metzudas Dovid, Mishlei*, 15:6, he played the primary role in popularizing it. See his *Toras ha’Olah, Vol. I, chapter 6* where he writes, “And it has already been stated, that those who have not tasted the taste of clarifying the doubts of logic, have never tasted joy.” See as well *SHU”T ha’RaM”A* (No.6) where RaM”A responds to the MaHaRSha”L,

*Ha'vadai shemo, kein tehilaso.*

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“Like the words of the wise one, those who have not tasted the doubts and there clarifications, have not tasted the taste of joy.” Based on the ideas expressed above, it is quite apparent why RaM”A took this aphorism so seriously.