

Days That Count

Rabbi Zevulun Weisberger
Illustrated by Mordechai Zeffren

Lag B'Omer has been a special day for nearly 1900 years, but no *Lag B'Omer* was happier than the one in 1348 in the Jewish ghetto of Ratisohn, Germany. It was the twenty-eighth night of *Sefirah* when Menachem, the Rabbi's twelve-year-old son, left the *shul* and walked home.

"Only three weeks until *Shavuos*," he thought. His father had promised that, he would allow him to stay up all of *Shavuos* night and learn like the other boys in the community. Miriam and Yocheved, Menachem's sisters, also had their share of excitement. They were chosen to prepare the *Mezonos* for the early *Minyan* on *Shavuos* morning. What an honor! Alas, how soon they were destined to forget about their *Shavuos* hopes.

The Jews of the ghetto looked forward with relish and enthusiasm to any *Yom Tov*. On an ordinary day life was indeed drab in the ghetto, with its narrow, winding streets and overcrowded dwellings. The Jew was persecuted because of his faith, and hounded by his neighbors for his stubborn refusal to forsake the Torah of his ancestors. The Jew of the Middle Ages had to work hard to earn a bare living; he was forbidden by law to own land or engage in many trades. Many Jews earned a living lending money at interest, and this earned them the hatred of their borrowers. Most Jews were poor—desperately poor—but they remained cheerful because they had faith in Hashem and in the rabbis who taught them the word of Torah. At night, the gates of the ghetto were closed and bolted and no one was allowed to leave. Small wonder, then, that a *Yom Tov* was a welcome guest.

"*HAYOM TISHAH VESRIM YOM* (Today is the twenty-ninth day . . .)"

"Only four more days till *Lag B'Omer*," Menachem mentioned to Miriam as he arrived home. "By the way, where is Abba? He wasn't in *shul* for *Maariv*."

"Someone arrived with a special message for Abba," his mother said. "It seemed to be very important." It was important—more than any of them realized.

An hour later, the Rabbi entered the room. He seemed pale and worried.

"We have some very sad news," he said. "It seems that a terrible disease is raging throughout Europe. Thousands have died. They are calling it the Black Death."

"Is it very contagious?" Miriam asked.

"Yes, it is. We are faced with two great dangers. The plague itself, and the reaction of the gentiles. They are blaming it all on the Jews."

"What? How in the world can they do that?"

"They claim we are poisoning the wells in order to wipe them out. They say that less Jews than gentiles have perished from this dreadful disease."

"But surely they can't be serious," Yocheved said angrily. The Rabbi sat down at the table, pale and clearly worried.

"No, Yocheved, you are mistaken. This is deadly serious. The messenger has brought us reports of whole Jewish communities being wiped out—all on this awful charge of poisoning the wells."

"But surely we can't be in any danger," Menachem exclaimed. "We've always been on such good terms with our neighbors."

"That wouldn't help us if there is a breakdown in law and order. That's exactly what would happen if there is mob rule and some anti-Semite incites the crowd to break down the walls of the ghetto. We have enemies who are already using this charge against us."

The rest of the story came out. Thousands of Jews had already perished "*Ahl Kiddush Hashem*". Their properties and belongings were looted. Who could tell when it would be Ratisohn's turn?

"We must call an emergency meeting of the town council," the Rabbi exclaimed. "There is no time to lose."

With that, he hastily left the house. Menachem looked at his mother and his sisters. Their faces were white.

The town council met to consider the situation. Mendel, a survivor from the nearby Jewish community, rose to tell the grim details of the massacre.

"People are looking for a scapegoat and who would qualify more than the Jews, huddled together in the ghetto? Besides, here is a chance to wipe away loans they owe our money-lenders. If they kill us they wipe out their debts at the same time. And they have a chance to get our property by looting. So the lie is spreading like wildfire that we Jews are causing the Black Death. Cries of 'Burn down the ghetto' are heard all over."

The members of the council were aghast. The Rabbi arose, "My friends, this is a time for action. We will send a delegation of the most important people of the community to the officials to explain the foolishness of their accusations. Jews themselves have died from this disease. Why should we harm ourselves? But, in the meantime, we must proclaim a fast and do *Teshuvah*. Perhaps Hashem will have pity on us and save us from their evil hands."

"*HAYOM SHLOSHIM YOM . . .* (Today is the thirtieth day . . .)"

Three more days till *Lag B'Omer*—would they live to see this day—let alone the *Yom Tov* of *Shavuot*? Suddenly all their plans for the *Yom Tov* seemed so uncertain, so far away.

On the following day, the entire ghetto seemed to have squeezed into the *shul*. They poured out their hearts to Hashem to save them from the terrible *g'zerah* (decree). A delegation was quickly appointed to meet with the officials outside the ghetto walls.

The messengers were grim as they returned.

"It looks bad," they said. "The people are all worked up. Every time someone gets the plague, there are ten more volunteers to break down the ghetto walls and slaughter the inhabitants."

"There is one more thing we can do," the Rabbi remarked thoughtfully, "but it may be too late. I know the Governor personally.

"Many years ago, I saved his son's life. I passed by a lake, and heard the cries of a young boy drowning. Without thinking twice, I jumped in and rescued him. It turned out to be the governor's child. He was very grateful and promised to help me whenever I was in need. I am going to send a messenger to him to appeal for help."

"But the ghetto walls are locked day and night now. No one can get in or out. How will a message get through?"

The Rabbi turned to Menachem. "My son is a small boy. He will be able to slip through at night. We must risk it— it must succeed."

"*HAYOM ECHOD U'SHLOSHIM YOM* (Today is the thirty-first day . . .)"

After *Maariv*, the congregation recited the *Tehillim* with great fervor. With tears in their eyes, they returned to their homes.

The next day went by without incident. The crowds outside the ghetto walls increased in size and the loud hysterical cries of "Burn down the ghetto" could be heard clearly in every part of the Jewish quarter. Mothers held their children tightly, and men went grimly about their tasks.

Menachem had not returned. He had succeeded in slipping through the walls as hoped. He had had time enough to reach the Governor's residence. But there was no news—no sign of him or any assistance. Perhaps he had been caught by the mob. Who could tell if he was still alive?

"*HAYOM SHNAYIM U'SHLOSHIM YOM* (Today is the thirty-second day . . .)" One more day until *Lag B'Omer*, would they be alive to celebrate it?

The Rabbi called a special meeting for the next evening. He had received word that the attack would begin on *Lag B'Omer*. At dawn, the murderers would strike. And

then it would be all over. *Shavuot* would arrive and alas—there would be no one in the Jewish quarter to accept the Torah!

A hush settled over the crowd as the Rabbi arose.

"My friends, tonight we will count the *Sefirah*, perhaps for the final time in our lives. This day has always been a *Yom Tov* for us, and it will be known as the day that the Jews of this town offered their lives *AL KIDDUSH HASHEM*. Therefore, be strong, just as Rabbi Akiva was, during his final moments on earth, uttering the words *SH'MA YISROEL* with every fiber of his body despite the tortures inflicted upon him. If this be the desire of Hashem, then we stand ready to do our duty and fulfill our responsibilities.

"Let us live the final hours of our lives in a holy way. *Sefirah* teaches us that every day counts—every day is important. Let us not waste these last moments—let us fill them with Torah and *Mitzvos*!

Never before was a *Maariv* prayer recited with more feeling. Now they would count the *Sefirah* that was the signal for great joy for the Jews throughout the centuries—one that would have an entirely different meaning for these Jews tonight. Afterwards, they would not sleep. They would defend the ghetto to the bitter end—and then they would give their lives *AL KIDDUSH HASHEM*. Someday *Moshiach* would come and he would point to their *Kehillah* which, with supreme sacrifice, kept the flame of Torah Judaism burning bright.

It was at this very moment that they heard a great commotion outside. They braced themselves for an assault, but this was surely strange—it was too early—the attack was not due to come until dawn.

But there was no attack. Instead, soldiers were stationing themselves near the wall—troops from the Governor's palace guard. They turned around and faced the crowd with their swords drawn.

"Disperse by order of the Governor. No one is to be harmed. You are to leave immediately."

There were shouts of disappointment from the crowd, but they obeyed. Inside the walls there were other shouts—shouts of joy and thanksgiving to Hashem for this salvation, shouts of gratitude to Menachem for his successful mission.

And then they counted the *Sefirah*. "*HAYOM SHLOSHA U'SHLOSHIM YOM* (Today is the thirty-third day . . .)" this was a day that really counted.

