

This is how our forefathers danced.

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Today is Lag Baomer, a Jewish holiday in the middle of the period of mourning between Pesach and Shavuot, when all kind of disasters befell the Jewish people, in different times and places. We celebrate today that the plague epidemic which hit the students of Rabbi Akiva stopped on the thirty-third day of the Omer. Rabbi Akiva played a role in the bloody Bar Kochba revolt in 132-136 C.E against anti-Jewish measures by the Romans, persecution of the Jewish religion, thus prohibiting Jews to live like Jews. But Akiva's students were struck by the plague because they were not respectful to each other. We can learn a lesson form this.

LagBaomer is also connected with Rabbi Akiva's student Shimon bar Yochai, who was compelled to flee Roman persecutions. Together with his son Eleazar he hid in a cave in the wilderness. There, the two of them studied Torah, naked but buried up unto their neck into the sand. The reason for this was, that they wanted to preserve their clothes for Shabbat and times of prayers, when they came out of the sand. They did not know when they would be able to leave that cave to get new clothes. It turned out they would be stuck for years. This theme, the two rabbis learning in the cave, inspired the Chassidic Rebbe Yissachar Baer of Radoschitz, who stated:

When Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son were forced to hide for a very long time from the Romans, in a cave, Rabbi Shimon said:

"My son, you and I are sufficient for the world."

Rabbi Yissachar Baer explained what this meant:

atta elokeynu, (You are our G'd), and HaShem answers: ani ha-shem elokaykha, (I am HaShem your G'd!).

This 'You' and 'I' are sufficient for the world.

I included this story in my collection of Chassidic stories, which I illustrated in black and white, because I hoped that would make it easier to find a publisher. I decided to make an ink drawing of the two rabbis, with their clothes on, ready for Shabbat (see above). Later I added color illustrations to the same collection of Chassidic stories, and chose an old painting, which I had made when I lived in Chassidic Williamsburg, after a friend turned all of a sudden around in the street, and said, "You know who just passed us? The Spinker Rebbe and his *gabbay* (assistant)!" He was in awe. I did not see the Rebbe clearly because it was already dark, but the incident impressed me, and I made a painting (to the right). I do not remember why, but I added a line from a mystical prayer and a book, the Zohar, which has been ascribed to Shimon bar Yochai. As an artist you don't always



have to remember—or explain—everything. A lot of what we do is intuitive, like the colors and the composition. It speaks for itself, of course, that intuitive feelings only produce good art when

they are paired with good techniques and good art materials. I consider this painting is an excellent illustration for “*You and I.*”

On Lag Baomer we can conduct weddings and get a haircut, which is generally not done during a time of mourning. Many people light bonfires and dance, especially near Shimon bar Yochai’s tomb in the Israeli City of Meron. But we should never forget that this festive day is just one day in the middle of a gloomy period for the Jews, like a little candle in a vast, dark cellar vault. And that inspired me to illustrate a poem of Yitzchak Lamdan. He describes how perilous our existence has been for the last few millennia, and often still is. Lamdan (1899-1954) was a religious Zionist poet, who made aliyah in 1920. In 1926 he composed his epic poem about the siege of Masada, one of the last Jewish strongholds against the Romans, and the site of fierce and brave resistance. I have visited Massada two times, and was impressed and moved every time to see to what great length people will go—and did go—to defend their freedom of thought and speech, to determine how they want to live their lives. Such Jewish resilience became the inspiration of generations of oppressed Jews. The people of Massada were religious, the Jewish anarchists, like Emma Goldman in the Lower Eastside of New York, in the early twentieth century were not, but all these people wanted freedom. In Lamdan’s work, the chorus sings the following mystical lines:

*The chain is still not broken,
From father to child,
From fire to fire,
The chain continues.
Thus danced our fathers,
One hand on a neighbor’s shoulder,
The other holding a scroll of the Law.
A people’s burden is raised with love.
So let us dance,
One hand gripping the circle,
The other clutching our heavy book of sorrow,
So let us dance.
When our fathers danced,
They closed their eyes and wells of joy were opened.
They knew they were dancing on the abyss,
That if they opened their eyes,
The wells of joy would turn dry.
So let us dance too, with our eyes closed.
Thus shall we continue the chain, lest it crumble into the deep,
To let us dance too.*

(Masada, From: Milken Archive of Jewish Music)





Since this scene is timeless, I made a line of dancing Jews from different backgrounds and periods of time at the edge of the abyss, like a medieval rabbi next to a man in a striped concentration camp suit with a yellow star, a chassid, a working class eastern-European Jew, a scholarly “German” type, a kibbutznik with short pants a thimble hat, a Persian or Ottoman Jew with a turban, and a man with a medieval pointed hat, imposed on him by the rulers of his time to state clearly that he is a Jew, (in the colored version) and some timeless, non-descript Jews. All these are dancing together, the religious and the non-religious, the rich and the poor, educated and non-educated. They carry Torah scrolls, because no matter what individuals believe or don’t believe, over the ages the Torah has defined our lifestyle and thinking. Behind the dancers is the fire, in front of their feet the edges of the abyss are crumbling. But they dance on, because there is no other choice. The same principle applies to many of us, Jewish artists.

I wish you a happy lag baOmer and much inspiration,

Shoshannah Brombacher, New York, 5-23-2019