"From the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering – the day after the sabbath – you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete." (Leviticus 23:15)

We are currently in the period of the Counting of the Omer, which is commanded in our Parsha (Vayikra 23:15) for this week.

In fact, for many of us, tragically we are more aware of the exact day of the Omer than we have ever been before. Yesterday was Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of the Omer (in Hebrew letters can be numbers and Lamed – Gimel which is how you would write 33 if using Hebrew letters also makes the word Lag – thus, Lag B'omer.)

It was on this special day, when, according to legend, a plague which had killed thousands of students of the great Rabbi Akiva was finally lifted. Lag B'Omer is also the anniversary of the death of one of the most fascinating sages of the Talmud – Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

Shimon bar Yochai is a fascinating character. A mystic, Jewish tradition teaches that he wrote the great work of Jewish mysticism known as the Zohar. (Today we follow the scholarly opinion that it was written by the thirteenth century Spanish mystic Moshe de Leon.) Tradition teaches that Shimon bar Yochai hid from the Romans in a cave for years, burying themselves in the sand so they would not wear out their clothes. They spent those years in mystical studies. Finally, when they learned that the Romans had ceased searching for them, they came out of the cave. They saw a man going to work and became so angry that the man was not studying Torah, that their eyes caused everything to catch fire. So God sent them back to the cave. "Are you trying to destroy my world?" When they came out of the cave a second time, they saw a man preparing for the Sabbath and found peace. (Talmud Shabbat 33b – 34a)

As we saw in horrific videos last night, tens of thousands of religious Jews ascend to the cave in Meron where he is buried. His life and his teachings transformed the way they see the world and experience the divine. They sing, dance, celebrate his life, those mystical teachings and tragically last night dozens were killed, hundreds injured when a stampede erupted after a stage collapsed in the midst of the crowd packed shoulder to shoulder.

Lag B'Omer traditionally a day of celebration, a day for haircuts (little boys when they are three years old) and weddings. Campfires, which one sees all over Israel; and this year the first public celebrations in Israel since the start of COVID will now be remembered for tragedy; one of the largest peace time mass casualty events in Israel's history.

We mourn the loss of life, we will say kaddish in a few minutes for the two Canadians, Shraga Gestetner and Dovi Steinmetz, both of Montreal who died at the event, and pray that those injured will recover in body and spirit.

The people who gathered at Mt Meron were ultra-orthodox Jews; the place they gathered is the center of mystical Judaism or Kabbalah, not far from the norther city of Tzfat.

It will be no surprise to those listening that I'm not a mystic or an ultra-orthodox Jew. There are many flavours of Judaism and those are not my taste. But on this tragic shabbat I want to feel closer to our brothers and sisters in Israel, and in truth I am hoping that we all will.

With that intent it seems to me that the best way to honour the lives of those who died and to pray for the healing of those injured is to teach a bit of torah, maybe even a bit of torah we would not have learned, were it not for this tragedy teaching us all of the importance of Lag B'Omer to ultra-orthodox Jews.

So in their honour and memory I want to share this mystical teaching about this time in the Jewish calendar.

Over the centuries, the counting of the Omer has taken on a mystical quality, which in part explains why 100,000 ultra-orthodox Jews chose this particular day to gather at the tomb of one of their sages.

The Omer is the 49-day period counting from the second day of Passover to the first day of Shavuot, and according to traditional Jewish law, each day of this period must be ritually counted. Like all Jewish rituals, there are rules: The day must be counted at night, after sunset and with the appropriate blessing. You cannot name the day of the Omer until it is counted with a blessing.

Technically, according to the Bible, an "omer" is simply a biblical measure of grain, and we are counting the days between the first grain offering of the year and the new meal offering given at the peak of the harvest season, 50 days later. The whole thing is simply a way to count down the harvest season. But over the years, as Shavuot morphed from a harvest festival to the holiday celebrating the day the Jews received the Torah at the foot of Mount Sinai, Jewish philosophers and commentators have seized on this calendrical link between Passover and Shavuot to push for a more robust religious underpinning.

Enter the kabbalists, Jewish mystics who further added meaning to what before was simply marking time.

According to Jewish mystical teachings each of the seven weeks of the counting of the Omer is associated with one of the seven sefirot, the mystical manifestations of divine characteristics. And each day within the week corresponded to the same succession of sefirot.

For example—and bear with me if this is not your jam because things are about to get very mystical here but I promise there is a point at the end—the seven sefirot are:

1. Hesed (lovingkindness)
2. Gevurah (strength/discipline/justice)
3. Tiferet (compassion/harmony)
4. Netzach (endurance)

5. Hod (humility)
6. Yesod (bonding/foundation/intimacy)
7. Malchut (sovereignty/nobility/kingship)

Hesed lives closest to the realm of the ein sof, and malchut is the sefirah that lives closest to our world. This is a snapshot of that ladder which knits us to God and through which the portal of divine actions pass through to our world. The first week of Omer-counting, in this system, is considered the week of hesed, and then each day within that week takes on a secondary attribute. So on the first day one would consider the attribute of loving-kindness within loving-kindness, and then on the second day the attribute of justice or strength within lovingkindness, then harmony within lovingkindness, endurance within loving-kindness, humility within lovingkindness, relationship-building within lovingkindness, and nobility or majesty within lovingkindness. That process is repeated with the second week, which is the week of gevurah, and so on until the week of malchut completes the 49 days.

There are meditations and blessings that go along with thinking through the Omer this way, and a whole theology of divine reunification, but for many people the central idea is to meditate on the attributes of the respective day: What would it mean to incorporate endurance into our acts of lovingkindness? To show nobility within our humility? To give discipline to our compassion?

If you're confused or a bit lost, welcome to mysticism – honestly I think part of the point of Jewish Mysticism is to get you a bit lost then help you find your way out.

But all of this actually relates I think in a deeply meaningful way to what we have been going through I these endless days of COVID; when every day seems to run together, what do they call it, "today is Blursday"?

Here the mystical lens for counting the omer may help us get through to what we hope is the light at the end of the tunnel; which our health professionals say coukd be somewhere around August/September.

Our tradition offers us, and the Jewish mystics would implore us to replace the emptiness of counting with the optimistic conviction that each day is not just some holding unit of time but holds the promise of a distinct and unique virtue in its own right. After all, no two days of the Omer hold the same characteristics. Instead, each day we are called upon to act with some new understanding of the world, or some new understanding of ourselves.

No the reform Jew is me, still thinks that the counting of the Omer is just a measure of wheat onto which some bored mystical rabbis centuries ago fostered a whole system of meaning.

But to honour the memory of those of our Jewish brethren who died or were injured yesterday I am going to open my mind a bit and allow myself to be less rational and more mystical if only for the remaining 15 days of the Omer. To allow myself to be comforted by the lesson that I live

inside a Judaism in which time doesn't pass without comment, in which each moment must be filled with and mined for meaning. A Judaism that says, long before it became a cliché – count each day and make each day count.

Mystical or not, ultra-orthodox or liberal, Jewish or other – as we go from one blursday of COVID to another, it's a teaching that resonates with me. Each week must have a theme and each day within that week a deeper connection to that theme, and when we do this, no day is blursday – everyday if we pay attention, is unique and special and holy and sacred and filled with meaning.