

BONFIRE

מדורה

Preparing at KCT for the joyful
celebration of Lag B'Omer

18 Iyar ~ May 6-7, 2015

Photo by Jason Empey (12/2012, Ontario, CA)

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מְדוּרָה

May 6 - 7, 2015 18 Iyar 5775

Kehillat Chovevei Tzion

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*A Kehillah For Those
Wishing To Participate
In Traditional Religious
Service On Shabbat
And Yom Tov*

*Celebrating Our
Twenty Second Year!*

Editors' Note: Because of the unique nature of this occasion, there is a wide diversity of views on some of the day's requirements and practices. None really can be assured to be exclusively and historically correct. This first selection represents an amalgamation of thoughts from several people among the Conservative Movement's leadership, collectively explaining why Lag B'Omer exists, where it came from, and what messages it conveys. Then, we move to some essays by authors with other approaches to relevant issues and practices.

. . . . Why Lag B'Omer?

Lag B'Omer is not a religious festival (as Rosh HaShana or Pesach, for example) and work is permitted on this day. Lag B'Omer still retains the long-treasured memories of the heroic struggle our ancestors waged for the sake of the Torah. We associate this ancient holiday, which originated nearly 2,000 years ago, with the modern Yom Ha'Atzmaut, Israel's Independence Day. Why? That will become more evident as you read on.

Until the birth of the State of Israel in 1948, Lag B'Omer had been the youngest of our Jewish festivals. Yet it was nearly 2,000 years ago that this "youngster" was born. It happened in the days when the Romans ruled Israel with an iron hand after defeating the Jews in two wars. They forbade the Jews to study the Torah and made life extremely bitter for them. Out of all this war and suffering came the festival of Lag B'Omer.

After the Jews lived through many centuries of growth and progress punctuated by much suffering, beginning with the period of the Bible, followed by centuries of foreign rule, they were finally -- after a short period of independence - conquered by the Romans, the mightiest rulers of ancient times. Then, when they rebelled against their Roman masters, they were defeated in the year 70 C.E. The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and many Jews were driven from their land into all parts of the Roman Empire and elsewhere. However, even outside their land, they did not stop studying the Torah.

Then about 60 years later (around 130 C.E.) the Jews petitioned the Emperor Hadrian to allow them to rebuild the Temple.



Hadrian agreed at first, but then changing his mind, he consented only on condition that Jerusalem be rebuilt not as a Jewish, but as a heathen city, where only Roman idols, and not God, would be worshipped. So great was the Jews' disappointment and so fierce their anger that they decided to rebel against Rome and to try once more to regain their independence. But in this war too the little band of Jews was defeated and their hopes for rebuilding their Temple were crushed.

This second rebellion against Rome was led by a brave and legendary warrior. His name was Bar Kochba. Well known for his mighty strength, he was chosen as a leader by one of the most famous scholars of all times, Rabbi Akiba. For a while it appeared that Bar Kochba's army would defeat the Romans, but the mighty armies of Rome were too much for the Jews. Now the Roman conquerors made life for the Jews more miserable than ever.

However, when the Romans discovered that the Jews refused to die after two defeats, and that it was the study of the Torah that kept them alive, they decided to forbid all study of Torah. In this way, thought the Romans, Judea would be destroyed forever.

But the Jews were not frightened. They still did not lose hope but instead, continued to study Torah faithfully. Now, it happened during the days of Rabbi Akiba, and during the seven weeks, or 49 days, between Pesach and Shavuot, that a frightful epidemic broke out among his students, killing thousands of them. That is why this period of 49 days is one of sadness. The rabbis forbade the celebration of any happy events, such as weddings and parties, during these 7 weeks. However, a strange thing occurred: the raging epidemic suddenly stopped on the 33rd day. On this one day of the Omer (49 day) period no students died. For this reason all festivities that had been forbidden during this period were henceforth permitted on the 33rd day, which is called "Lag B'Omer".

The term "Lag B'Omer" comes first, from "Lag" which in Hebrew stands for 33 because it is comprised of the letter "Lamed" which has the numerical value of 30 and "Gimmel," 3. It comes also from the "omer" period during Temple days, when a measure of grain, called an "omer," was brought into the Temple for 49 days, or seven weeks. This ceremony, known as S'firat Ha Omer (Counting the Omer) began with the 2nd day of Pesach and ended on the 50th day, which was the Festival of Shavuot. But this period of the days of Rabbi Akiba also came to be known as the "S'firah" period, a time of great sadness.

Lag B'Omer is also known as "Scholars' Day" because it reminds us of the end of the plague that killed so many famous and beloved scholars. Of the noted rabbis who lived during this period were Rabbi Akiba (who, although totally uneducated until 40 years of age, later became one of the greatest scholars Israel has ever known) and Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai (who lived in a cave for 13 years when studying Torah was forbidden). Many scholars of this era became martyrs; they gave up their lives rather than their study of the Torah. Chief among them was Rabbi Akiba whom the Romans cruelly tortured to death.

On the other hand, Lag B'Omer is a happy holiday because we remember the heroism of these beloved scholars. They live on as unforgettable examples. This, then, is the message of Lag B'Omer: We are filled with pride in our Torah, which communicated such faith and courage to the Jews that even the harshest Roman laws could not keep them from living by its teachings and studying it in the face of all dangers.



. . . . *What Holiday Customs Have Developed?*

Several types of customs have arisen in Israel in modern times.

Bonfires - Lag B'Omer has become the bonfire holiday, perhaps in commemoration of the signal fires the rebels lit on the mountaintops to relay messages, and perhaps in memory of Rashbi. For weeks before Lag B'Omer children gather any scrap wood they can find, and on the eve of this holiday large bonfires are lit and potatoes and onions (and now marshmallows, too) are roasted in the flames. Among secular Jews, the bonfires are the only custom that has remained from the traditions of Lag B'Omer.

Bows and arrows - In the Diaspora, Jewish youngsters used to go out into the fields on Lag B'Omer and shoot arrows, perhaps in commemoration of the Bar Kochba revolt; perhaps influenced by the surrounding gentiles. One can still find children here and there who play with bows and arrows on Lag B'Omer, but this custom is slowly disappearing. (*Editors' Note: See a later essay for more on this custom.*)

Celebrations in honor of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (Rashbi) - This is a custom that developed among the kabbalists of Safed in the 16th century and has become a popular folk celebration: on Lag B'Omer thousands of people have adopted the custom of making a pilgrimage to Rashbi's tomb in the Galilee, in the city of Meron, the burial place of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son, Rabbi Elazar b'Rabbi Shimon, tens of thousands of Jews gather to celebrate on the "Yahrtzeit," the anniversary of the death of the "godly Tanna," the great scholar who lived in the immediate aftermath of the Second Temple. With torches, song and feasting, the Yahrtzeit is celebrated, which was a specific request by Bar Yochai of his students. They light bonfires there in the evening and picnic throughout the following day. Many fervently Orthodox Jews also bring their three-year-old sons there on Lag B'Omer for their first haircut.

. . . . *Lag B'Omer and Gratitude*

Written by Rabbi Efram Goldberg, rabbi of the Boca Raton Synagogue.

Years ago, someone gave me a Tony Robbins CD to listen to. I was excited to hear what one of the most inspirational people of modern times would have to say and how it could change my life for the better. He started his talk by saying that he has the secret to both happiness and success. If you follow his advice and begin each and every day of your life exactly as he prescribes, he can all but guarantee you will find yourself both happier, and achieving your goals and dreams.

I was very eager to hear what his secret is.

What Tony Robbins said is correct, but for me, and for you, and for Jewish 3 year olds around the world, it was nothing new. The secret to happiness and to achieving success, he said, is to start every day of your life by expressing gratitude. As soon as you wake up, before doing anything else, say thank you. Be grateful and appreciative for being alive, having a roof over your head, having your health if you are lucky, your family, etc.



He continued that it isn't enough to think appreciatively, but you need to start your day by verbalizing and actually saying thank you out loud. If you do, the rest of your day is guaranteed to be successful and happy.

What Tony Robbins is teaching in the 21st century, Judaism has taught since its inception thousands of years ago. From an early age, we teach our children to wake up saying Modeh ani lefanecha, I am grateful to you God for the fact that I woke up, that I am alive to see another day, for the wonderful blessings in my life and for my relationship with You. It has been inculcated within us from our youth that we don't wake up feeling entitled, deserving and demanding. Rather, we wake up with a deep and profound sense of gratitude, appreciation and thanks.

In my experience, Tony Robbins is right. How we start our day has an incredible impact on how the rest of it will go. This week we will celebrate Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of the Omer. Each day of the Omer is characterized by another kabbalistic attribute. Lag B'Omer is Hod sh'b'hod, the glory of glory, reflecting our appreciation of God's greatness and glory. The Hebrew word hod can be understood as coming from the same word as hodu, or modeh, meaning thanks. Lag B'Omer is a day characterized as "thankfulness within thankfulness," or a day to celebrate gratitude.

The Chassam Sofer, Rav Moshe Sofer says that the miraculous manna that fell from Heaven began to descend on Lag B'Omer. On the first day, the manna was undoubtedly greeted with great enthusiasm and appreciation, but as time went on and there was an increasing expectation the heavenly bread would descend, it became much easier to take it for granted and to forget to be appreciative for it at all. Therefore Lag B'Omer is a time that we identify and say thank you for all of the blessings that regularly descend into our lives, but unfortunately, like the manna, that we take for granted.

. . . . Why Bows and Arrows?

Rabbi Kerry Olitsky and Rabbi Ron Isaacs explain the customs of bows and arrows.

The custom of children playing with a bow and arrow on Lag B'Omer is traced to the legend that rainbows did not appear during the lifetime of Shimon Bar Yochai because of his saintliness. A rainbow ("Keshet" in Hebrew) is a sign that the world would not be destroyed. Since Bar Yochai was so good, there was no need for the affirmation of the rainbow. The word for "bow" in Hebrew is the same as the word for "rainbow," therefore children play with bows and arrows to remember Bar Yochai. Other people associate the custom with the traditions that the students of Rabbi Akiba deceived the Romans by carrying bows and arrows to pretend that they were hunting, when in fact they were studying Torah, which the Romans had forbidden.

. . . . Do We Have Lag B'Omer All Wrong?

In this 2013 essay, Shayna Zamkane, a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Chicago, explores whether Lag B'Omer shouldn't be refashioned to afford us the opportunity to realize this period's full potential for joy.



On [May 7, this year], Jews will light bonfires and celebrate Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of the counting of the Omer. For many, Lag B'Omer is a joyous respite from the customary mourning between Passover and Shavuot. But neither the festivities of the day, nor the sobriety of the seven weeks, have their origins in any of Judaism's authoritative texts. How did the most joyous time of year for the Jews become such a lachrymose period?

Both the mourning rituals and Lag B'Omer seemingly commemorate events surrounding the second-century sage Rabbi Akiva. As the Vilna Babylonian Talmud recounts, "Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of disciples and they all died between Pesach and Atzeret [Shavuot] because they didn't treat each other with respect." Today, Jews mourn for the deaths of these students and celebrate the day on which they stopped dying.

The story of the deaths was later amended by the ammoraim, the early Jewish scholars who taught from 200 C.E. to 500 C.E. They claimed that the students died "from Pesach to Atzeret [Shavuot]" and were afflicted with a plague or with diphtheria. The narrative thus became infused with a moralistic teaching. We would expect the Talmud to expound on the mourning customs; strangely, it does not. In fact, the Talmud says nothing about commemorating the deaths.

In order to understand the story's unusual aspects, such as the large number of students and their harsh punishment, we must situate it against a backdrop of messianic politics and persecution. From 132 C.E. to 135 C.E., Shimon Ben Kosiba, also known as Shimon Bar Kokhba, led a revolt against the Romans. Akiva believed that Bar Kokhba would prove to be the Messiah, and in the early stages of the war it seemed that this might be the case. Indeed, the Romans had been forced to retreat, and Bar Kokhba ruled Israel for two years. It was the first significant victory since the destruction of the Second Temple, in 70 C.E.

Two events might have precipitated the rebellion: first, the decision of the ruler, Hadrian, to rebuild the Temple, dedicate it to Jupiter and transform it into a Roman holy place, and second, Hadrian's ban on genital mutilation, which included Jewish circumcision. Clearly, the students weren't Akiva's classroom pupils, but soldiers fighting religious and national persecution.

In later generations, Babylonian Jews temporarily lost some of the historical facts surrounding the story, although they were aware of the tradition of the Rabbi Akiva. In the tenth century, Rav Sherira HaGaon, the leader of the Babylonian Talmudic Academy of Pumbedita, explained that the students did not die in a plague, but in a "shamda," a government-sponsored persecution. Shamda appears in the Spanish versions of Yevamot 62b. The corruption of the French versions explains the inconsistencies. Given that Rav Sherira HaGaon was the most authoritative of the Talmudic Academy's heads, and was closer to the sources, his explanation is more consistent with Talmudic accounts.

The recasting of the students as soldiers still does not answer the question of why Jews mourn, since Tisha B'Av was legislated as the official day of national mourning. Interestingly, the custom most associated with mourning — not marrying — might have been adopted from the Romans. During Lemuralia, the Roman month of May, Romans believed that the ghosts of the dead returned to disturb the living. The Romans did not

marry, for fear of jeopardizing their happiness. This superstition subsequently migrated to France and Germany. Within Jewish communities, the practice can be traced to the ninth century, but it was not widespread until the 12th century, and never became universal.

If Akiva's students never died from a plague, then the end of a plague cannot justify the existence of Lag B'Omer, despite claims to the contrary. Even when the duration of the plague and its end date are cast into doubt, rabbis have clung to the number 33 for other reasons: as the symbol of the weekdays during the Omer, as the total possible days of mourning after subtracting the number of holidays, etc. Roman tradition seems to offer the most compelling explanation: After 32 days of mourning, the Romans celebrated on the 33rd day by marrying.

Until the 17th century, no evidence suggests that Jews celebrated Lag B'Omer. None of the rabbis who advocated quasi-mourning suggested that it could be interrupted. Only with the followers of Isaac Luria, the father of Lurianic Kabbalah, did the day become one of celebration in honor of the death of Shimon Bar Yochai, whom many (but not all) observant Jews believe wrote the Kabbalah. Not only was the attribution of his death to this day a historical misprint, but there is also no precedent in Jewish history for fetishizing a death. The holiday has since been criticized by some rabbis for its meaninglessness.



Rather than clinging to a relatively recent and impoverished innovation, it is time to reclaim the period of redemption between Passover and Shavuot as one of joy and not sorrow. Lag B'Omer, a mirage with no halachic tradition, whose only purpose is to temporarily alleviate self-imposed stringencies, contradicts the real spirit of the counting of the Omer. We may continue the practice of refraining from marriage during the seven weeks — not because we are mourning, but because of the long-standing tradition of giving joyous occasions our undivided attention.





5775

MAY - JUNE

**SCHEDULE
OF
SHABBAT
AND
SHAVUOT
SERVICES**

**KEHILLAT
CHOVEVEI
TZION**

SERVICES CANDLE LIGHTING

20 IYAR

SHABBAT EMOR

FRIDAY	MAY 8	6:25 PM	7:37 PM
SATURDAY	MAY 9	9:00 AM	

27 IYAR

SHABBAT BEHAR-BECHUKATAI

FRIDAY	MAY 15	6:30 PM	7:44 PM
SATURDAY	MAY 16	9:00 AM	

5 SIVAN

SHABBAT BAMIDBAR

FRIDAY	MAY 22	6:35 PM	7:51 PM
SATURDAY	MAY 23	9:00 AM	

6 SIVAN

SHAVUOT FIRST DAY

SATURDAY	MAY 23	7:30 PM	8:58 PM
		TIKKUN L'AYL SHAVUOT	8:00 - 11:30 PM
SUNDAY	MAY 24	9:00 AM	
SHAVUOT STUDY SESSIONS CONTINUE			

7 SIVAN

SHAVUOT SECOND DAY

SUNDAY	MAY 24	7:30 PM	8:59 PM
MONDAY	MAY 25	9:00 AM	
(INCLUDING YIZKOR)			
SHAVUOT STUDY SESSIONS CONTINUE			
SHAVUOT ENDS MONDAY EVENING AT 8:47 PM			

12 SIVAN

SHABBAT NASO

FRIDAY	MAY 29	6:40 PM	7:57 PM
SATURDAY	MAY 30	9:00 AM	

19 SIVAN

SHABBAT BEHAALOTECHA

FRIDAY	JUNE 5	6:45 PM	8:02 PM
SATURDAY	JUNE 6	9:00 AM	

26 SIVAN

SHABBAT SHELACH-LECHA

FRIDAY	JUNE 12	6:50 PM	8:06 PM
SATURDAY	JUNE 13	9:00 AM	

3 TAMMUZ

SHABBAT KORACH

FRIDAY	JUNE 19	6:50 PM	8:09 PM
SATURDAY	JUNE 20	9:00 AM	