

Dear Rabbi Fried,

In temple religious school, our teacher said that in Israel many people light bonfires on Lag B'Omer. She couldn't really give the reason why they do that. Could you please explain the significance of lighting bonfires on Lag B'Omer?  
Whitney T. and Zachary W.

Dear Whitney and Zachary,

This Thursday night, May 22, and Friday, marks the day on the Jewish calendar called "Lag B'Omer". The day Lag B'Omer means the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the "counting of the Omer", a mitzvah we have discussed and explained for the past 2 columns. "Lag" means 33, as the numerical value of Lamed is 30, and that of Gimel is 3, hence Lamed Gimel of the Omer is the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of counting.

This day is significant on the Jewish calendar for two reasons. One, it is the day that the plague which took the lives of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students came to an end. For this reason it is a day of happiness and rejoicing. This does not, however, explain why Jews around the world mark that rejoicing by lighting bonfires. (Jews usually rejoice by eating!!).

There was a second occurrence on this day. Lag B'Omer is the day that marks the passing of one of Rabbi Akiva's greatest students, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. Rabbi Shimon is most widely known as the author of the Zohar, the principle Kabbalistic text.

The day is not known as the "day of his death", rather "the day of his joy", by the Kabbalistic sages. This is due to the unique circumstances of his passing. On Lag B'Omer, R' Shimon's home was filled with students. He requested that all leave, besides his son and one student. The Zohar tells that when everyone left and the door was closed, his home became surrounded by fire, the same fire which burned on Mt. Sinai when the Torah was given to the Jews. Rabbi Shimon then began to speak for hours, revealing the innermost hidden secrets of Kabbalah to his selected listeners who recorded his remarks and the events. All these Kabbalistic, mystically profound ideas poured out of Rabbi Shimon with a joy and ecstasy above anything they had ever witnessed before. The fire of Sinai was because it was like another day of Sinai, being given the understanding of the innermost parts of the Torah.

The Sefirah, or Heavenly trait which is revealed on Lag B'Omer is called "Hod ShebeHod", or the Beauty within the Beauty. This is referring to innermost beauty of the Torah, which was revealed by the mouth of Rabbi Shimon on that day. When he finished, his soul, saturated with such an elevated holiness, could no longer stay within his physical, limiting body, and he returned his soul to its Maker. He said this should not be a day of sadness due to his passing, rather a day of joy for the revelation of the words of Torah which he taught.

For this reason bonfires are lit in Israel and throughout the world, reminiscent of the fire of Sinai surrounding the home of Rabbi Shimon on that day. Especially in Meron, the city of his burial, bonfires abound.

I sincerely hope you continue with your learning for many more years, and come to the true understanding of the Torah and its beauty.