

## The Month of Iyar:

# The Holy Fires of Lag B'Omer

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

### Introduction

I'm happy to return home from a successful North America tour just in time for Lag b'Omer, which is one of these hidden holidays which we celebrate "big time" in Bat Ayin. In addition to the big communal fire for the entire community, almost each family has their own bonfire. When I invited a couple of our friends over to share the light of our Bonfire, one woman responded: "Sorry, we can't come, because we have a big pile of wood clippings to burn. We want to use the night of Lag b'Omer to burn it all up." So I'm asking you, is the purpose of the bon-fires on Lag b'Omer mainly to consume all the accumulated garden waste? Or is there a deeper reason behind lighting fires on this holy day? What is the best way to take advantage of the energy of Lag b'Omer? I look forward to reading your comments!

Lag b'Omer takes place during *hod* of *hod* in *sefirat ha'omer*.<sup>1</sup> *Hod* shares the same Hebrew root with the word תודה/*todah* which means thank you. I want to take this opportunity to thank all the amazing people who helped make my tour so successful! Thank you to all of you who hosted, who helped with PR, transportation, and various technical matters. Thank you for those who opened their homes to make me comfortable, who provided healthy food and who extended yourselves in so many ways. Thank you to those who sponsored and supported, who bought my books and who attended. I really appreciate all of you. May Hashem greatly bless you, and may you share in the spiritual reward of Holistic Torah for Women on the Land.

### Lag b'Omer – A Holiday Shrouded in Mystery

Lag b'Omer is an exciting and mysterious holiday. We light bonfires, play music, celebrate weddings, and some shoot arrows. All this takes place during the semi-mourning period when we haven't been celebrating weddings, playing dance-music, cutting hair, or shaving. What is the underlying significance hiding behind this obscure holiday? Lag b'Omer celebrates the anniversary of the passing of the renowned Mishnaic sage and foremost Kabbalist, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai.<sup>2</sup> His teachings comprise the text of the *Zohar* the primary book of the Kabbalah. We don't have any other holiday of this caliber which celebrates the passing of a Jewish sage. Why do we celebrate the passing of one of the greatest sages in Jewish history with so much joy?

<sup>1</sup> During each of the seven weeks between Pesach and Shavuot when we count the omer, we focus on a different one of the seven lower sefirot in the Tree of Life each week. Each day of the week likewise has its own sefirotic aspect.

<sup>2</sup> *Ateret Yehoshua, Parashat B'Chukotai.*



## The Successor of Rabbi Akiva Entering the Orchard of Kabbalah

Lag b'Omer, which literally means the thirty third day of the Omer, commemorates two events. On the thirty-third day of the Omer, there was an interruption or end of the plague that killed twenty two thousand students of Rabbi Akiva. Subsequently Rabbi Akiva moved to the south of Israel, where Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai became one of the five students, who then carried Rabbi Akiva's teachings into the future. He later died on the same thirty-third day of the Omer. On his deathbed, he expressed his personal wishes that his *yahrtzeit* (anniversary of death) be celebrated with great joy. Rabbi Akiva was the greatest Kabbalist of his time. He is the only one of four Rabbis who entered the *Pardes* (An acronym for the four levels of Torah including the secret mystical level of Kabbalah). Whereas the other Rabbis were injured either physically or spiritually, Rabbi Akiva was the only one who entered and returned in peace.<sup>3</sup> The mystical tradition that Rabbi Akiva carried with him was passed down to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and revealed in the *Zohar*.

## Lag b'Omer's Kabbalistic Transmission – Rectification for Rabbi Akiva's Students

Rabbi Avraham Trugman explains how Lag b'Omer celebrates the survival of the Kabbalah. When Rabbi Shimon and his son were hiding from the Romans in the cave, Rabbi Shimon summoned Eliyahu the prophet by a specific formula that he had learned from Rabbi Akiva. This is how it came about that Eliyahu taught them the holy *Zohar*. There is a tradition in the writings of the Chida (Rabbi Chaim David Azulai), that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai received the sacred traditions of the Kabbalah from Rabbi Akiva specifically on Lag b'Omer. The knowledge of Kabbalah needed to be transmitted during the Jewish month of Iyar, called the month of *Ziv* (splendor),<sup>4</sup> because at this time the land of Israel is glowing with holiness, as the fruits are maturing on the trees and the flowers are blossoming. Since the knowledge of Kabbalah is the holiest teaching, the greatest obstacles deter it from being passed on and revealed in the world. This is the underlying cause of the dispute between the students of Rabbi Akiva and why they met their death during the Omer period. However, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai brought about the rectification, by enlightening his students with the secret of Kabbalah that he had received from Rabbi Akiva. The zenith of this Kabbalistic revelation took place on the day when Rabbi Shimon's soul rose to heaven. Therefore, we celebrate on the day of his passing, how Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai became the most important link in the chain of Kabbalistic succession.

## Bonfires

Since "the Torah is light,"<sup>5</sup> we can understand the main custom of Lag b'Omer to light the bonfire. The fires of Lag b'Omer represent the light of the inner dimensions of the Torah as well as the deepest longing of our soul to be close to G-d and to understand the spiritual, mystical depths of the Torah. The bonfires also connect us back to Rabbi Akiva, who was tortured to death. He transformed his burning pain into sacrificing his life with the fiery love of Hashem. Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai carried on Rabbi Akiva's ability to transform the fires of torture to the fire of love of G-d. This incredible light became engraved in the holy *Zohar*. Rav Yitzchak Ginsburgh reveals that the two letters of *גל*/*gal* – 33, when inverted, spell *גל*/*gal*, which means to reveal or open, as in the verse "Open [*gal*] my eyes

<sup>3</sup> *Babylonian Talmud, Chagiga* 14b

<sup>4</sup> *Melachim* 6:1.

<sup>5</sup> *Mishlei* 6:23.

that I may see wonders in Your Torah.”<sup>6</sup> Lag b’Omer represents the fire of Torah that gives us the inner vision to grasp the wonders of the Torah, thereby illuminating the long night of exile. With Hashem’s help, Israel will be redeemed in the future through the merit of learning the *Zohar*. In order to overcome the darkness all around us, on a personal, national and universal level, we need to go beyond the superficial learning and observance of Torah, and reveal deeper and more spiritual levels that will bring light to ourselves and the world.

### Receiving the Torah with a Good Heart

*B’nei Yissascher* explains that the forty nine days of counting the Omer can be broken down to the numerical value of the Hebrew “A good heart” consisting of (לב/lev – 32) and (טוב/tov – 17). (32+17= 49) If you count from the first word of the Torah until the word “good” (“tov”) in “*Hashem saw that it was good,*”<sup>7</sup> you will find exactly thirty two words. Together the first thirty two words (לב/lev) and the word (טוב/tov) – good spell out the expression טוב לב/lev tov – A good heart.” Hashem commanded us to count the numerical value of “A good heart” in preparation for receiving the Torah, which embodies the quintessence of “A good heart.” The Torah is the heart of the world. Therefore, it has thirty two paths of wisdom. On the first day of Creation, after creating light, the Torah states that Hashem saw that the light was good. According to the Midrash, He concealed this light in the Torah. Therefore, the Torah is the essence of good corresponding to the hidden “*light that is good.*” This explains why Hashem commanded us to count 49 days (32+17) in order to be worthy to receive the Torah.<sup>8</sup>

### The Hidden Light of the Torah

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai is called the holy candle, for through him the secrets of the Torah were revealed. This is the secret of “*the light that is good*” – the *Ohr HaGanuz* (hidden light) buried in the Torah. Just as the word “*tov*” in the sentence “*the light that is tov/good*” is the thirty third word in the Torah, so was Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai’s holy light revealed on the thirty third day of counting the Omer. After having counted thirty two days of the Omer, then the “good” of the heart hidden in the Torah, is revealed. For this reason Lag B’Omer is “*tov*” (17) days from Shavuot. On that day Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai rose to the upper heaven, and it follows that this is also the day he was born, as Hashem always fulfills the years of the *Tzaddikim*.<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai’s holy book is called the *Zohar* – (Splendor), which refers to “*the light that is good*” hidden in the Torah. His light will be preserved until the revelation of the light of Mashiach, as our sages said “G-d said, let there be light”<sup>10</sup> – this is the light of Mashiach.<sup>11</sup> This explains the *minhag* (custom) to light candles and fires on this day, in honor of “*the light that is good*” which begins to sparkle on that special day of Lag b’Omer “*tov*” days before receiving the Torah. This is in honor of the soul of Rabbi Shimon the illuminator of the Torah, and in honor of his holy book the *Zohar* which gives light from one end of the world to the other.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Tehillim* 119:18.

<sup>7</sup> *Bereishit* 1:3.

<sup>8</sup> *B’nei Yissaschar, Article 3 on the month of Iyar.*

<sup>9</sup> *Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashana* 11b.

<sup>10</sup> *Bereishit* 1:3.

<sup>11</sup> *Yalkut Shimoni, Yesha’yahu* 60.

<sup>12</sup> *B’nei Yissaschar on Lag b’Omer.*