

WHY WE DO? LAG BA'OMER

"Why We Do" is a new series on foundational Jewish knowledge, offering insights into the reasons behind our practices. Understanding these reasons brings purpose, meaning, and excitement to what we do.

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WHY WE DO - LAG BA'OMER

What is Lag BaOmer and when is it observed?

Lag BaOmer is the 33rd day of the Omer count, which spans from the second night of Pesach until Shavuot. The name "Lag" is a combination of the Hebrew letters lamed (30) and gimel (3), totaling 33. It falls on the 18th of Iyar, and although it occurs during a traditionally mournful time, Lag BaOmer is celebrated with joy, music, and celebration. The day serves as a break in the semi-mourning practices that characterize the Omer period and is marked by a number of festive customs and traditions, particularly in connection with Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

Why do we celebrate Lag BaOmer?

Lag BaOmer is celebrated primarily for two deeply significant reasons. First, a plague that killed 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva ceased on this day. These students passed away because they did not show proper respect for one another, and their deaths were a national tragedy. The ending of the plague gives the day a redemptive and hopeful quality.

Second, Lag BaOmer is the *yahrzeit* (anniversary of passing) of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (Rashbi), one of the greatest sages in Jewish history. Rabbi Shimon is closely associated with Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, and is traditionally believed to have revealed the Zohar, a foundational text of mystical Torah. Before his death, he asked that his passing be commemorated with joy rather than mourning, because he viewed it as a day of spiritual elevation. As a result, Lag BaOmer is filled with music, bonfires, and celebration in his honor.

Who was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and why is he so central to Lag BaOmer?

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was a Tanna (Mishnaic sage) and a direct student of Rabbi Akiva. He is known both for his mastery of revealed Torah (Nigleh) and his profound teachings in the hidden Torah (Nistar)—Jewish mysticism. After speaking out against the Roman regime, Rabbi Shimon was forced to hide in a cave for 13 years with his son Elazar. There, he was sustained by a miraculous carob tree and spring of water, and he spent his time immersed in Torah and spiritual refinement. Rabbi Shimon achieved a level of closeness to God and spiritual insight unmatched in his generation. On the day of his passing—Lag BaOmer—he revealed deep secrets of the Torah and requested that the day be commemorated not with sorrow but with rejoicing, because his soul was ascending to its eternal reward. His love for the Jewish people, his teachings, and his legacy as a spiritual light are all central themes of the day.



What are some of the customs of Lag BaOmer?

Lag BaOmer is rich with customs that reflect its joyful and mystical nature. One of the most prominent is the lighting of bonfires, representing the spiritual light of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Another well-known custom is holding outdoor celebrations and outings, especially for children. These often include bows and arrows, which symbolize multiple ideas: one is that during Rabbi Shimon's life, no rainbow appeared, a sign from the Midrash that his merit protected the world from needing such a sign of divine restraint.

Another widespread custom is allowing haircuts on this day, especially the upsherin (first haircut) for boys who turn three years old. This is often done at Meron, near Rabbi Shimon's grave, and is seen as an initiation into Jewish learning and observance. The Sephardic custom is to allow haircuts on the 34th of the omer. In addition, since mourning restrictions are lifted, many weddings are held on Lag BaOmer, and music and dancing are permitted and encouraged.

Why do people light bonfires on Lag BaOmer?

The bonfires lit on Lag BaOmer symbolize the spiritual light that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai brought into the world through his Torah. Just as a fire spreads light and warmth, Rabbi Shimon's teachings illuminated the hidden dimensions of the Torah and revealed the inner unity of creation. On the day of his passing, his home was filled with a spiritual fire as he revealed deep mystical teachings.

Thus, lighting bonfires on Lag BaOmer is not merely a custom; it's a symbol of the eternal flame of Torah, the passion of a soul completely devoted to Hashem, and the lasting impact of spiritual insight. For many, especially in places like Meron (his burial site in northern Israel), these bonfires are accompanied by singing, dancing, and prayers that reflect joy, yearning,

and connection to the Divine.

Why is mourning suspended on Lag BaOmer during the Omer period?

The Omer is generally observed as a time of semi-mourning to commemorate the death of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students, who died due to a lack of proper respect for one another. This tragic event devastated the Torah world of that time and left a deep mark on Jewish history.

However, on the 33rd day, the plague stopped. This turning point brought relief and hope, and the mourning practices are therefore suspended for this day. In some communities, the mourning ends completely from Lag BaOmer onward, while in others it resumes until Rosh Chodesh Sivan. The lifting of mourning practices allows for joyful expressions such as haircuts, weddings, and music, turning Lag BaOmer into a celebration of renewal and healing. The Sefardic custom is to wait until the 34th.

What is the connection between Lag BaOmer and unity among Jews?

One of the core messages of Lag BaOmer is the importance of unity and respect among Jews. The plague that afflicted Rabbi Akiva's students was not caused by a lack of Torah learning, but by a failure to treat each other with honor and respect. This teaches that even great Torah scholars can fall if interpersonal respect is missing. Lag BaOmer, therefore, represents a healing of that wound and a call to strengthen our bonds with one another.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, whose life we celebrate on this day, was known for his love of all Jews and his ability to see the inner beauty and potential in every soul. His mystical teachings emphasize the inner unity of all creation and the oneness of the Jewish people. Celebrating Lag BaOmer through joy, unity, music, and shared traditions helps reinforce the value of Ahavat Yisrael—love for every Jew—as the foundation of spiritual growth and communal redemption.