

On One Foot - Lag B'Omer

Next Wednesday night through Thursday will be Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of the Omer.

The Talmud (Yevamot 62b) mentions 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva's students who died "in one period because they did not treat each other with respect". The Talmud itself does not designate the Omer as a mourning period. Our earliest record of the Omer as a period of mourning is from the Tshuvot of Rav Natronai Gaon, who headed the academy in Sura (now in Iraq) in the second half of the 9th century.

Lag B'Omer only began to feature on the calendar in the time of the Meiri (1249-1310 Catalonia). In the *Beit HaBechira*, his commentary to the Talmud, he references a Midrash that the plague abated on Lag B'Omer – though it is not clear if it stopped completely or was simply a day when no students died.

Lag B'Omer is also the Yahrzeit of the great R' Shimon bar Yochai, according to tradition, the author of the Zohar, which is the seminal Kabbalistic commentary. It might also be the day on which Rabbi Akiva gave him semicha or the day on which he first emerged from his years of hiding from the Romans in a cave in Meron. The Yahrzeit association first appears in the *Pri Etz Chayyim* by R' Chayim ben Yosef Vital (1542-1620), a leading kabbalist and acclaimed student of R' Isaac Luria.

Today, hundreds of thousands make a Lag B'Omer pilgrimage to Bar Yochai's grave in Meron in the Upper Galilee; where it is a major haircutting-fest for three year olds (and others who need a trim). The Israeli Police are making provisions for 350,000 visitors on Lag B'Omer this year. The Chatam Sofer (1762-1839, Pressburg) opposed the bonfires and these kabbalistic celebrations. However, he identified the day as one of celebration and the anniversary of the first Mannah in the wilderness.

We permit weddings, music, shaving and haircuts on Lag B'Omer. (See my previous On One Foot for differing computations of when the mourning period begins and ends). Most authorities favour delaying the haircut till daytime. In *Iggerot Moshe*, Rav Moshe Feinstein notes that some authorities allow weddings on the eve of Lag B'Omer (and therefore permit shaving etc in readiness for the wedding even on the afternoon of the 32nd day.) Weddings on Lag B'Omer itself may extend their celebrations after nightfall.

Some wonder if the four modern landmarks in our Omer calendar Yom HaShoah, Yom HaZikaron, Yom HaAtzmaut & Yom Yerushalayim really belong as Holy Days or whether they will withstand the test of time. Certainly, at the moment they are certainly meaningful to us as they happened in our own lifetimes (or at most our parents' and grandparents'). Each of those days is very clearly defined in terms of what it commemorates and why its date was chosen. It would appear that even though the origins of Lag B'Omer are far from explicit, it has certainly evolved over the centuries into a very tangible celebration.

May we keep counting towards our ultimate redemption!