

# LAG BA-OMER

Lag Ba'omer is a minor holiday that occurs on the 33rd day of the Omer,( Omer the 49-day period between Passover and Shavuot.

## Why We Celebrate

There are a few explanations why we celebrate Lag Ba'omer, but none is definitive.

The Omer is a time of semi-mourning, when weddings and other celebrations are forbidden, and as a sign of grief, observant Jews do not cut their hair.

Anthropologists say that many peoples have similar periods of restraint in the early spring to symbolize their concerns about the growth of their crops. But the most often cited explanation for the Jewish practice comes from the Talmud, which tells us that during this season a plague killed thousands of Rabbi Akiva's students because they did not treat one another respectfully. The mourning behavior is presumably in memory of those students and their severe punishment.

According to a medieval tradition, the plague ceased on Lag Ba'omer, the 33rd day of the Omer. As a result, Lag Ba'omer became a happy day, interrupting the sadness of the Omer period for 24 hours.

## Lag Ba'omer Customs

Some authorities attribute the joy of Lag Ba'omer to the belief that the manna that fed the Israelites in the desert first appeared on the 18th of Iyar.

Though its origins are uncertain, Lag Ba'omer has become a minor holiday. Schoolchildren picnic and play outdoors with bows and arrows — a possible reminder of the war battles of Akiva's students — and in Israel plant trees.



It is customary to light bonfires, to symbolize the light brought into the world. And every year numerous couples wed at this happy time.

## **The festival of Lag Ba'omer in Rhodes.**

On the night of this festival the synagogues were well-lit. Vases were filled with Calla Lilies, the flower appropriate for this holiday.

It was during this time that we would bury old holy books that were not in use. Men would go about the streets proclaiming this event. The books and materials were placed in sacks and everyone gathered in the Wide Street at the home of Joseph Shemaria.

He would gather the children and give each two stones which proceeded to knock together to accompany the following chant, sung in Hebrew

*Shiru lo Sing to Him*

*Zameru lo Praise Him*

*Gayo mayiko Sing like a rooster*

*Mayo mayiko Little Mayo*

As they approached the cemetery, the gates were already open. People were praying respect to their dead relatives. The sacks filled with the old books were buried.

After the burial, they had a picnic right there in the cemetery with music and drinks, raki being the most popular beverage among the men.