

LaG Ba'Omer

According to the Torah (Lev. 23:15), we are obligated to count the days from Passover to Shavu'ot. This period is known as the Counting of the Omer. An omer is a unit of measure. On the second day of Passover, in the days of the Temple, an omer of barley was cut down and brought to the Temple as an offering. This grain offering was referred to as the Omer.

Every night, from the second night of Passover to the night before Shavu'ot, we recite a blessing and state the count of the omer in both weeks and days. So on the 16th day, you would say "Today is sixteen days, which is two weeks and two days of the Omer." The Orthodox Union has a chart that provides the transliterated Hebrew and English text of the counting day-by-day.

The counting is intended to remind us of the link between Passover, which commemorates the Exodus, and Shavu'ot, which commemorates the giving of the Torah. It reminds us that the redemption from slavery was not complete until we received the Torah.

Thirty Three days into the counting Jews commemorate the loss of thousands of the students of the great 2nd century sage, Rabbi Akiva. Because of their lack of respect for each other, the students were struck with a terrible plague. On the thirty-third day of the Omer, the plague ended, but nearly all of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students had perished. To commemorate the tragic loss of these Torah Scholars, 33 days of the Omer are marked as days of mourning, during which observant Jews refrain from marrying, shaving, cutting hair and listening to live music.

In Hebrew, every letter has a numeric value. The "lamed" equals 30, and the "gimmel" equals 3, thus the name: Lamed Gimmel (L"G) Ba'Omer, literally 33 (days) in the Omer.

Rabbi Akiva persevered after this great tragedy and continued to teach those students who had survived the plague, as well as new students. Of his surviving disciples, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai is also deeply connected with the thirty-third day of the Omer. Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai spent his life studying the Kabbalah, the hidden esoteric aspects of the Torah. According to tradition, on the 33rd day of the counting of the Omer, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai finished revealing his teachings, recorded in the famed book, the Zohar. He died that evening, and was buried in the cave on Mount Meron, near Safed, where he had lived.

There are several customs associated with Lag B'Omer:

Bonfires: Families and friends gather together for a bonfire or a picnic on Lag B'Omer, often on Mount Meron. There are several reasons given for this custom. One is that the teachings of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai were compiled in the Zohar (which means shining light) and the bonfires bring light to the world.

First Hair Cuts: Many have the custom not to cut a boy's hair until he is three years old, the age at which he first begins to learn Torah. Because this idea is tied into Kabbalistic

thought concerning hair, many put off the ceremony, called an Upsherin, until Lag B'Omer.

Weddings: Because weddings are not held during the mourning period of the Omer, and because of the high spiritual energy of the day, many people choose to get married on Lag B'Omer.

Mount Meron: In Israel, tens of thousands of people travel to Mount Meron to celebrate the Yahrtzeit, the anniversary of the death, of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. Per his deathbed request, his death is celebrated, rather than mourned.