

Traveling with Jewish Taste®

Lag BaOmer – For Me, Bittersweet

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



Lag BaOmer has bittersweet memories for me. We were fortunate that another family didn't want Memorial Day weekend for their son Robbie's Bar Mitzvah. We, on the other hand, did want it for Elana's Bat Mitzvah because that meant family and friends from far away could travel without having to rush back for work on Monday morning – and it meant that we could celebrate a Jewish holiday that weekend: Lag BaOmer, and I had big plans and couldn't wait to carry them out.

On Saturday evening, we gathered outdoors on the synagogue's patio as the sun settled into the western sky. Under the stars the cantor led us in the songs of havdalah, deputizing young cousins in various tasks.

One held the burning candle while another distributed little packets of fragrant cloves. As we concluded the service, the cantor dunked the flaming candle into the wine, the band began to play, and a huge bonfire son Seth had prepared on the big lawnburst into flame.

We danced around and around the blaze, the fire lighting our faces in the dark. Neighbors passing by on their evening strolls joined us in celebration. When we finished, we made our way indoors for dinner.

Now, that was a Lag BaOmer celebration to remember!

The occasion was also the last time that all my cousins were together. Soon after David died, followed by my brother Max. So, you see, the holiday has both good and sad memories for me.

But – while it was happening – it was magical.

I'll leave it to the rabbis to explain the deeper religious meaning of the holiday, and will confine this space to tracing its origins to our current celebration of it.

The holiday is mentioned explicitly for the first time in a Talmudic passage that recounts how, during the time of Rabbi Akiva, tens of thousands of his students died from a plague during the omer – the seven-week period between Passover and Shavuot.

Rabbi Meiri, the writer of this passage, explains that the plague fell upon them because they did not show proper respect to one another. (Perhaps modern-day Knesset politicians should heed this reminder.) Meiri named Lag BaOmer as the day on which the plague ended.

After the plague ended only five students of Rabbi Akiva remained, among them Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, who is credited with being the greatest teacher of Torah in his generation.

Among his accomplishments is the *Zohar*, the thirteenth century landmark text of Jewish mysticism. Bar Yochai is said to have revealed the deepest secrets of the



Near Tel-Aviv, the Qesem Cave's fire-pit may hold the secret to the beginnings of social culture among early humans



Schoolchildren's games with bows and arrows are related to the concept of divine protection



Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai: Lag BaOmer became a day of celebration of the light of wisdom that he brought into the world

Kabbalah on the very day he died, the thirty-third day of the Omer (the numerical equivalent of the letters lamed gimmel add up to thirty-three).

Lag BaOmer therefore became a day of celebration of the light of wisdom that Bar Yochai brought into the world – hence, the tradition of the blazing bonfire.

Also during the Middle Ages, a new holiday tradition arose called "Scholar's Day," on which rabbinical students participated in sports. This practice has evolved into the modern custom of hiking, tree planting, and other outdoor activities on the holiday.

Israeli schoolchildren play games with bows and arrows, a practice explained by a Chabad source as stemming from the fact that no rainbow appeared during the life of Shimon Bar Yochai, an absence that signified divine protection. The Hebrew word *keshet* is the same for both rainbow and bow.

A little over ten years ago, construction crews building a road east of Tel Aviv discovered the Qesem Cave, and in it the evidence of cooking fires used over long periods of time. They also found the bones of large animals and stone tools used for butchering said game.

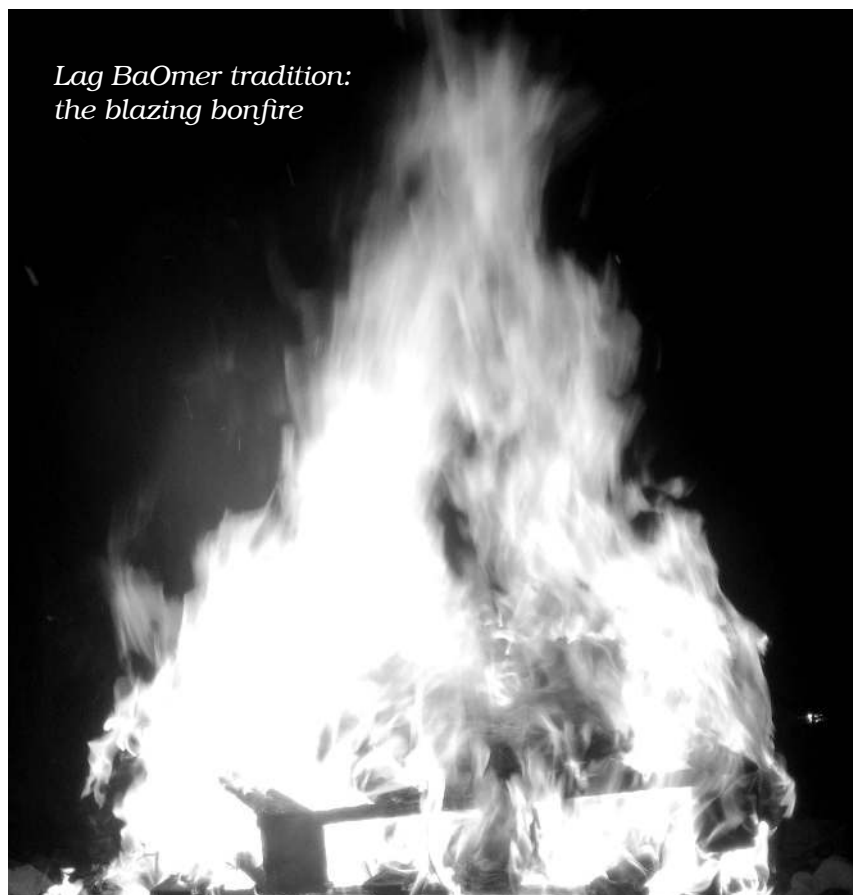
Although scientists aren't sure exactly who was doing the cooking at the Qesem Cave, archaeologists do believe large groups of cave dwellers used the hearth over a long period of time, since they found teeth there dating from between 400,000 and 200,000 years ago.

No matter, whether it was modern humans or Neanderthals grilling the steaks, the fact that these people knew where to situate the campfire so as not to asphyxiate themselves shows a certain level of intelligence. (Or, perhaps one fastidious cave-keeper shooed the fire-makers out of the house in order to preserve her pristine walls.)

What the Qesem cave findings do demonstrate is that early residents of the Holy Land loved to grill as much as their modern counterparts!

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She recently launched the blog "Food for Thought," on her website at carolgoodmankaufman.com. She invites visits and comments.

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Lag BaOmer tradition: the blazing bonfire

Whole Fish Grilled Over An Open Fire

Why spend time with fancy cooking in the beautiful, warm summer months? This recipe is super simple and delicious, cooked over your Lag BaOmer bonfire.

Ingredients:

One whole bluefish, gutted and scaled, five pounds	Olive oil
Juice of one lemon	Salt and pepper
	One bunch fresh dill

Directions:

Make four deep slits in each side of the fish. This will help cook the fish evenly.

Rub the fish inside and out with lemon juice, olive oil, salt, and pepper.

Stuff the dill into the interior cavity.

Place the fish inside a well-oiled, hinged fish grill, and place over the hot coals of a wood fire.

Cook about fifteen minutes until the skin is well-browned and bubbles up, then flip it over.

The flesh should flake when forked.

Serves 6