

Jews on Fire:

Living Passionately

Emor and Lag B'Omer 5779

ח וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם אֶשָׁה לַיהוָה, שְׁבַעַת
יָמִים; בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִקְרָא-קֹדֶשׁ, כָּל-
מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ. {פ}

Leviticus 23:8 And ye shall bring an offering made by fire unto the LORD seven days; in the seventh day is a holy convocation; ye shall do no manner of servile work.

Great waters cannot quench the flame of love; neither can the floods drown it.

Song of Songs 8:7

*The Sfat Emet (in 1880) explains that **the altar is similar to the human heart and that each one of us must have an internal flame that is constantly burning.***

Burning with a passion and desire to do what's right in this world, with a love of God. (The words "lev" (heart), "lahav" (flame) and "hitlahavut" (passion) all have the same Hebrew root.)

The Baal Shem Tov thought of the Jew's relationship to God as a romance, and it disturbed him to see how many rituals had become routine rather than rapturous acts, exercises in repetition rather than gestures of surprise -- a hand without a heart. Faith was fire, not sediment. Did not a pillar of fire serve as a guide when the people Israel roamed in the wilderness? And fire was the beginning of light. One of his contributions was to awaken a zest for spiritual living, expressed in **hitlahavut**, which literally means "being aflame" -- the experience of moments during which the soul is ablaze with an insatiate craving for God, when the memory of all other interests and the fear of misery and persecution are forgotten...The Baal Shem thought that obedience without passion, conformity without spontaneity was but a skeleton, dry, meager, lifeless. A Jew should serve God with ardor. It was necessary, vital, to have fire in the soul.

- Abraham Joshua Heschel -- *A Passion for Truth*

Bonfires and Lag B'Omer

Lag B'Omer customs associated with commemorating Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai include lighting enormous bonfires and carrying torches in the evening in open spaces in villages and towns across Israel and on Mount Meron. The bonfires are also kindled on the roof of the domed building housing Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's burial site on Mount Meron. Lighting bonfires on Lag Ba'Omer / Lag B'Omer symbolizes the shining spiritual light which Rabbi Yochai brought into the world. Some scholars attribute lighting bonfires to the fact that in ancient times, bonfires were used as signals in wartime, hence they associate the bonfires with Rabbi Akiva, his disciple Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and Rabbi Akiva's appointed military leader, Simeon bar Kochba, and their war with the Romans that lasted from 132 C.E. to 135 C.E. From about 10 days to a week before Lag Ba'Omer / Lag B'Omer, children begin collecting wood boards, old doors, and anything made from wood that can burn. There is so much wood collected as Lag Ba'Omer / Lag B'Omer approaches, that building contractors have to employ extra night watchmen to make sure that wooden planks and wooden scaffolding are not taken by the eager youngsters. As well, as one can imagine, the fire departments are kept very busy on Lag Ba'Omer / Lag B'Omer eve when the bonfires are lit and where the danger exists of fires getting out of control.

<http://www.angelfire.com/pa2/passover/lag-bomer/lag-baomer.html>

Stories and Celebrations around the Fire

Most adults today spend the daylight hours at work; nighttime is for cutting loose over drinks and food and sharing stories and strengthening relationships. Our ancient ancestors probably weren't so different. According to new research published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, ending the day around the campfire, where songs, stories and relationships blossomed, ultimately shaped cultures and perhaps even helped develop some of our ability to understand one another, cooperate and internalize culture. Anthropologist Polly Wiessner arrived at these conclusions after spending 174 days living with the Ju/'hoan (Kung) Bushmen of Botswana and Namibia. Weissner recorded conversations during the day and at night, and then compared the content of those exchanges. Three-quarters of daytime conversation, Weissner found, centered around work-related talk or gossip. At night, however, more than 80 percent of conversations centered around singing, dancing, spirituality or "enthraling stories, often about known people," including tales about "the exploits of distant kin, adventures in towns, local politics, truck stories, elephant stories, or experiences in trance." Weissner describes that fireside setting today, as experienced with the Ju/'hoan and likely representative of previous generations:

Fireside gatherings are often, although not always, composed of people of mixed sexes and ages. The moon and starlit skies awaken imagination of the supernatural, as well as a sense of vulnerability to malevolent spirits, predators, and antagonists countered by security in numbers. Body language is dimmed by firelight and awareness of self and others is reduced. Facial expressions—flickering with the flames—are either softened, or in the case of fear or anguish, accentuated. Agendas of the day are dropped while small children fall asleep in the laps of kin. Whereas time structures interactions by day because of economic exigencies, by night social interactions structure time and often continue until relationships are right. Foragers make use of daytime efficiently and nighttime effectively.

Such regular interactions, Weissner continues, date back at least 400,000 years. It could be that these repeated interactions shaped entire cultures and gave us our aptitude for stories and song. The significance of the time our ancestors' spent by the fire manifests in a more obvious way as well. As Weissner writes, "Appetites for firelit settings for intimate conversations and for evening stories remain with us today."

- Rachel Nuwer, [Smithsonian Magazine](#)

Top 10 fire festivals around the world (according to Cheapflights.com)

1. **Guy Fawkes Night (Bonfire Night) – England** - “Remember, remember the fifth of November - gunpowder, treason and plot” goes the nursery rhyme, chanted in the run-up to Guy Fawkes Night (November 5). It goes back to 1605 when Guy Fawkes, one of the members of the Gunpowder Plot, was arrested while guarding explosives in the House of Lords, London. With the plot to blow up the House of Lords - and kill King James I - foiled, Londoners lit bonfires around the city in celebration. The bonfire tradition continues to this day, and usually there’s an effigy of Guy Fawkes placed at the centre of it. One of the biggest celebrations is in the town of Lewes in Sussex where, in recent years, effigies of various current figures, including those from the UK banking world, have been burned.

2. **Daizenji Tamataregu Shrine’s “Oniyo” - Fukuoka, Japan** - Fukuoka, capital of Fukuoka Prefecture on Kyushu Island, is one of Japan’s largest cities and hosts one of its oldest fire festivals. Daizenji Tamataregu Shrine’s “Oniyo” (Fire Festival) is a ceremony to drive away evil spirits that has been practiced for 1,600 years. It’s held in early January each year. A “devil fire” that has been guarded at the temple is transferred - at around 9 p.m. on the seventh day (January 7) - to six massive torches measuring one meter in diameter and 15 meters long. The torches are transported around the grounds of the shrine by a group of men in loincloths. It sounds like a potential health-and-safety issue, but it’s considered to be good luck if embers or ash from the torches fall on them.

3. **Jeongwol Daeboreum Deulbul Festival - Jeju, S. Korea** - In early February, the Jeongwol Daeboreum Deulbul Festival takes place on the island of Jeju off the coast of South Korea. It’s a fairly new festival, younger than 20 years old, but its origins go back to the time when families kept cows. To keep the grass grazeable, farmers set fire to the fields in the mountains to destroy old grass and kill harmful insects. Today, a hilltop is set alight to pray for health and a good harvest in the coming year. There’s a torchlight march, straw-rope making competition and deumdol (rock) lifting.

4. **Diwali – India** - The best-known Hindu festival is known as the “festival of lights.” Diwali (or Deepavali) means “rows of lighted lamps” and, during this time, houses, shops and public places are decorated with diyas (small earthenware oil lamps), elaborate feasts are prepared and spectacular fireworks displays light up the skies. The five-day festival celebrates the triumph of good over evil and is celebrated throughout India and around the world (in Singapore, Trinidad and Tobago, Mauritius, Myanmar and London among many others).

5. **Samhain 2012 - Out of the Darkness - Altoona, Florida, USA** - More than 500 pagans gather in Florida for the state’s largest pagan festival. Running from October 31 to November 4 at Camp Ocala, each day is filled with feasting, rituals, drumming, dancing and live entertainment. The main ritual in 2012 is centred around the “Burning Times” when so-called “witches” were put to death.

6. **Quema del Diablo (Burning of the Devil) – Guatemala** - In early December Guatemalans ready themselves for the Christmas season by...driving the devil from their homes and burning him in the streets! For centuries - at least since the 1700s - the traditional ceremony has been performed to chase bad spirits from homes and neighborhoods. By watching bonfires, firework displays and burning devil figures in the streets, locals say they are spiritually cleansing themselves. The tradition is best experienced in Guatemala City and Antigua, but many towns throughout Guatemala host similar ceremonies.

7. **Ottery St Mary - Devon, England** - In the small town of Ottery St Mary, the bonfire and fireworks are not the focal point of the community’s celebrations. This November 5, it will be the local townspeople carrying flaming barrels of tar through the streets. In a tradition that predates even 1605 it is said, 17 barrels are carried, starting in the afternoon, with small barrels for boys, medium barrels for youths and

women and big ones for the men. Traditionally, the barrels are set on fire at pubs and hotels around the town and a strict schedule is followed until midnight when the final barrel is carried in the square.

8. Up Helly Aa, Lerwick - Shetland Islands, Scotland -If you've ever wanted to see Vikings, this is the festival to see! Described as a Northern Mardi Gras, its origins stretch back 1,200 years, although the festival started in the 1870s. It's held on the last Tuesday of January (January 29 in 2013). On that evening, nearly 1,000 men march in ranks, carrying fencing posts topped in paraffin-soaked sacking. At 7:30 p.m. a rocket cresting over the Town Hall marks the start. Torches are lit, bands start playing and the men march with the Guizer Jarl (the head of the festival) who stands at the helm of a longship. Dragged to the burning site, the Guizer Jarl will leave his ship for it to be set alight. As the longship is engulfed by flames, the Vikings sing "The Norseman's Home" before heading to halls for feasts of mutton soup, bannocks and plenty of warming drinks.

9. Bonfire Night - Newfoundland, Canada - When English and Irish people, in search of a better life, crossed the Atlantic Ocean to Canada, they took their traditions with them. The English took Guy Fawkes Night, the Irish took Samhain and over time the traditions merged into Mischief Week. With a belief that certain types of naughty behaviour (soaping windows, taking pins from gate hinges or stealing old tires for bonfires) is permitted at this time, many of Newfoundland & Labrador's close-knit communities hold bonfires and celebrations.

10. Sadeh – Iran - Sadeh (or Jashn-e Sadeh) is an ancient Zoroastrian festival. While it refers to 100 days and nights before the New Year (Nowruz, which falls on the Vernal Equinox, March 20 or 21), it is celebrated 50 days earlier - around the end of January. It honours the discovery of fire that defeated the forces of darkness and cold. Traditionally, festivities went on for three days and gifts of food were given to the poor. Today, Zoroastrians light bonfires, perform religious rituals around them and thank God for his blessings. It's usually celebrated in the Kushk-e Varjavand gardens in Karaj (in Tehran province) where members of the Zoroastrian community congregate for the festivities.

Fire and Lag B'Omer – Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai

On the day that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was to leave this world he arranged his affairs. His friends came to his room and he said to them "now is a time of favor. I can now reveal to you holy things that haven't been revealed until now" **All that day the fire never left the room**, and there was nobody who was able to approach because it was impossible. The light and the fire were surrounding him. When they [came to] remove his bier the fire flew into the air and the fire danced before it. A voice was heard [from Heaven] saying "come and gather for the *hilula* (anniversary/celebration) of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai".

Truculent stingers and shield-bearing warriors from Sephoris came and beset them. The people of Meron banded together and shouted, for they feared he would not be buried there. After the bed emerged from the house, it rose into the air; **fire blazed before it**. They heard a voice: "Come and enter! Assemble for the wedding celebration of Rabbi Shim'on!" - *Zohar*, Translated by Daniel Matt

Fire and Passion - Hitlahavut

Hitlahavut means 'rapture,' 'enthusiasm,' or 'ecstasy.' It generally refers to a state reached within prayer, though Hasidic masters sometimes report that it can happen outside prayer as well. "The root XXX/l-h-v means 'flame.' *Hitlahavut* means that the soul catches fire and is itself turned into flame. In

such moments all obstacles to perceiving God everywhere are consumed in an instant; consciousness and the ecstatic flame are one.

Nowhere in Jewish spiritual literature is *hitlahavut* proclaimed as the *goal* of devotional life. It is a rare and precious moment that happens in the life of those who give themselves wholly to prayer. Usually it comes and goes almost in a flash. But no matter: The real impact of *hitlahavut* is in the *memory* of such moments. They are stored in the contemplative's mind and become important steps on the road toward the much cooler but longer lasting goal of *devekut*, an attachment to God in which one may live and act.

The great masters of Jewish prayer within Hasidism debated the value of ecstasy, and especially of its display in public worship. In circles where religious devotion was taught to be the highest good, it was natural for novices (especially young boys) to 'show off' the intensity of their worship and the 'heights' of loud and passionate prayer they could reach. Many older and more sophisticated worshippers found such behavior annoying and disturbing to the community at prayer. Others, however, felt a distinction should be made between such childish excesses and true expressions of *hitlahavut*, which should always be welcomed in the community and never be deemed a cause of embarrassment."

- Arthur Green, *These are the Words*

*Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.* - **Robert Frost**