

Lag BaOmer: A Minor Holiday with Major Meaning for Today

The Jewish people celebrate a mini-holiday called *Lag BaOmer*, which has taken on a life of its own in recent years. It's celebrated with bonfires and singing of Jewish songs, and in Israel with a pilgrimage to the grave of *Shimon Bar Yochai* in Meron (Israel), a well-known Talmudic rabbi who many believe wrote the *Zohar*, the foundational text of *Kabbalah*, Jewish mysticism. The bonfires are a symbol of the light of the Torah and mystical knowledge that *Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* brought into the world.

Shimon Bar Yochai was a great rabbi, but he became infamous for one not-so-flattering story found in the Talmud. One day, Rabbi Shimon and his son were exiled to a cave for decades because of a Roman decree against them. A miracle occurred in the cave in the form of a spring that burst out of the ground, and a carob tree grew in their midst. They had food, water, and Torah, which they thought were all they needed. They lived in this cave for twelve years and emerged to see men plowing and sowing their fields all day. Rabbi Shimon could not believe what he saw: Jews working in the real world, and forsaking Torah study! He screams, "They forsake eternal life and busy themselves with temporal life?!"

Every place the rabbi and his son looked was immediately burned in an ancient form of heat-ray vision. A heavenly voice came out and said to them, "Did you go out to destroy my world? Return to your cave!" They returned. After a year, they venture out of the cave again, and this time, they see a man with two myrtles, and they ask him what he is doing with them, and he answers that he's bringing them home for Shabbat, to represent the two aspects of Shabbat: *Shamor*, to observe Shabbat, and *Zachor*, to remember Shabbat. And their minds become at ease.

This mysterious passage has many lessons, but in my eyes, it tells of the destruction that humanity can bring to the world when we remain outside it and out of touch with others, as we see today in the virtual world. The more closed off we are, the more our eyes can turn and burn against others, and the less understanding we have of others who might be different from us. The man they find isn't a wise sage; rather, he is an ordinary person, but through their meeting, they see that their way isn't the only way to be; that they must be with others to truly encounter the Divine.

Every human being is created *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. The sooner we can understand this simple yet deeply profound idea, the closer we will come to a less violent and more loving world.