

Articles - The Jerusalem Correspondent 8th Edition - The Lag B'Omer Mosh

For 3 years before arriving in Israel, I remember having Lag B'Omer fires behind the Noranda Shule with stories, toasted marshmallows and a little guitar playing in the background. On these occasions, we were often visited by a traveling Israeli who would sit around the fire telling us:



“If you only knew what this holiday actually is in Israel, WWOOOOHHH!!”

I wondered what he was talking about. I mean, here we are in Perth sitting beneath the nights sky with a cute little flame and some friendly stories, perhaps even a l'chaim. What more could this festival really be...?

I didn't even really know why we celebrated it and how this little custom had found its way across the world to the Perth Jewish Community. There were rumours about this ancient spiritual giant around the turn of the century. Ideas about loving your fellow like yourself. There were a few stories here and there about a cave, a carob tree and a whole lot of mysticism. It was all quite intangible.

So, in the approaching days to Lag B'Omer this year, posters began to arrive, plans were being made and we were all being warned to strap ourselves in for a ride of a lifetime.

Before I continue about my actual experience, a few words about what Lag B'Omer actually celebrates.

The 49 days of the Omer are the period between Peach and Shavuot where we each go through our own refinement and purification in order to personally receive the Torah. Now, 1 500 years after receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai, there lived a truly brilliant sage called Rabbi Akiva (around 300 BC). Rabbi Akiva had 24 thousand students all learning Torah under his scholarship. One such student was the great Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai ('Rashbi').

During the Omer period, many of Rabbi Akiva's students were dying due to a plague brought on by very strange behaviour. The cause was something that grew out of a lack of love between the students. On Lag B'omer, this plague suddenly stopped. Many years later, it happened that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai actually passed away on this same date, unconnected to the plague.

So, Lag B'Omer is a little island of celebration in what is otherwise 49 days of mourning the loss of such brilliant students. The principal celebration is therefore in the honour and legacy of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. In celebration of the Rashbi's life, bonfires and light are introduced into the world because of what the Rashbi actually achieved. He revealed the very internal dimensions of Torah in a text called the Zohar. This, together

with the teachings of the Arizal (1600's) and the Baal Shem Tov (1700), make up the soul of our beautiful Torah. But, it all began with the Rashbi.

Any introduction of holiness into the world is always likened to light because of the nature of light with respect to darkness, destruction and despair. You can't fight off darkness with a stick due to its intangible nature. However, it is well known that just to light a small candle banishes any such dark instantaneously. And so, as we celebrate the light that was drawn down into the world by the Rashbi, Jews from all over the world travel to Meron (North of Israel), light bonfires (light) and dance into the night in the hope to greet Moshiach on that day.

And yes, this event is a wild one indeed. Over a quarter of a million people make their way to Meron, a small town that year round accommodates a few hundred people at most. The cosmic realms brace themselves as the music begins and faces begin to glow.

The Rashbi's grave is more like a shrine than a headstone. Attached to the building is a mikveh and a courtyard. The whole building is right on top of a mountain which looks across the valley to the holy city of Sefat. The buses all park at the bottom on the mountain and you begin the climb, passing thousands of people as you go. There are stalls selling books on mysticism. There are musicians who sing with passers by. There are stations to donate money to fund the scribes that write Torah scrolls. There is free food and wine. You just extend your hand and collect all sorts of goodies on the way.

When you make it to the Grave, you squeeze and push through a very excited crowd to get your chance in the courtyard and by the grave itself. Women go one side, men the other. In the courtyard, as the sky darkens, the band prepares to launch Lag B'Omer 2005. People poise. The music begins and the crowd erupts. There is one man dressed in white on the shoulders of another. He is clearly very respected. People make room for him as he encourages the crowd. He is like an angel, floating amongst a sea of black. The temperature is very hot. You look up at the crowd and see that the bonfires have begun. This party goes on until midday the following day. So you take your time, ignore the pushing and mosh along with fellow Jews. The whole experience is something else altogether.

And amongst it all, you close your eyes, blot out the people, find your peace and scream to Hashem that this be the last year that we do it alone. We want the Rashbi with us the next time around. We want the light of Torah to penetrate to all lands and bring the peace of eternity. We want it now...

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