

Counting the Omer & Lag ל"ג Ba'omer

By Hannah Neshet www.voiceforisrael.net

Lag Ba'Omer ([Hebrew](#): ל"ג בעומר) is the 33rd day of the Counting of the Omer which occurs on the 18th day of the [Hebrew month](#) of [Iyar](#). This counting began on Passover and ends at Shavuot (Weeks). On this day, Jewish children and adults alike build bonfires to commemorate the bonfires lit by Bar Kokhba's soldiers following their victory over Roman troops in 132 C.E.



Israeli boys gather wood for Lag Ba'Omer Bonfires



Simon Bar Kokhba (Son of Star) was a leader of Israel's army who fought the Romans in a revolt and established an independent Jewish state over which he ruled as 'nasi' (prince) for three years until the Romans conquered it.

It was the Jewish sage, [Rabbi Akiva](#), believing that Simon could be the [Jewish messiah](#), who gave him the surname "Bar Kokhba" meaning "Son of the Star" in Aramaic, from the [Star Prophecy](#) verse, "**There shall come a Star out of Jacob**" (Numbers 24:17). Both Rabbi Akivah and Shimon bar Kokhba were killed by the Romans.

Many thought that Bar Kokhba was the promised Messiah who would deliver the Jews from the oppression of the Romans. With Bar Kokhba's defeat, the Jews' Messianic expectations died also and many were bitterly disappointed.



The Messianic believers who followed Yeshua of course could not support Bar Kokhba as the Messiah and were therefore considered as traitors among the Jewish people.

Bar Kokhba Silver. Text reads "To the freedom of [Jerusalem](#)".

Lag Ba'Omer is not a Biblical festival at all, but rather a tradition instituted by Rabbinic Jewish sages. Because it is not commanded in the Torah; and because of its 'questionable' associations with Jewish mysticism, many Messianic believers choose not to participate.

One Messianic believer I spoke with mentioned a possible connection between the building of bonfires and the ancient heathen custom of causing children to pass through the fire to their false god, Molech.

Offering to Molech, 1897 picture by Charles Foster



Children watch Lag BaOmer bonfire in [Tel Aviv](#)

We have been studying this in the last parashot Torah studies: **You shall not give any of your offspring to offer them to Molech**, nor shall you profane the name of your God; I am the LORD. ([Leviticus 18:21](#))

"There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass

through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. ([Deuteronomy 18:10-11](#))

What does 'Lag Ba'Omer' actually mean? Good question! 'Lag' stands for two Hebrew letters: 'lamed' ל and 'gimel' ג, representing the numbers 30 and 3; therefore 'Lag Ba'Omer, is actually the 33rd day of the counting of the omer (In Hebrew – 'Sefirat HaOmer').

What is this 'counting of the omer' all about? What is an omer and why is it counted? An 'omer' עמר is a measure of wheat or barley.



A modern barley field



The Jews in ancient times brought the omer to the Temple as an offering on the second day of Passover. It is not the omer that we count but time. From the day after the Sabbath of Passover, we are commanded to count seven weeks until we reach the festival of Shavuot (Hebrew for ‘weeks’).



Sheaves of wheat

“From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks (Shavuot).” (Leviticus 23:15)

The Torah commanded the Jewish people to count, from the time of this ‘wave offering’ the seven weeks ($7 \times 7 = 49$ days) until the evening of the festival of **Shavuot** on day 50. The fiftieth day is biblically significant as it represents the year of Jubilee (Hebrew *yove/יובל*).

At the end of seven cycles of shmita (Sabbatical years), the shofar (ram’s horn) would sound and all slaves or prisoners would go free. Debts would be cancelled and properties lost would be restored.¹ Therefore the number 50 symbolizes freedom, liberty for the captives and restoration of all that has been lost or stolen.

Why do we count seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot? Seven is a number representing wholeness, **perfection and completion**. For example, in six days God created the universe but on the seventh day, His work was completed and therefore He rested. The counting of the Omer, therefore - seven weeks of seven (49) – represents *the Messianic expectation of a time when all will be complete and perfect – when the Messiah comes*.

Whenever we are eagerly looking forward to a future event, we ‘count down’ the days until it arrives. At this time, we are planning (God willing) to visit our beloved family in Canada this summer. So we are ‘counting the days’ until our departure. My son, Avi, asks me every night, “How many days left until school ends?” He is so much looking forward to the start of his summer holidays, which is called ‘chofesh hagadol’ (great freedom) in Hebrew ☺

This is how we count the days between Passover and Shavuot – waiting with eager anticipation that God has something wonderful waiting for us at Shavuot. Counting the omer commemorates the days between Passover, when God brought His people Israel out of Egypt, to the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. (seven weeks later on Shavuot at the beginning of the month of Sivan).

We are also to be counting the days in blessed anticipation of Yeshua’s second coming when He returns for us, His Bride, and establishes His Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and justice on this earth.

¹ Leviticus 25:8-13

These forty-nine days between Pesach and Shavuot are counted aloud during synagogue services each evening. The leader of the service recites a special blessing:

"Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has commanded us to count the Omer."

And the congregation responds: "Today is the fifth day [or seventh or thirtieth....] day in the Omer."



Although Jewish people no longer bring their offering of the omer to the Temple, it is still observed as a period of time to reflect upon one's character, just as the Jewish people needed a time of spiritual preparation before receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai on Shavuot.

Therefore, the tone of the Counting of the Omer (**Hebrew:** ספירת העומר **Sefirat HaOmer**) is not joyous, but one of somber introspection. Traditionally, each week is dedicated to one particular spiritual quality to which we aspire to attain in greater measure: *hesed* (kindness), *gevurah* (strength), *tiferet* (balance) and *yesod* (confidence).

Sfirat Ha'Omer is also a period of semi-mourning during which time observant Jews do not celebrate weddings or cut their hair.

Scholars are not actually sure of the historical reasons for the mourning, other than mention of a plague at this time in the Talmud (oral law) which may have killed 24,000 of the students of the great Jewish sage, Rabbi Akiva. The word "plague" could also have been a code word for the disaster of Simon Bar-Kokhba's failed rebellion against the Romans – an attempt which Rabbi Akiva supported.

Lag Ba'Omer is one day, however, that is exempt from this period of semi-mourning. Why? Some say it is because on Lag Ba'Omer (the 33rd day of the counting) apparently the plague was mysteriously stopped.

Actually, there seems to be little clarity or consensus as to the 'what' or the 'why' of Lag Ba'Omer. I remember going to a picnic sponsored by Chabad one year in Canada with my Orthodox Jewish family. At the table, I asked what exactly we are celebrating and no one seemed to know. So we asked the rabbitzin (rabbi's wife) and she didn't know either. :)



A Lag BaOmer parade in front of [Chabad](#) headquarters at [770 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn](#), New York, in 1987



So basically, most people just take advantage of a day off to enjoy picnics in the parks, barbecues, and other gatherings like the Lag Ba'Omer music festival in Jerusalem.

Traditionally, children take walks in the forest, often with bows and arrows as did Bar Kochba. This day is a popular time for

weddings; and is the customary time of the first haircut for three year old boys from Orthodox Jewish families. This is why you may often see boys under the age of 3 with long hair in a pony tail.



A rabbi performs the traditional first haircut on a 3-year-old boy in Meron on Lag Baomer 1970.

Dead Men's Tombs

Other customs include a pilgrimage to the tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, in the northern Israeli town of Meron, to commemorate his death on this day.



Entrance to the tomb of Rabbi bar Yochai

Attributed by Orthodox Jews to be the author of the mystical book, the Zohar, the primary text for the kabbalah (study of Jewish mysticism), Rabbi bar Yochai is believed to have revealed the deepest secrets of the Torah to his students just before his death on the 33rd day of the counting of the omer.

Several hundred thousand people are expected to descend upon the city of Meron in the Galilee for Lag Ba'Omer as they do each year to commemorate his yartzheit (the anniversary of his death).

They light bonfires, torches and candles to honor the 'spiritual light' that Rabbi bar Yochai brought into the world. However, though these thousands of Jewish people spend all night at this dead rabbi's tomb, we are told not to search for the living among the dead (Luke 24:5).



The prophet Isaiah also spoke harshly about those who 'sit among the graves' and spend all night keeping vigil². God is alive and well and we do not need to seek for His blessings at dead men's tombs.

Giving of the Torah and the Spirit

The counting of the Omer reminds us to be '*counting down the days*' until Shavuot; but not only because this is when God gave us His Torah; but also because we received another wonderful gift from Adonai on this day.

Yeshua told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the fulfillment of God's promise to baptize them with the Holy Spirit (Ruach Hakodesh).

“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 1:4-5)

Yeshua said it was better for them that He would go away, in order that the Father would send the Holy Spirit.³ It was at Shavuot that God did fulfill His promise and the disciples of Yeshua were filled with power and courage to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth!

“When the day of Shavuot (Pentecost) came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” (Acts 2:1-4)

² Isaiah 65:2-4

³ John 16:7

We cannot fully understand Pentecost, however, until we learn about the ‘roots’ of this tremendous day in the biblical festival of Shavuot. The Law and the Spirit were always meant to be married – one without the other is sadly incomplete. The Holy Spirit does not come devoid of the Torah, for God’s law is the basis of all truth; and yet we cannot live out this truth without the grace of the Holy Spirit.

As we count down the days toward Shavuot, may we be ever thankful for both of these precious gifts from God to His people. Let us wait, with eager anticipation, for a new wind to come this Shavuot – a fresh infilling of the Ruach Hakodesh (Holy Spirit) – to fill us with courage and power to be a shining light and witness for Yeshua in this world.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8)

Please pray that the people of Israel will hear, understand, and receive the good news that the true Messiah has already come! Thank you so much for standing with us and all Israel!

About the Author:

Hannah Neshar grew up in an Orthodox Jewish home and received her education in a religious Hebrew school in Canada. During a crisis pregnancy, she came to know Jesus (Yeshua) as her Messiah and Savior. She now lives in Israel with her children and grandchildren, writing and teaching about the Jewish roots of the Christian faith.

If you appreciate these teachings your generous gifts, donations and offerings are deeply appreciated.

“For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 2:3)



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Lag Ba'Omer Study Questions

1. What is the meaning of 'Lag Ba'omer'?
2. What is an omer and what is the purpose of 'sfirat ha'omer' (counting of the omer)?
3. Why do Jewish people light bonfires on Lag Ba'omer?
4. Who was Shimon Bar Kokhba? Rabbi Aikvah?
5. If Lag Ba'omer is not a biblical festival and has some mystical connotations do you think Messianic believers should celebrate it? Why or why not?
6. What is the symbolic meaning of the number 50? Why do we count 7 weeks between Passover and Shavuot?
7. Why is the tone of Sfirat Ha'omer somber?
8. Is there one particular spiritual quality that you would like to develop during this time? (or more than one?)
9. What are some other Lag Ba'omer customs?
10. What do you think of the kabbalah (Jewish mysticism)? Discuss.
11. How does Shavuot show us the marriage of the Torah and the Spirit?