

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

Lag BaOmer

A day of light, song, and celebration in the weeks between Passover and Shavuot, honoring the sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

WHEN

The 18th of the Hebrew month of Iyar, in April or May: the 33rd day of the 49 day count between Passover and Shavuot.

THE NAME

"Lag" is written with the Hebrew letters *lamed* (30) and *gimel* (3), so Lag BaOmer means "the 33rd of the Omer."

CUSTOMS

Candles and bonfires, songs for Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, festive meals, weddings, and first haircuts for three year old boys.

SPECIAL TO THIS EXPLAINER

The best known Lag BaOmer song, "Bar Yochai," was written in sixteenth century Tripoli, Libya.

Lag BaOmer is a small holiday with a big personality. It is not mentioned in the Torah and has no required rituals, yet over the centuries it became a beloved day of joy. It breaks up a quieter season of the Jewish year, and it honors Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a sage whom tradition links to the great book of Jewish mysticism, the Zohar. Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews helped shape many of its best known customs, from the songs sung around the fire to the celebrations at Meron in the Galilee and at the Ghriba synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba.

Why the 33rd day?

Counting the Omer. In ancient times, an offering of barley, the *omer*, was brought to the Temple on Passover, at the start of the harvest. Jews still count the 49 days from the second night of Passover to Shavuot, one day each evening, linking the Exodus from Egypt to the giving of the Torah.

A season of semi mourning. The Talmud (Yevamot 62b) tells that a plague struck the students of Rabbi Akiva between Passover and Shavuot. For this reason, many Jews avoid weddings and haircuts during the Omer. A medieval tradition, preserved by Sephardic sages, holds that the deaths stopped on the 33rd day. Historians often read the story as a memory of the losses of the Bar Kochba revolt against Rome around 132 CE.

The day of Rabbi Shimon. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a student of Rabbi Akiva who lived in the second century, is said to have died on Lag BaOmer. Tradition credits him with the Zohar. Many scholars attribute the Zohar to Moses de Leon, a kabbalist in thirteenth century Spain. Because a great teacher's passing is celebrated as a *hillula*, a joyful festivity, his day became a celebration rather than a day of sadness.

A song from Tripoli

Rabbi Shimon Labi (also spelled Lavi) was a kabbalist of Spanish origin who grew up in Fez, Morocco. In 1549, on his way to the Land of Israel, he stopped in Tripoli, Libya, and stayed on as a teacher. There he wrote *Bar Yochai Nimshachta Ashrecha*, "Bar Yochai, you are anointed, happy are you."

It became the most popular kabbalistic poem of all. Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews sing it on Friday evenings and on Lag BaOmer, Hasidic Jews adopted it, and it rings out at Meron every year.

How Lag BaOmer is celebrated

- **Light.** Candles are lit in synagogues and homes in honor of Rabbi Shimon, and bonfires burn at Meron and across Israel. Fire is often explained as a sign of the light of his teaching.
- **Song and study.** Communities sing *piyyutim* (religious poems) for Rabbi Shimon, such as “Bar Yochai” and “Va'amartem Ko Lechai” by Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad, the Ben Ish Hai, and study passages of the Zohar.
- **The halaka.** A boy's first haircut at age three is called *halaka*, from an Arabic word for cutting hair. Disciples of Rabbi Isaac Luria, the great kabbalist of sixteenth century Safed, said he cut his young son's hair at Rabbi Shimon's tomb, and the custom of doing so on Lag BaOmer grew from there. In one old custom, the hair was weighed and its weight in silver or gold given to charity.
- **Weddings and feasts.** Because the Omer's mourning customs pause, Lag BaOmer is a popular wedding day. Many Sephardic Jews, following the Shulchan Aruch, wait until the 34th day for haircuts, while many North African families cut hair on Lag BaOmer itself.
- **Pilgrimage.** Huge crowds gather at Meron, and Tunisian Jews and visitors gather at the Ghriba synagogue on Djerba. Both are described in JIMENA's explainer *Hillulot and Pilgrimage*, along with the Lag BaOmer hillula of Rabbi Amram ben Diwan in Ouezzane, Morocco, where boxes of candles are auctioned to support the upkeep of the cemetery.

Scholars disagree about how the Meron celebration began. Historian Avraham Yaari argued that the customs, known at Meron at least since the sixteenth century, were developed by the *Musta'aravim*, Arabic speaking Jews long rooted in the Land of Israel; others credit the kabbalists of Safed. In the nineteenth century, a Moroccan Jewish family, the Abu family of Safed, began a procession carrying a Torah scroll from their courtyard to Meron.

Community by community

Libya

Libyan Jews treasure “Bar Yochai” as a song born in their own community, where Rabbi Shimon Labi taught the Jews of Tripoli for decades. His grave in Tripoli became a place of pilgrimage and the subject of study by the anthropologist Harvey Goldberg.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jewish Virtual Library); HeHacham HaYomi; Harvey E. Goldberg

Tunisia

Many traveled to the Ghriba synagogue on Djerba, where the pilgrimage begins 33 days after Passover starts, and hosted a meal for the poor. At home, families made a “Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai corner,” lit a special lamp there, and studied by its light, followed by a festive meal, mainly for young people.

Sources: Chagim Center (Beit Hashita); Times of Israel

Morocco

In Tetouan, the eve of Lag BaOmer was called “a night of celebration.” Groups of ten studied the Zohar until midnight, then shared a meal hosted by the chief rabbi, who recited a memorial prayer for community members who had died that year.

Source: Chagim Center (Beit Hashita)

Iraq

In 1907 or 1908, a Baghdad press printed *Sefer Hilula Raba*, a book of Aramaic and Hebrew texts for Lag BaOmer, now in the Iraqi Jewish Archive. Baghdad's great rabbi, the Ben Ish Hai, wrote a song for Rabbi Shimon sung at Meron, and a Baghdadi rendition of “Bar Yochai” was recorded in Jerusalem in 1959.

Sources: Iraqi Jewish Archive; Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre

Yemen and Aden

Yemenite Jews who followed the Zohar cut their hair early in the day, studied in the synagogue, lit many candles for Rabbi Shimon, and held feasts and weddings. Those who did not accept the Zohar treated it as an ordinary day. In Aden, Jews lit candles in the synagogue, read Proverbs, sang songs, and studied the Zohar.

Source: Chagim Center (Beit Hashita)

Egypt

Customs varied. Some Egyptian Jews waited until the day after Lag BaOmer to cut their hair, in the Sephardic way, while others cut their hair on Lag BaOmer itself.

Source: Chagim Center (Beit Hashita)

Rhodes

The Sephardic Jews of Rhodes marked the day by gathering old holy books and torn pages and burying them respectfully, with psalms and mourning songs.

Source: Chagim Center (Beit Hashita)

Israel today

Bonfires light up neighborhoods across the country, and families picnic and celebrate outdoors. In dry years, Israel's fire service has banned bonfires in wooded areas, and authorities ask the public to keep fires small and supervised. In 2021, a crowd crush at Meron killed at least 45 people.

Sources: Times of Israel; JNS; Voice of America

Common misconceptions

- **"Lag BaOmer is a biblical holiday."** The Omer count is biblical, but Lag BaOmer is not in the Torah. Its customs grew over many centuries.
- **"Lag BaOmer is all about bonfires."** In several Sephardic and Mizrahi communities, the heart of the day was candles, study, songs, and a shared meal.
- **"Everyone ends the Omer mourning on Lag BaOmer."** Many Sephardic Jews wait until the 34th day, and family customs differ.
- **"The Meron celebration is an Ashkenazi tradition."** Today Hasidic groups play a large role, but Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews helped shape its early history, its songs, and its customs.

Words to know

Omer *Hebrew*

"Sheaf." The barley offering brought on Passover, and the 49 day period that follows.

Sefirat HaOmer *Hebrew*

The counting of the Omer, one day each evening until Shavuot.

Lag BaOmer *Hebrew*

The 33rd day of the Omer, 18 Iyar.

Hillula *Aramaic*

"Festivity." The joyful anniversary of a great sage's death.

Rashbi *Hebrew*

A name for Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, formed from his initials.

Zohar *Hebrew*

"Radiance." The central book of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism.

Piyyut *Hebrew*

A religious poem, often sung.

Halaka *Arabic and Hebrew*

A boy's first haircut, often at age three.

Musta'aravim *Hebrew*

Arabic speaking Jews long rooted in the Land of Israel.

Menara *Judeo Arabic*

The decorated lamp tower paraded at the Ghriba on Djerba.

Bringing Lag BaOmer to life

In the public school classroom

- Teach about the calendar: how a harvest count became a bridge between two festivals, and how a minor date gained its own customs.
- Read “Bar Yochai” in translation as poetry and history: who wrote it, where, and how it traveled from Tripoli to Safed and around the world.
- Map the customs in this explainer, from Tetouan to Djerba, Tripoli, Baghdad, Aden, and Rhodes.
- Do not light bonfires or candles, or have students sing the piyyut as prayer. Fire safety is a good topic: discuss why Israeli authorities limit bonfires in dry weather.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Sing “Bar Yochai” and the Ben Ish Hai’s “Va’amartem Ko Lechai.”
- Create a “Rabbi Shimon corner” in the Tunisian style, with stories, study, and safe electric lights.
- Host a Lag BaOmer picnic with stories of Rabbi Shimon Labi and the song’s journey from Tripoli.
- Invite families to share Lag BaOmer and halaka memories and photographs.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: How did our family mark Lag BaOmer? Did anyone have a halaka? Which songs did you sing?
- Read *Sadie’s Lag Ba’Omer Mystery* together with young children.
- Enjoy a picnic or an outdoor day together.
- Record an elder’s memories for JIMENA’s oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why might a community choose to celebrate, rather than mourn, on the anniversary of a beloved teacher’s death?
- A poem written in sixteenth century Tripoli is now sung around the world. How do songs travel, and what do they carry with them?
- Why do you think so many cultures use fire and light in their celebrations? How can we enjoy those traditions safely?

Learn more

Watch and listen

JIMENA's Jewish Journey Through Tunisia: El Ghriba Synagogue (JIMENA)

vimeo.com/558450359

History of the Hillula of Rabbi Shim'on Bar Yohai in Mount Meron (Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre; article in Hebrew on the songs of Meron)

jewish-music.huji.ac.il/he/node/22151

Culture and Holidays video collection (JIMENA)

jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Read

Sadie's Lag Ba'Omer Mystery, by Jamie Korngold, illustrated by Julie Fortenberry (Kar-Ben Publishing, 2014). Picture book, ages 6 to 7.

pjllibrary.org/Books-and-Music/Books_Old/Sadie-s-Lag-Ba-Omer-Mystery

A Guide to the Zohar, by Arthur Green (Stanford University Press, 2003). For teachers.

ingramacademic.com/products/a-guide-to-the-zohar-9780804749084

Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries: History and Culture in the Modern Era, edited by Harvey E. Goldberg (Indiana University Press, 1996). Includes a chapter on Rabbi Shimon Labi's grave in Tripoli.

cris.huji.ac.il/en/publications/the-maskil-and-the-mequbbal-mordecai-ha-cohen-and-the-grave-of-ra

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"A Broken Peace Leaves a Family's Heritage Trip in Shards," by Adam Eilath An account of a family heritage trip to Tunisia and the May 2023 attack during the Ghriba pilgrimage. For adults.

distinctionsjournal.org/a-broken-peace-leaves-a-familys-heritage-trip-in-shards

Explore online

What Is Lag Ba'omer? (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/lag-baomer

The Omer (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/the-omer

What Is An Upsherin, or Halaqah? (My Jewish Learning, by Eliezer Segal)

myjewishlearning.com/article/upsheren

Labi, Simeon (Encyclopaedia Judaica, via Jewish Virtual Library)

jewishvirtuallibrary.org/labi-simeon

Special Customs (Chagim Center, Kibbutz Beit Hashita)

eng.chagim.org.il/STUDY/special-customs

Sefer Hilula Raba, Baghdad (Iraqi Jewish Archive)

ijarchive.org/s/iraqi-jewish-archive/item/12613

Why Did My Sephardic Neighbors Wait Until the 34th Day? (The Jewish Link)

jewishlink.news/why-did-my-sephardic-neighbors-wait-until-the-34th-day-in-the-omer-to-have-their-hair-cut

Tunisian Jews Mark Lag B'Omer in Ancient Ghriba Synagogue (Times of Israel)

timesofisrael.com/tunisian-jews-mark-lag-bomer-in-ancient-ghriba-synagogue

Fire Service Bans Some Lag B'Omer Bonfires (Times of Israel, with safety guidance)

timesofisrael.com/fire-service-bans-some-lag-bomer-bonfires-due-to-dry-conditions

From JIMENA

Cultural Heritage Series, including Hillulot and Pilgrimage

jimena.org/cultural-heritage

Oral history collection

jimena.org/oral-history

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)

sepharditoolkit.org



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include My Jewish Learning (Francine Klagsbrun; Eliezer Segal); the Encyclopaedia Judaica (via Jewish Virtual Library and Encyclopedia.com); Yaakov Mazor, Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre; the Chagim Center, Kibbutz Beit Hashita; the Iraqi Jewish Archive; HeHacham HaYomi; Harvey E. Goldberg; Rabbi Haim Jachter in The Jewish Link; ReformJudaism.org; the Times of Israel; JNS; and Voice of America. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.