

Two Lessons for Lag BaOmer 2026: The Fire That Warms and the Fire That Burns

Lag BaOmer is one of the strangest and most mysterious days in the Jewish calendar. Its origins are not entirely clear, and its customs developed over time. Yet two figures became deeply associated with this day: Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. And perhaps there is no better moment than sitting around a fire to tell stories about them.

Rabbi Akiva did not begin as Rabbi Akiva, but as Akiva ben Yosef: poor, humble, uneducated, descended from converts, a shepherd who began learning Torah only at the age of forty. Rachel, the daughter of the wealthy Kalba Savua, saw something in him that no one else saw. They married in secret; her father disowned her. At Rachel's encouragement, Akiva left to study Torah for twelve years. When he returned, he overheard that Rachel would be willing to endure another twelve years of sacrifice so he could continue learning. Without even greeting her, he turned around and left again. Twenty-four years later, he returned as a great sage with thousands of students. Only then did he say: "What is mine and what is yours is hers" — *sheli ve-shelachem, shelah hi* (Ketubot 63a).

It is a beautiful sentence, but it comes very late. Rachel lived for decades almost like a widow while her husband pursued his sacred calling. We often romanticize her sacrifice, but perhaps Lag BaOmer invites us to read the story more carefully. Rachel should not only be seen as an example to imitate, but also as a warning. No one should have to disappear from their own life so another person can become great. Rabbi Akiva's passion for Torah was real, but here it also wounded the person closest to him. The lesson is not that love must always sacrifice everything for study. The lesson is that even holy passions can become dangerous when they make us absent from the people we love.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's story is also a story of fire. According to the Talmud, he criticized Rome so sharply that he had to flee and hide in a cave with his son, Rabbi Elazar. For twelve years they lived there, sustained by miracles, praying and studying all day. When they finally came out, they saw people plowing and planting, living ordinary lives, and they could not tolerate it. After so many years of pure spiritual intensity, everyday life seemed empty to them. Wherever they looked, their gaze burned. God then sent them back to the cave and said: "Did you come out to destroy My world?" (Shabbat 33b).

They remained there for twelve more months. When they emerged again, Rabbi Elazar still burned what he saw, but Rabbi Shimon had changed. He healed what his son damaged. He had learned that a life of Torah cannot mean contempt for the world. He then said a difficult and mysterious phrase: "You and I are enough for the world" — *dai la'olam ani ve-atah* (Shabbat 33b). Perhaps he meant that not everyone must live only in prayer, study, and spiritual intensity. Some will devote themselves entirely to Torah, but others must farm, build, work, raise families, and sustain the world. That too is holy.

It is striking that the two heroes connected to Lag BaOmer are, in some ways, recovering fanatics. Rabbi Shimon seems to heal from it. Rabbi Akiva, perhaps, not completely; later tradition remembers his support for Bar Kochba as a messianic figure, a hope that ended in disaster for our people (Yerushalmi Ta'anit 4:5). Both stories remind us that religious fire can inspire, but it can also blind.

That is why fire is such a powerful symbol for this day. The Jerusalem Talmud describes the challenge of walking between fire and ice: too far from the fire, and we freeze; too close, and we burn (Yerushalmi Chagigah 2:1). Pirkei Avot also warns us to be careful with the words of the sages, because their words are like burning coals (Avot 2:10).

The words of God, the words of Torah, and the words of our sages are like the fire of Lag BaOmer. If we stand too far away, we may become cold and disconnected. But if we stand too close, we may burn ourselves and others. The goal is not to extinguish the fire, and not to throw ourselves into it. The goal is to find the right distance: close enough to be warmed, guided, and inspired; far enough to remain humble, balanced, and human.