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HOLIDAY WATCH

Lag B'Omer Celebrations Kick Off With Flames and Grilled Meats



Children were all smiles at a Lag B'Omer barbecue conducted by Chabad-Lubavitch of Japan.

By Joshua Runyan
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As tens of thousands of people ascended a northern Israeli mountain to congregate at the resting place of a 2nd century mystical sage, the Jewish community of Japan ushered in this year's holiday of Lag B'Omer with a get-together in a Tokyo backyard.

Marking the anniversary of the death of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, Lag B'Omer – it began Thursday night – is known throughout Israel as a time for bonfires and children's parades, as well as pilgrimages to Bar Yochai's gravesite in Meron. In Tokyo, Rabbi Mendi and Chana Sudakevich welcomed some 100 local Jewish residents for a barbecue with a Japanese twist: They grilled prime tuna.

“We have very good tuna here in Japan,” laughed the rabbi, who took a break from the cleanup to speak by telephone. “But we also had arts and crafts projects for the children, and talked a lot about Bar Yochai and his importance in the world.”

Sudakevitch, who has co-directed Chabad-Lubavitch of Japan for seven years, said that people find Bar Yochai, known in Jewish literature as the Rashbi, to be an inspirational figure. The Rashbi and his son, Rabbi Elazar, hid from the Romans in a cave for 13 years, during which time they learned the Torah's esoteric secrets that were later codified in the Zohar. Soon before his death, the Rashbi instructed his followers that the day be celebrated as a time of profound revelations.

“The Rashbi brought a tremendous amount of light down here into this world,” explained Sudakevitch. “And that's how Jewish life should be. We should be bringing heaven down to this world.”

Hours after the Tokyo party had disbanded, revelers in Philadelphia Thursday afternoon were still preparing for a large bonfire in the middle of the city. Sponsored by the Jewish Center of Northern Liberties, the second-annual bonfire had already generated tremendous media interest before the first

wooden plank was lit.

“Last year, we promoted the event maybe a week before, and about 200 people showed up,” relayed 24-year-old Aviel Nisimi. “This year, we sent messages, we put up flyers, we did huge e-mail drives. We sent out more than 1,000 invitations.”

According to Chabad-Lubavitch Rabbi Gedaliah Lowenstein, co-director of the Jewish Center with his wife Shevy, the Lag B'Omer bonfire is the center's premiere event. It helps that most people view a bonfire in the middle of the city as a curious anomaly.

“When I went to get the permit, I got very strange looks, because it's not so common for people in the city of Philadelphia to make bonfires,” said Lowenstein. “We've received phone calls from all the television stations.”



The 2007 Lag B'Omer bonfire hosted by the Jewish Center of Northern Liberties drew some 200 people.

According to Lowenstein, the bonfire, while fun, represents more than just the opportunity to have a good time and roast some hot dogs. The custom has its roots in the tradition that when the Rashbi passed away, he was enveloped in light.

“On Lag B'Omer, we celebrate the Zohar, and we celebrate the soul inside every single one of us,” said the rabbi. “Attending a celebration such as this becomes a deeply spiritual experience for people.”

Nisimi agreed, and offered a story of the bonfire's genesis this year as an example.

“In Israel, kids start preparing two months, three months before Lag B'Omer by collecting all the wood they can find,” he said. “I didn't know where we were going to get the wood, but by Divine Providence, I ran into a guy who offered to help. He came with a truck full of pallets, and I had to tell him, ‘Sorry man, but I can only take so much. We're only allowed to have a six-foot-high fire.’ ”

Campuses Opt for Cruise

In an expression of Jewish unity, hundreds of Chabad Houses throughout the world planned Thursday night celebrations, some of them featuring bonfires and barbecues, others relying only on the grill. Parades and carnivals were on tap for Friday itself.

On the more than 130 college campuses served by Chabad-Lubavitch emissaries, Lag B'Omer celebrations tended to be collaborations between several schools. Rabbi Dov Wagner said that in Los Angeles and S. Diego, Calif., for instance, the close of the school year emptied universities of many students.

With that in mind, Wagner's Chabad Jewish Center at the University of Southern California teamed up

with the Chabad Houses serving the University of California at Los Angeles and California State University, Northridge, and the Chabad student group at S. Monica College to coordinate a four-hour Pacific cruise.

The so-called May 22 “Jews Cruise” could be the first of its kind, as Lag B'Omer celebrations go, said Wagner.

“Lag B'Omer is connected to the outdoors,” said the rabbi, “but here, we opted to have our party over the water.

“Any opportunity to get students to remember their Judaism is a good thing,” added Wagner. “Because of its originality, a Lag B'Omer cruise brings a little more excitement to the table. And the fact that we're doing this in the middle of the summer demonstrates that we're here for students throughout the year.”

In Hollywood, Fla., organizers of a community-wide Thursday night mega-bash at a local golf course were grappling with the question of just how many people could end up attending.

Rabbi Mendy Levy, outreach director of The Shul of Bal Harbour, said that more than 1,000 people would show up to the event, which has been dubbed “Bringing Meron to Miami” and will feature a live performance by popular Jewish singer Yossi Piamenta. He added, however, that the actual attendance figure could be ten times as high. (More than 10,000 people attended last year's Chanukah party sponsored by Chabad-Lubavitch of South Broward.)

“We've never done anything like this before,” said Levy, who coordinates The Shul's Million Mitzvah Campaign, a worldwide effort that got people to collectively pledge one million good deeds. “The day schools, the stores, the synagogues, everybody has signed on to this celebration.”

Levy said that although the presence of Piamenta had spurred a lot of interest, the bonfire, assuming the winds would cooperate, would certainly be something to remember: “We've been working on it for weeks.”

The event will also feature a mitzvah fair and a ceremony marking the accomplishment of the Million Mitzvah Campaign's goal.

Community member Betzalel Ness noted that a film crew will be on hand to document the affair.

Said Ness: “There's definitely a lot of excitement.”

By **Joshua Runyan** [More articles...](#) | [RSS](#)

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