

# Bonfires

Rabbi Dr. Seth Mandel

“The fact that fires on lag ba'Omer have been more of a communal event as opposed to more individual fires on erev Pesach, have limited the problem then - however that may be in danger of changing...

P.S. On a language note, according to Merriam Webster, the word bonfire comes from bone fire (not bon-fire = good fire). R. SM? Can you elaborate on what kind of bones were burned, etc. ?”

Obviously, the bones of people who believe that there is a s'gullo in making fires <grin>. As I have had fun telling people, the *only* bonfire that was an ancient Jewish tradition was the Simchas Torah bonfire in Ashk'naz, which is attested from the 14th century up until the 19th century, but has since gone out of style. The Lag Ba'omer bonfire is a very recent phenomenon among most Jews.

Indeed, the word bonfire is from "fire of bones." The term was used primarily in various pagan ceremonies which then were transferred to Christianity, for a funeral pyre, and in burning infidels or books (like The Gaon of Vilna or The Making of a Godol). The bones used, if 'twere not a pyre, were primarily animal bones.

Here's an early quotation (1493): "in worshyppe of saynte John the people waked at home and made all maner of fyres. One was clene bones and no woode, and that is called a bone fyre." From Marlowe in 1586: "Making bonfires for my overthrow. But, ere I die, those foul idolators Shall make me bonfires with their filthy bones." (Think that would get by the moderators on Areivim, R. SBA?)

1689: "The dead corps is buried. They of old made a bone-fire and therein burnt it."

1622: "Their holy Bibles cast into Bone-fires."

The term became used for any large fires used for celebrations, although the practice and term continued to be used especially for those associated with various Christian saints, particularly John and Peter:

From a 1570 history: "Then doth the joyfull feast of John the Baptist take his turne, When bonfiers great with loftie flame, in every towne doe burne."

From a constitution of the association of the cooks of Newcastle, 1575: "The said Fellowship of Cookes shall yearelie. mainteigne and keep the Bone-fires. that is to say, one Bone-fire on the Even of the Feast of the Nativitie of St. John Baptist. and the other on the Even of the Feast of St. Peter the Apostle."

These quotations start in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, because that is as far back as the term "bone-fire" goes, but the practice of making a bonfire in honor of Christian saints goes back to ancient times in England (and in France as well). Another practice that goes back to ancient times in Christian Europe is making pilgrimages to "qivrei tzaddiqim" and donating alms at the qever; this practice is well known from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

Most Christian scholars attribute the association of the bonfires with celebrations of the feast of a saint to pagan, pre-Christian practices which were later adopted by the local people to their new religion. Indeed, the Celts made bonfires to honor some of their deities and spirits. No one would ever claim that these practices, going back into old Anglo-Saxon England, are of Jewish origin.

The Arabs of EY, Syria, and Lebanon, as is well-known, honored the Christian and Jewish "saints" (everyone knows that the qever of Sh'muel haNavi has been a "holy" site to the Arabs for hundreds of years, and they built a mosque there; the site is called "anNabi Samwil"). They made pilgrimages to them, like the Christians did, and they made large celebrations to honor the festival of the saint. The Arab pilgrims who came did various things to honor the saint. They gave alms (a big mitzva in Islam), usually done by the practice of cutting the hair of their children (which they had let grow from before the pilgrimage), then weighing it and giving the same weight in gold or silver for alms. They also made large bonfires to honor the saint. The custom of making pilgrimages, giving alms, and making bonfires may have been borrowed from the Christians, since a) they originally appeared among the Arabs of EY, Lebanon and Syria, AFAIK; b) they are first recorded after the time of the Crusades (although the giving of gold or silver in the weight of the hair seems to have been from the Middle East). However, there is no clear proof that they did not arise from another source. But they are attested in Arabic sources going back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and probably before.

Could the custom of bonfires on Lag Ba'omer have arisen among the Jews separately and independently from the non-Jewish sources? Theoretically it's possible. Books like Minhag Yisrael Toyre bring all sorts of reasons from various chasidic rebbes and from the book Ta'amei haMinhogim for the origin of the bonfires on Lag Ba'omer. The problem with all the explanations is that a) they are all of recent origin, and b) they somehow ignore the fact that the custom was completely unknown to any Jews up until the time when it is recorded in EY in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, it was the custom there of only one group of Jews, the Musta'ribim, about whom other Jews complained that they had adopted a lot of Arab customs (the very name means "Arabicized"). Of particular significance is that the customs of bonfires (and of opsheren) were unknown among Ashk'naz Jews in Europe up until very recently (i.e. less than 200 years). [I can attest that not only my grandparents, echt Litvaks, knew nothing about bonfires, and that none of the Litvishe RY ever participated in bonfire celebrations, including RMF, R Aharon Kotler, RYBS, etc. as well as none of the Yekkes.] They were also unknown among S'faradim and Teimanim until very recently. How is it possible that something claimed to be an old Jewish custom was completely unknown among Jews outside of EY??

From contemporary documents we learn the Muslims (and a few Jews) cut the hair of children as well as lit a bonfire on the yohrtzeit (28 of Iyyar) of none other than the aforementioned Shmuel haNavi. However, in the 1560s the Arab authorities forbade Jews to go there. Shortly afterwards, we have the testimony of R. Chaim Vital that he was told by R. Yonatan Sagiz that a year before he started learning by the Ari, in the Ari's first year after he immigrated from his homeland of Egypt (also 1570), that "Mori v'Rabbi Z'L took his small son and all of his family there [to the celebration on RaShBY's yohrtzeit in Meron] and there he cut his hair in accordance with the custom." R.

Chaim Vital is careful to note, however, that "I do not know whether at that time he was expert and knowledgeable in this wondrous wisdom [Qabbolo] as he became after that." IOW, R. Chaim Vital himself is cautioning the reader that he has doubts about whether the Ari did this in accordance with his views in Qabbolo, or just because it was a popular celebration, and he might not have participated had he already been an expert in Qabbolo.

Some historians believe that once the Musta'ribim were forbidden to go to the qever of Sh'muel haNavi, they transferred their celebration to Meron and the date to Lag Ba'Omer. Others claim that the custom at Meron predated 1570. But both groups agree that both of these customs, cutting the hair of the children and making bonfires, were practiced by the Arabs and the Musta'ribim, but not by any of the Ashk'nazi and S'faradi Jews in Israel. Of great interest is that at that time, the local rabbis in Tz'fat, who had the practice of going to the all the known q'vorim of the Tano'im from the middle of Iyyar until Shavu'os and having a seder in learning there, opposed the celebrations of the Musta'ribim on Lag ba'Omer and tried to forbid it. They made little headway, and once it became known that the Ari participated one year, any opposition was swept away. We know from travelers to EY in the 18th and 19th centuries that the "hilula" at Meron on Lag Ba'Omer with bonfires and the cutting of children's hair had become an affair of the masses. A well-known talmid chochom from Europe, R. Avrohom Rozanes, writes that in his visit to EY in 1867 he saw an Ashk'nazi Jew who had taken his son to the "hilula" and was giving him a haircut. R. Rozanes says that he could not restrain himself and went to that Jew and tried to dissuade him but was unsuccessful, and that most of the Ashk'nazi and S'faradi Jews of EY participate in this "craziness," with "drinking and dancing and fires." The custom of giving the son his first haircut at that celebration, originally called "halaqa" by the Jews of EY (apparently because there was an established Arabic term but no Jewish term for the custom) was later mixed with the custom of making a celebration when a son reached 3 and began learning Torah. The two customs were combined by many, and resulted in the boy's haircut being delayed until he was 3, and not specifically on Lag ba' Omer. A chasidish rebbe, R. Yehudah Leibush Horenstein, who emigrated to EY in the middle of the 19th century writes that "this haircut, called halaqa, is done by the S'faradim in Yerushalayim at the qever of RaShB'Y during the summer, but during the winter they take the boy to the synagogue or Bet Medrash and perform the haircut with great celebration and parties, something *that is unknown to the Jews in Europe*. and at that point they start him growing his pe'ot. It is incomprehensible why this is not done outside of EY [as well]" [emphasis mine]. Indeed, the custom was adopted by shortly thereafter by chasidim in Europe to imitate the custom of the S' faradim in EY, and the custom of lighting bonfires on Lag Ba'Omer also was adopted at that time by chasidic communities in Europe (note the time frame: after the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century). The Jews in Europe, knowing no Arabic and having no Yiddish name for the custom of the haircut, called it by a normal Yiddish word for cutting off the hair: opsheren.

So both customs are less than 150 years old among Ashk'naz Jews, including chasidim. Now we scarcely can expect to find a historical document that says "we, the undersigned Jews, have decided that there is nothing wrong with copying the Muslim celebrations in honor of saints, and we will participate in them." So you're never going to find better historical evidence for Jewish borrowing of non-Jewish customs than this: that a custom that was previously unknown to any group of Jews

arose among a group of Jews known to copy various Arab customs in a time and place that the custom is attested among the Arabs from independent evidence.

Is there anything osur about a bonfire on Lag Ba'Omer, or waiting to give a son a haircut until he is 3 or until you go to Meron? Certainly not. As I believe R. SBA has noted, the opsheren provides an excuse for a party that is connected with the boy's beginning to learn; it could be done without the haircut, but if people feel that it is important to give a haircut as well, there is no issur. Certainly no one who lights bonfires or celebrates opsheren has any idea that the source of these customs is extremely questionable. And after 130 years most Jews forget the origin of customs anyway and just assume they are old Jewish customs.. However, those who studiously avoid eating turkey on Thanksgiving should know that the origin of the customs of the bonfire on Lag ba'Omer and halaqa/opsheren are much more suspect.

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